FYREBRAND

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Dedication

To the wonderful ladies and family at EDBM. Pat, Barb, Tigg, Beth, Momma Sue, Stacey, Punque and Lue Anne. You encouraged me, supported me, and nagged endlessly. You were friends when times were good and you held me up when times were bad. You always took time to explain what I didn't understand, and to read what you didn't always like. And through it all, you taught me to accept the stories that were a part of me. Thank you.

Chapter One

He touched her gently. Too gently. Carmella strained beneath Torren's tender strokes, forcing back the aggression rising inside her as her desire rose. His long, dark brown hair caressed her arms, creating a curtain of rough silk around his head while his tongue laved her hard nipple and his mouth suckled the eager point gently.

His hands, work-calloused and large, moved over her body with sensual knowledge, but with restraint. He was holding back, just as he always did. Her head tossed on the pillow as she bit her lip to keep from crying out in frustration.

"Adrenaline overload," he whispered against her breast, moving lower, his lips like a stroking flame over her skin. "Relax, Carmella."

His voice was thick and husky with lust as he nipped at the flesh of her abdomen, traveling closer to the center of the heat spreading through her body. But there was something more. A vein of knowledge she couldn't quite grasp...almost amusement. As though he knew the needs tormenting her and refused to ease them.

Her fingers clenched in the blankets of the bed beneath her as she fought for control. She could handle it, she assured herself, she always had before.

"Carmella." She opened her eyes, staring down at him as he paused over the pulsing mound of her cunt.

God, he was so rugged, so handsome. The angles of his face were an artist's dream. High cheekbones, the sharp slash of his nose, the stubborn chin. The male sensuality in the curve of his lips combined with the sun-darkened tone of his flesh gave him a brooding, intense look.

"Are you going to fuck me or talk to me all night?" She restrained the urge to bite him. Why did she always want to bite, to claw? The desperate throb of an almost violent lust surged through her veins.

Torren's lips quirked into a small smile. Too knowing. What knowledge did he possess that she didn't? And why couldn't she sift through the myriad psychic impulses to make sense of it?

"Eventually, I'll fuck you." His hand slid up her thigh, parting her legs further as the long strands of hair caressed her flesh.

Carmella shivered. She loved the feel of the silken strands on her skin.

"What do you mean, eventually?" She panted as she tried to tamp down the heated urges flowing through her.

She wanted to fight. Wanted to force him to restrain her, to plow inside her with every hard, throbbing inch of his thick cock. She trembled at the thought, allowing the image to flow through her mind as she whimpered in growing hunger.

"Damn, you're hot enough to burn me alive." His fingers skimmed the saturated curls between her thighs.

Her vagina pulsed, spilling the thick juices of her need from its gripping tunnel.

"Torren, stop teasing me." She wanted to scream, to demand that he give her the agonizing pleasure/pain her body was craving.

God, what was wrong with her? She needed him, loved him as she had never loved anyone. Torren fulfilled her. Soothed her. But nothing seemed to touch that dark core of lust growing steadily in her body.

Torren moved between her thighs, his eyes narrowed as he watched her. Hard, muscular legs spread hers; the broad head of his cock kissed the swollen lips of her pussy. Carmella shuddered, her hands fisting in the blankets as flames nearly erupted over her body. No. No. She couldn't let that happen.

She bit her lip, feeling the wide head of Torren's erection part the wet curves of her cunt. Her body was taut. She fought the flames and the agonizing pleasure as he began to stretch the delicate tissue of her vagina.

"Torren." Her strangled gasp was a plea. God, she couldn't be begging for something she knew she could never control. And she would never be able to stop her response to what she needed so desperately.

"It's okay, love." He sheltered her, coming over her as his hips worked his cock deeper insider her in smooth, shallow thrusts. "Hold onto me, Carmella," he whispered at her ear. "It's okay."

But it wasn't okay. The scream trapped in her throat was one of frustration and fury. The heat building through her body was too dangerous to ever relinquish control of.

"Hold onto me," he whispered again a second before his cock surged inside her, hard and deep.

She couldn't stop the keening cry that escaped. Couldn't halt the desperate spasm of her vagina around the thick, hot shaft impaling her. It was so good. Not what she needed, but so damned good.

His hair flowed around them, smelling of man and cleaning soap, damp and cool against her hot skin as he began to fuck her with a steady driving rhythm. Carmella arched her neck, her fingers tightening around the blankets gripped between them as dark lust surged through her body. Oh God. Her skin was heating, her blood flaming. Torren's cock stroked, caressed, tormenting sensitive, aching, nerve endings to a point of pleasure she could barely stand. She had to come soon. She had to.

"Now," she begged desperately as she fought the erupting power threatening to release. "Please, Torren. Please, now."

He slammed home. His arms tightened beneath her shoulders, his knees digging into the mattress as he began to fuck her hard and fast, pushing her close to the edge, so close...

Carmella couldn't contain her cry as the orgasm, lighter than she would have preferred, swept through her body, tightening it with pleasure. The desperate edge of hunger dulled as she heard Torren growl out his own release, the hot pulse of his semen emptying into her vagina as he tightened in her arms.

Breathing rough, her skin still prickling as heat raced beneath it, she tried to relax in his arms. She didn't want him to know how close to the edge she was coming. Couldn't face his realization of the perversions that tormented her.

"Okay now?" His lips caressed her cheek. A loving, gentle touch that brought tears to her eyes.

"Fine," she lied. She hated lying to him. Hated the needs that tormented her.

Torren moved to her side lazily, pulling her into his arms as he cuddled her close.

"Sleep, baby," he whispered. "Tomorrow's another day."

The reflective tone of his voice bothered her, but the fight to hold back the violence rising inside her took all her concentration now. She nodded against his chest, but she knew sleep would be a long time coming.

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We can't wait much longer. Torren sent his thought to the man who waited miles from their location, pacing his rooms furiously.

Dammit, Torren. I'm moving as fast as I can. He could hear Ryder's lust pulsing in his voice. The connection he allowed the other man as he made love to Carmella had been strong. Ryder had sensed in every pore of his body the nearly uncontrolled needs sweeping through her.

Move faster, Torren suggested darkly. She nearly lost control tonight, Ryder. We can't afford to allow her to do that until you are with her.

A bleak pause followed his words.

Head to the beach house tomorrow. I'll have the Hummer waiting outside the east end of New Cincinnati. I'll cover her from here.

It was a risky plan. Torren stared down at Carmella, knowing she didn't sleep as she pretended to. Her muscles were taut, small goose bumps raised along her flesh as she fought the power coursing through her. He had to save her. He had to protect her. He kissed her head softly, enjoying the feel of her silken, fiery-colored hair against his lips.

She was a Fyrebrand. But even more than that, she was a blood link to the greatest psychic monster ever created. Her power was deep, strong. The psychic ability to spark and generate fire from thin air; to destroy, if need be, with flames hotter than any man could create, pulsed within her small body. And she was slowly losing control.

I love her, Ryder. But he knew and accepted that she would never be his alone. There was no jealousy, no anger in that thought. He had known for years that she belonged not just to him, but to Ryder as well.

I'll take care of her, Torren. The unspoken emotion lingered in Ryder's thought, as did the surge of dark, intense lust. He would complete the circle Carmella needed. He would complete them all.

Torren tightened his grip on her, holding her close, regretting the coming separation, but looking forward to the reunion. Carmella wasn't the only one restraining her lust, her darker desires. Torren was as well.

A smile crossed his lips. One he was glad Carmella couldn't see. Anticipation rolled through his body, thickening his cock, heating his blood. His hands smoothed over her back.

"You aren't asleep," he growled at her ear as he lifted her thigh over his, pushing his erection against the wet curves of her cunt.

Heat awaited him. A gripping, milking pleasure he needed one last time before he left her to Ryder's care. He rolled to his back, pulling her with him as she gasped in pleasure.

She impaled herself on the thick shaft, her back arching as she cried out at the pleasure he brought her. She surrounded him with fire, a lava-hot intensity he was more than willing to lose himself in.

"Ride me, Carmella." He gripped her hips as her small hands braced on his chest and she began to rise and fall along the hard length of flesh spearing into her. He gritted his teeth, his hips meeting her downward glide as he fought to take her easy, gently.

She cried out above him, her hips moving faster, harder, her pussy gripping him like a silken, slick fist. Torren gritted his teeth. His cock throbbed, ached to spew its hot release into the tight depths of her vagina.

His hands tightened on her hips, pushing her to ride him, to stroke the tight clasp of her pussy over his cock repeatedly. She was crying above him, her nails biting at the flesh of his chest, stroking his lust higher.

"Fuck me," he ordered her, his voice tight, nearly desperate. "All of me, Carmella."

He arched his hips, driving every hard inch inside her as she began to shudder convulsively, her cunt rippling along his shaft as her orgasm tightened her body. He thrust inside her again, hard, heavy, and then once more before he erupted inside her, groaning in pleasure, holding back the regret. It was much less than he wanted, but he knew soon-very soon-it would be everything the three of them needed.

Chapter Two

Two Weeks Later

Carmella was wearing black. Ryder could only shake his head at this as he followed her in his astral form, staying between her and her pursuers, throwing the hounds off every chance he got and generally protecting the finely curved ass as it raced through the underbrush in the hills above New Cincinnati, Ohio.

She was dressed in the color of night from head to toe, form fitting, and snug. It was the color of mystery, of secrets. It was his color-and hers as well, it appeared. Her clothes hid nothing from his eager, astral gaze, though, and made his cock throb hard and demandingly in his physical body still sheltered in the inn back along the edges of town.

He kept up with her easily, drawing on Torren's added powers, as his astral form traveled farther away from his physical body than he was entirely comfortable with.

He sent her pursuers up and around the mountain with the false form of a young woman fleeing. As they moved, Carmella was forced to change her direction, opting instead for a path that led down the mountain to the safety of the inn she had been staying at in town.

She had gotten careless in her search for her commander and lover, Torren Graves, whom she believed had been captured by PSI, the Psychic Sensory Investigations unit of the new government, the week before. Her ties to Torren were strong, but her focus was faltering severely. If it weren't, she would have already been well aware of the fact that he wasn't in the prison she was watching so hard. She would have caught on instantly to the plan they had set in motion more than a month before. And the damned group of vigilantes would have never managed to surprise her as they had.

The coordination it had taken to draw everything together that night would terrify the director of the PSI if she ever realized he had managed to do it. There were things he kept from everyone, the true scope of his abilities being one of them.

The world wasn't ready to acknowledge that such powerful psychics were once again in the government.

He followed the woman, catching a glimpse of her expression as she glanced back at the lights that scoured the mountainside, a frown on her heart-shaped face as she realized the hounds had somehow lost her scent when they shouldn't have and were moving up the mountain, rather than on her heels.

He stilled his grin. She knew it wasn't logical. Carmella would never trust what wasn't logical. He had a hell of a fight ahead of him because his attraction for her, the rioting hunger that rose inside him, would never make sense to her.

He watched as those long, exquisite legs jumped a low boulder, her body hovering in the air for a long second before she hit the ground running again. Amazing. She twisted around the hulking forms of shadowed trees, avoiding more than one trap set to catch the unwary. She couldn't see them on the cloudless night, and he couldn't sense a flow of psychic power, though he knew he should have.

The power it would have taken to send out the "feelers" to detect the upcoming obstacles should have been near impossible for him to shield. Instead, he had only to worry about hiding her physical form. He should have been hard pressed to keep her safe. The fact that he wasn't had a twinge of excitement running through his veins. She was strong. Damned strong. It would make for a very interesting relationship.

You have obstacles moving along the street at the point she'll enter. Torren relayed the information to him telepathically. Ryder could also feel his anticipation. He had been separated from Carmella for over a week now, giving Ryder time to accustom Carmella's unconscious mind to his presence, thereby assuring the conscious part of her that he could be worth the risk of trusting. Not that he expected it to be easy, though. Ryder sent a burst of power to the fleeing woman's left, giving the impression of a pursuer's light flickering in the underbrush. She shifted to the right, though he saw her hesitate. She was getting more suspicious now. She sensed no one there, saw only the light, and he knew she was starting to suspect she was being led along the path.

Carmella burst into the rubble-choked alley, bracing her hands on the concrete dune that stood in her way and flipping over it like an ethereal shadow. Then she stopped, hidden on the other side as he felt the tendrils of her power reaching out to him.

Avoiding them wasn't hard. She was trying to be cautious; to be certain there was no chance of touching the senses of the hounds still baying in the hills above her. But she also knew she was being watched.

Ryder shook his head and pulled back. He had her close enough to safety now and was fairly certain she would now find her own way to the Inn several blocks over. This had been his main objective, other than getting her ass away from the lynch mob that had detected her outside the prison grounds hours before.

I'm pulling back, he informed Torren. Cover my retreat.

The surge of power it took to return to his own body could be detected and tracked by another psychic, even one without astral power. He felt Torren providing the cover he needed as he forced himself to return from the astral plane and back to the physical.

Ryder opened his eyes the moment his psychic presence slammed back into the flesh and blood form. He drew in a deep breath as he fought the exhaustion that invariably came with such extreme use of his powers.

Ryder's lips quirked. He had been watching her for a week now as she searched the city for Torren. She was struggling with her own senses, the knowledge that her commander wasn't where she had been told he was. She was fighting herself so strongly that she refused to see the truth. Had refused to accept it even at the time Torren had offered it to her. The offer was rescinded now. Ryder would demand where Torren could not.

It wasn't going to be easy, leading her through her own fears, breaking her control. The grip she had on her own heightening desires was even tighter than the control she used psychically. Even more importantly, it was drawing away from the control she needed to focus and contain those powers.

Torren had been aware all along of Carmella's destiny. As a minor talent, his gift for seeing the potential of the future had been strong where Carmella and Ryder were concerned. He knew what had to be done, and he knew his part in it. The hard part would be convincing Carmella.

She's on her way back in, Torren informed him as he continued to follow Carmella. She's suspicious.

We didn't expect it to be easy. Ryder closed his eyes as he fought to still the anticipation of what was coming.

She's frightened, Ryder...

Bullshit, Ryder responded with an edge of amusement. She's pissed and she's getting careless. You aren't where you're supposed to be. She can't just kick ass and be done with it.

If there was one thing he had learned from Carmella's dreams, it was that the dominant, hard-edged side of her would cause complications in matters requiring a long degree of patience. She was quickly losing control rather than being able to wait and watch for the best opportunity to strike. It was going to get her killed.

Yeah. Torren's amused admiration of those qualities filtered through the mind connection easily. That girl sure does look good kickin' ass, though, Ryder. It's a fine sight to see.

Ryder snorted. Perhaps he would have seen it by now if his old buddy had been a bit more forthcoming when they had separated as a team years ago. Ryder had always wondered why Torren had sent him to join the group preparing to rebuild the government and the country, rather than both of them heading there.

The other man was an amazing tactician. As a seer, which was one of Torren's main psychic powers, he had the ability to glimpse what was coming and to know how to work toward it, or away from it. Rather than taking the job of working within that new government himself, though, he had sent Ryder.

PSI had been created to draw in those psychics with enough power to aid the rebuilding. It was also created to investigate and neutralize rebel psychics, and those intent on creating another demonic leadership such as Tyre's had been.

Carmella was under investigation not just because of the strength of her powers, but because of her connection to Tyre. The bloodline, which ran thick and strong, took her back to the two most powerful psychics the world had ever known-Tyre and the Tyrea.

That left her two choices now. She could submit to testing. If it was learned she could bond and be controlled by a disarming psychic whose only powers were that of neutralizing hers, or an absorber, who could soak it in, then she would live in relative peace. Or she could accept the drug the government had created that would control and eventually destroy her power. Otherwise, her freedom and possibly her life were at stake.

We'll save her. Torren's mental voice was as strong as Ryder's resolve.

You should have told me sooner. Ryder couldn't keep the edge of anger from his thought at the future Torren had not told him was coming.

Would you have left? Would you have done the work you have done? Would you have put in place the ties to this new government that will ultimately save her? Torren's questions were valid ones, and yet still that spark of jealousy remained.

Torren had found her, guided her, had been her lover for more than a year now while Ryder did the job he had been sent to do. During that time, his dreams had been in turmoil as his own lesser "seer" abilities had taunted him with her images while giving no clue to her whereabouts. Only after Torren had provided the necessary link had Ryder been able to slip into her unconscious mind and see the woman that had tormented him. A woman whose very life was now held in the balance of a government that was more than wary of any blood link back to the monster who had destroyed it once before.

The rewards will be worth it. Torren wasn't the least compassionate in his feelings toward Ryder's jealousy. Not that Ryder had expected him to be. I'll watch her while you sleep. Better get some rest, because she won't be as easy to conquer as you want to believe she will be.

Ryder didn't doubt that in the least.

Chapter Three

Carmella wasn't stupid. She knew she was being followed through her flight along the outer boundaries of New Cincinnati. She knew an astral watcher followed her, pushed her pursuers away from her and made a wide path of safety as she fought to escape the mob that had come upon her on the hill across from the prison.

Psychics were able to detect others of their kind, and were constantly on guard for them. But detecting those non-psychics, who had been taught to shield their thoughts, trained for years to hunt their fellow man and lived with the anticipation of the hunt, was harder. Especially when all her senses were concentrated elsewhere.

She needed Torren out of that prison-if he was there. She needed him out. She couldn't leave the area until she knew for certain he was safe. How the hell PSI had managed to capture him was a mystery to Carmella. She had known his obsession for that blonde-haired little witch of the new governor's would lead to nothing but trouble. But had he listened to her? Hell, no. Now there he was, drugged, trapped in the hellhole, unable to free himself or to help her free him. It was pissing her off. And it made no sense.

The blonde wasn't even his type. Delicate, fragile women had never appealed to him. Perhaps, it was Carmella's own jealousies that had her convinced of that. Her own pain as he had drawn away from her. He had been an anchor, a lifeline to the often tempestuous, nearly out-of-control emotions that could overtake her. He could draw her back with his passion, his gentleness. Even when she longed for something wilder, an intangible something she couldn't define or make sense of, Torren had eased her.

She moved quickly through the decades-old rubble and shadowed nightlife of New Cincinnati as she made her way back to the inn she was staying at. Finally, order was being established within the country. Lawlessness, lynch mobs and the desperation of a nation, she prayed, would slowly ease as the citizens replaced their nightly terrors with full stomachs and work-weary bodies.

Exhaustion clamored at her now. She was looking forward to a hot meal and the bed that awaited her. She moved carefully through the waste-filled alleys, making certain to stay within the shadows, to pull a close shield around the powerful abilities that could fairly hum with their strength if she wasn't careful.

Strangers were rare in the streets of New Cincinnati after dark. The lynch mobs knew who their locals were, made a point of it. Strangers were automatically distrusted, imprisoned, subjected to horrors she didn't want to relive for fear of never sleeping. She knew well the danger that awaited her if she was caught. It made the fact that she was being "watched" all the more worrisome.

She entered the torch-lit main room of the inn, ignoring the curious looks of the inhabitants as she stared around the bar. The inn had once been one of the many office buildings that sat outside the main thoroughfare of the city a century before. It was one of the few left standing.

The large central room held a multitude of tables and weary strangers to the city. Some she knew were psychics, some were bounty hunters, others were just killers.

She strode quickly through the long room, ignoring the distrustful, lecherous gazes of the men and the brooding, wary looks of the women as she made her way to a small, empty table in one corner.

She didn't like so many people watching her. The air felt thick with their emotions, the danger that surrounded many of them. It increased the nervous energy plaguing her now.

You need to center yourself. Otherwise, a PSI spy will pick up on you instantly. Torren's mental voice was cool, commanding.

Where the fuck are you? She was careful to keep her head lowered, her expression clear as he established the link that had been broken for over a week.

I'm not really sure I can tell you. There was a thread of amusement there that she knew she should worry about, but she was just too damned tired.

This isn't helping me any, Torren, she told him fiercely.

She was alone in this now. She was confident enough of her abilities to survive, but she missed Torren. Missed his support, his touch and the knowledge that there was someone to lean on.

I'm sending someone to help you, Carmella. His information had her holding her breath in surprise. He'll be there soon. I want you to be waiting when he makes contact.

There was something lingering in his thoughts that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Almost as though he didn't trust whomever he was sending.

Oh, I trust him well enough. There was a bit too much amusement in the thought.

And he's supposed to help me how? Irritation was crawling through her body. Dammit, she didn't like waiting around like this.

Stop, you're bleeding power! The command bordered on anger. Dammit, Carmella, you're losing control. Pull it in.

She tightened her jaw, doing just that. But it was damned hard. Her frustration level was becoming dangerously volatile.

You need to rest. I'm safe for now, he assured her. Get dinner, then fucking go to bed and sleep. You're too damned tired to keep stretching yourself like this.

And whose fault is that? She snarled silently, furiously. If you had kept your ass with me instead of sniffing some civilian honey pot I wouldn't be here now, would I, Torren?

It infuriated her. He was her lover, professed to love her, yet he had disappeared after nearly being caught trying to get close to the governor's daughter. A tempting, sensuous blonde who had drawn his gaze more than once during the speech the governor had given that day.

Sniffing some civilian honeypot? Mocking amusement accompanied Torren's thought. I never just sniff, Carmella. You should know that. Now be a good girl, stop being so jealous and get your dinner and some rest. You're wearing me down with all that frustration and weariness dragging at you. It's tiring.

Carmella clenched her teeth but refrained from growling as the waitress set a mug of beer in front of her.

"Dinner?" The slight woman's bored air pricked at Carmella's anger.

She glanced at the lighted menu display over the bar and sighed. It hadn't changed in days. Cabbage, potatoes, and boiled chicken with vegetables. Hell, it beat some meals she had been forced to eat.

"Dinner," she sighed, rubbing her brow. Torren was right; she was too damned tired for this.

The waitress nodded, moving away quickly as Carmella allowed her gaze to roam around the room in disinterest until the woman returned with her food. She ate quickly, efficiently. It was energy, nothing more, and as tired as she was she would need that energy just to pull her ass up the stairs to her room. As she pushed the plate back and picked up the mug of beer waiting beside it, she felt her senses hum in sudden awareness. She was being watched.

She could feel eyes on her, someone studying her, not astrally, but with such a physical presence it was disconcerting. The room was dim; especially the corners, but she found the offender easily enough.

Good God, he was a dangerous one. Carmella met his gaze for long seconds, her brow lifting mockingly as his look touched on her breasts pushing against the snug confines of her black top before meeting her gaze once again. His lips quirked in answering sarcasm.

He wasn't classically handsome. His features were too rough, too savage, for such a description. His thick, shoulder-length blonde hair was pulled back from his forehead and restrained at the nape of his neck. Like her, he was dressed in black with a light leather overcoat that fell to his knees. Her eyes narrowed. The man was packing more than just muscle under that coat.

He was easily six two, with broad shoulders. She bet his stomach was flat and rippled with strength, his arms would be strong, his thighs powerful. Her vagina clenched at the thought. Staying power. He looked strong enough to have it, if he wanted it.

She sneered at herself. She hadn't met a man yet that could still the fires that raged in her body. It didn't keep her from aching, though. And the man watching her lit a flame in her womb that threatened to burn out of control. She could feel her body crackling with desire. Singeing with guilt. She was furious with Torren, yet was lusting after another man herself.

She pushed her fingers tiredly through her short red-gold hair, breaking away from his gaze quickly. Hell, she was so damned tired she knew she wasn't up to a fucking, no matter how good it could get, even if she was so inclined. But it didn't keep her from wanting.

Carmella pulled the price of her meal from her snug pants pocket as she rose to her feet and made her way to the second floor of the inn. The room she had taken had once been a small office suite. The entrance had a frayed, aging couch and single chair but was otherwise bare. It was the shower she needed right now, though. The dust and grime of a day spent hiding in trees and along the rough ground had done little for her disposition this evening.

Long minutes later she stood beneath the tepid, surprisingly fresh flow of water. This wasn't river water as she was used to. It was clean and sweet-smelling, with just a mild touch of chlorine. Evidently the city's water station was working ahead of schedule.

She didn't expect hot water, but was mildly surprised that even the chill had been knocked off it. She leaned against the rough shower wall, letting the lukewarm stream course over her after washing her hair and her body quickly, enjoying the rare pleasure of being totally clean.

The soothing spray of the water eased some of her tired muscles and relaxed her marginally. Minutes later, the rationed flow of water began to slow, and Carmella turned the taps off with a sigh of regret before stepping out of the shower stall.

With no more than a coarse towel wrapped around her body she moved through the central room and entered her bedroom.

She barely kept from betraying her awareness that she was being watched the moment she stepped into the room. It was the same presence that had followed her through the woods earlier, eerily similar to the sensation of the stranger's eyes that had watched her in the bar.

Who was he and what the hell did he want?

She had no doubt the presence was male. Who he was became the greater question, though. And why was he watching her?

Chapter Four

Carmella flipped the towel from her body, dropping it carelessly on the chair beside the bed as she feigned ignorance of the presence. She kept the shields around her own powers carefully in place, hiding her knowledge of the watcher as well as the strength of her psychic talents.

Bad girl. The amused chiding in Torren's voice at her display had her fighting a grin. You always were a bit of an exhibitionist, weren't you, baby? His arousal filled the connecting thought.

It surprised her, the dark undercurrents flowing through the connection. There was no jealousy, as she would have expected, only heat, approval. Arousal.

Naked, she moved to the bed, lying back on the soft mattress as she stared up at the ceiling.

Feels like the bastard from the bar earlier, she mused, knowing Torren was listening closely. He's powerful, whoever he is.

There was no answer forthcoming, as though he too were considering the uninvited visitor.

For a second, as her gaze had connected with the stranger, she had sensed a power in him, a hidden well of strength that aroused her curiosity and more.

He made you horny, Torren accused her with a thread of laughter. Be honest, Carmella, he made you wet.

She sent him the impression of her silent snort. It's not like you've been of any use to me lately. Too busy chasing after blonde bimbos.

Blonde bimbos can be a nice diversion. But I didn't fuck her, baby. I just wasn't fucking you.

She didn't like his tone, or the information. It hurt to realize his desire for her was fading. She hadn't expected that. But then again, she hadn't expected to be hit so quickly with her own lust for another man. She hastily censored her thoughts from the man who had been her lover, unwilling that he would know the innermost part of her longings. Longings she had never shared with anyone.

She had gotten close several times. Torren had nearly brought her to the release she needed once or twice when his fury with her had overwhelmed his consideration. But close didn't count except in battle.

The stranger at the bar had been powerful. Physically, at least, with a glimmer of carnal knowledge glowing in the blue eyes that had watched her across the room. Tall, strong, and if he was by chance psychic, then that physical power could be greater than normal. Enough to hold her down. Enough to thrust inside her with a strength and power that could ultimately push her over the edge. Maybe.

She sighed softly. She had never gone over the edge, so she had no idea what it would take to push her there. At five feet six, with a willowy slender body, she just didn't seem to inspire mindless lust in men. Torren seemed to want to protect her, rather than fuck her mindlessly. Not that the soft kisses and gentle touches weren't nice at times, but her sexual fantasies little resembled the touches she had received.

Her lips quirked. How surprised he would be to know the sexual fantasies that tormented her body. They were raw, carnal images that came from hearing the rough, sexually explicit descriptions of the acts she had overheard men talking of throughout her life. That and the words from the nearly ancient novels of another time.

She had found the cache of books years before in the hidden basement of a nearly demolished home. Paperbacks so close to falling apart she feared reading them. But once the words had leapt from the front page, she had been ensnared, helplessly caught. She had been as fascinated then as she was now with the excitement of being watched by a presence so strong it could slip past the psychic barriers she had placed around the room.

She had a job to do tomorrow. Wherever the hell Torren was hidden she had to find him so they could get the hell out of there before she was detected by the PSI agents that must surely be looking for her. But that was tomorrow and this was tonight.

Until then, she could play with her psychic Peeping Tom just a little bit. The surge of excitement at the thought of that sent the blood racing through her veins in excitement.

Watch me, she thought, thinking of the watcher as she opened her thoughts to Torren once again. Knowing her lover was "seeing" mentally what she was doing-feeling her arousal-brought a keen edge of excitement to her lust.

Damn. This is a dangerous game you're playing, little girl, he warned her, but his thought was filled with heated desire.

Enjoy it. She hid her grin from whoever watched. Let me enjoy it.

She closed her eyes, bringing to her mind the image of one of the rougher passages she had re-read not long before.

Her body was sizzling with lust, and though she could have slept while the watcher moved about the room, there was no way she could sleep with the fires of arousal burning in the depths of her pussy the way they were. She would give the bastard something to watch, to wonder about, and give herself the relief she needed to help her rest.

Damn, Carmella. Torren's curse was one of frustration rather than shock or disgust as the image filled her head.

She settled herself comfortably on the nearly flattened pillow, her hands rising to her already swollen breasts. She drew in a hard breath as her fingers smoothed over the distended peaks. Heat flared through her body, piercing her womb at the touch. She could feel her pussy creaming, soaking the red-gold curls between her thighs as she built the image of the written scene in her mind.

Her thumb and forefinger gripped her distended nipple, and she couldn't hold back a moan as she pinched it lightly. Then harder. Oh, that was good. Pleasure sang through her bloodstream, pounding through her body.

In her mind's eye it was the stranger from the bar touching her. Holding her captive against a wall, his powerful body blanketing hers, holding her still as she struggled to escape him. She would have to fight him. Fight to win. She didn't want a man she knew she could best; she wanted one strong enough to take her down and fuck her mindlessly even as she screamed out in fury.

Fuck! Torren's fierce, lascivious thought only made her hotter. He was seeing the image she was creating, images she had hidden before.

Torren had been uncomfortable during the few months he had been her lover, when he glimpsed the rioting needs that tormented her body. He was a strong alpha psychic, but he had no desire to assert the darker side of his passions. At least, not with her. She had a feeling the stranger who had watched her earlier would have no such problem.

She bit her lip, forcing back her moan of need as she twisted the hard point of her nipple. Her other hand smoothed over the flat plane of her stomach until it tucked between her thighs. She was wet; so slick and creamy her juices matted the curls that shielded her cunt.

She could feel Torren, still connected with her, watching her, his own arousal sizzling between them now in ways it had only threatened to before. But it was the stranger she saw. His hands touching her, tormenting her.

She imagined him holding her easily as she fought him, his hard body pressing her into the wall, his fingers twisting the tender flesh of her nipple as the fingers of his other hand took possession of her pussy. She arched away from the touch, but he followed her, his fingers sliding easily through the soaked slit to the clenching entrance below.

He wouldn't allow her satisfaction to come easily. She wouldn't submit to him without first testing him, pushing him past his own limits of control. And there lay her greatest desire...and her greatest fear.

He would have to take her control with the loss of his own. She didn't want a man able to maintain his own power, his own desires as she lost hers. She would want him to overpower her because he had no choice. Because his lust for her would be greater than his need to control his own power, physical or psychic. There were few psychics alive with the honor she required that would allow a lifetime of control to vanish for lust alone. But she could dream. And she could imagine such a thing occurring. And imagine she did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryder allowed his astral body to move closer to the bed, for the first time in his life afflicted with such lust, such overwhelming desire, that he could feel it even now, separated from his physical body. His psychic form felt every bit as sensitive, as heated as he would have been if he were physically standing by the bed watching her.

She was a hot little package. Her skin was smooth, creamy, with no betraying blemishes of disease or sickness. Her breasts were full, her stomach flat but by no means undernourished. Her legs were strong, rounded and slowly spreading to accommodate her slender hand as she caressed her wet cunt.

It wasn't the first time he had watched a woman masturbate, unaware he was in the room with her, but he'd be damned if it wasn't the most arousing. What was it about Carmella Dansford that tempted his control? And tempt it she did-in a number of ways that surprised Ryder.

As an alpha psychic, there was a part of him-a darkness he had kept hidden most of his life. It was one of the main reasons for the control he had built up over his lifetime. That darkness made him wary, and the desires it produced often made him wonder at his own sense of honor. Until now, no woman had ever strained that honor or the control he valued so highly. He was almost tempted to return to his physical body and wait until morning to contact her. That would have been the wisest course. But lust was never wise, and Ryder was filled with that blistering, foolish emotion in ways he never had been with another woman.

She was laid out before him, ripe and flushed, her breathing hard and deep as she pulled roughly at a hard, reddened nipple, while her fingers worked slowly through the swollen slit of her pussy. She was so fucking wet that the red-gold curls of her cunt glistened with the moisture that saturated them.

Torren, son of a bitch, she's killing me. It was only with the help of Torren's mental shield that he was able to hide his identity from her. He had no doubt she knew he was there.

The woman was a damned banquet of carnal delight. Her breasts would fit his hands perfectly, and he'd be damned if he didn't want to be the one twisting that perfect, hard nipple. He wouldn't allow her to smother her cries, though. He wanted to hear her screaming with the pleasure and erotic pain he could give her.

Her eyes were closed, her teeth clamped over her lower lip as she held back her cries. Her hips undulated against her fingers as she stroked the hot, wet flesh of her cunt. What was she thinking? What was she imagining? The need to know was driving him insane.

Cover me. I'm going in, he ordered Torren, unable to bear the thought that the other man was experiencing whatever fantasy she had conjured and that he alone was left to merely watch the results. He wanted to see the images filling her imagination-needed to know the key to Carmella's passions. To do that, he would have to slip past the physical and enter her amazingly complicated mind.

Damn, she might be more than either of us can handle, Ryder. Torren's thought was a morass of lust, affection and anticipation.

He felt the added strength Torren sent to him as he stepped closer. Entering her mind undetected wouldn't be nearly as easy as entering her room had been. Her blocks were strong; her mind would be even stronger. But there was always a crack, a weak point. Ryder knew well there was no such thing as an impenetrable mind.

Chapter Five

God help him. Ryder sent out the silent prayer after finding the weak spot in Carmella's defenses and slipping into the shadows of her daydream. She would be the death of him-and her, if he wasn't careful. Because when he got hold of her he was going to fuck her until he killed them both.

She was imagining him. It was the most amazing sight, seeing himself holding her against the wall, his hands rough, his hips pressed against that pretty ass as he held her in place. And she was fighting him tooth and nail. Fighting as her image of Torren wavered around them.

"Say no," the shadowy Ryder ordered. "When you say no, I'll let you go."

Ryder wondered if he actually got his hands on her, if he could let her go should she actually say no.

"Go to hell." Her curse echoed in the confines of the dream she had built within her mind.

"Wrong answer," the dream Ryder taunted.

His hand moved from between her thighs to deliver a stinging slap to the well-rounded curve of her buttock. Ryder watched her flinch, heard her cry out. Son of a bitch, it was her daydream and it couldn't have hit his own fantasies much closer.

He watched as she struggled, kicking back, her head tossing as she tried to slam it into her dream lover's face. The male vision only chuckled, then smacked her again a second before his fingers delved into the cleft of her ass and slid to the area of her pussy.

It was wet. Ryder knew she was dripping wet without seeing it. The dream Ryder hummed his appreciation of what he found as the woman bucked in his arms.

He forced her legs apart then, his powerful thighs flexing. She screamed in outrage, cursing him as his body bent, his cock lining up between her thighs. Ryder had a second to glimpse the penetration of her cunt.

He stood back, watching as the pair fucked furiously. The dream Ryder was hard-pressed to keep his cock inside her as she fought him, but somehow he managed. She tossed and writhed, then whimpered as she came. The orgasm was light, her body pulsing for more. Behind her, her lover stiffened, driving his erection inside her one last time as he obviously spent himself as well.

She was nowhere near satisfied, despite her orgasm. She needed more, yet seemed too tired, too frustrated to bring herself to peak once more. He hid in the shadows of her mind as he felt the exhaustion sweeping over her. Sleep would come soon.

He had slipped into her mind while she was occupied with her own needs, but her subconscious would be used to him now.

Her mind darkened-images, memories, flickering about the mists that began to fill her subconscious. He stood back, waiting, knowing that when sleep took over another part of her would awaken. It was this part of her he longed to see.

The little fantasy he had glimpsed had intrigued him, giving him more than one clue into Carmella's sexuality. But he needed more. He didn't expect what came to him.

He saw the pages of a book, then the images jumping to life on the tapestry of her subconscious. He watched in surprise and lust at the twisting figures that began to fill her mind. In each, the female was in a position of submission, two males, out of control and consumed with lust, filling her. He was going to explode with his own arousal, Ryder thought heatedly. The female images were Carmella, the males' misty forms were his and Torren's. And they were willing to force her compliance. She was starving for raw, carnal sex. To submit, to be taken. Not raped, but forced to relinquish her own control to a man-or men-strong enough to take it. Someone stronger, more powerful than she.

She fought in each sequence of events. Struggled against the males' greater strength only to eventually accept the spears of hard, eager cocks ready to take her. But even in the midst of the lust, he saw something more. In each one Carmella's dream lovers, though out of control, never truly hurt her. The voices were rough, though tender; commanding, but not unkind. And after possessing whichever part of her body one of the shadowed shapes managed to penetrate, they praised her.

The tight fit of her small pussy, the heat of her ass, the grip of her mouth or the stroke of her tongue-each image, each fantasy, was different. And here was the key to the woman.

He eased back from her then, aware he was close to the edge of his own control and moving closer toward the vilest act a psychic could participate in. Taking her in this vulnerable time of her greatest need. And he could. He could weave his astral force into one of the shadowed male shapes and give her what she fantasized about. Without her consent. Without her own conscious realization that it was, indeed, what she wanted.

He forced himself through the small break in her barrier that he had found. He repaired it quickly, reinforced it to keep her safe then returned to his own body.

Ryder sighed deeply as he looked away. He stared up at the ceiling, contemplating his options. He liked to consider himself practical-kind in many respects. He worked for the new government because he knew the laws being put in place were for the protection of everyone-psychics and non-psychics alike. Laws that would be set up as unbreakable for the protection of everyone. Laws that, if in place now, would assure his instant punishment.

She won't be easy, he told Torren, amazed at the sense of gentleness he was suddenly feeling toward her.

She knew I was there when she took that little fantasy trip. She's strong. She's losing her defenses. Torren's tone was concerned. She's too tired.

Can you shield her until she awakens? That could be a complication. If she were that tired, then her powers would be easily detected by the PSI searching for emanations of psychic strength that weren't contained by the government-issued restrainers created for civilian psychics, or the unique signal of a tested PSI member.

As always. Torren's softer emotions for the girl filled his thoughts. He was worried, aroused, eager. But her protection was uppermost. As it always had been, even before she had come into Torren's life.

Ryder shook his head as he remembered his first contact with Torren right before receiving the file on Carmella from the PSI director. The future he had predicted had made little sense until he received the file and saw the woman who had occupied his fantasies for years. The same woman PSI was now contemplating extreme measures against because of her link to the past.

Fyrebrands were elemental psychics. The creation of that particular psychic talent had been artificial. Tyre had been extremely adept in the elemental powers, as had his wife, the Tyrea. They had been the most powerful and had easily taken positions of leadership. Since then, every advanced elemental discovered had been found to trace back to Tyre. The man had impregnated more women than those recording it at the time could keep track of. But his mate had been Leila, the Tyrea. The birth of her daughter had been discovered, as had the efforts taken to hide her as the war had started to turn the tide in favor of those fighting to destroy the merciless psychics who had taken power.

Where the child had gone wasn't learned until after her death. But it was reported that she, too, had given birth. That direct bloodline of the two most powerful psychics was suspected to run in Carmella's veins. If it did, then her life hung in the balance if it was ever discovered.

Chapter Six

The next evening the stranger returned. Carmella watched as he entered the inn, his gaze catching hers immediately as he stopped at the bar once again.

Who is he? She knew Torren was in her mind, watching her, keeping track of her movements, but he hadn't yet offered to reveal his location.

She hadn't even bothered returning to the prison. She knew she wouldn't find him there. Whatever game he was playing would have to be endured until he was satisfied. She had learned that a long time ago. It didn't mean she had to like it.

The day had been a fucking washout, Carmella thought as she sat with the back of her chair braced against the wall. She had scoured the city, wondering where Torren was, and having nothing but the conversations he kept up in her head to go by. But she never sensed a strengthening in the mental link. She was starting to think he was nowhere near the city.

She glanced broodingly at the stranger who made no effort to hide his interest in her. She finished off the shot of whisky she had ordered after her meal, refusing to redirect her gaze.

Her dreams the night before had been filled with him. Stark, vivid, lust-filled dreams that left her aching, her pussy wet, her breasts sensitive. She had never had such a reaction to a man. Had never been so certain that one could stem the rising fury of need that sometimes grew inside her, tormenting her body and her mind before she found a way to push it back.

Several times throughout the day she had been forced to tamp down the overriding lust. It grew in her, like a shadow of fury that threatened to rage out of control.

She rolled the small shot glass on its end, her fingers gripping it lightly as her gaze returned to the blond-haired, blue-eyed temptation that stalked her dreams, and now her evenings. Why was he just watching her? If he was Torren's friend, why hadn't he made contact yet?

I'm sure he'll let you know eventually. Amusement whispered through her mind.

Is he the one you contacted? She knew Torren could easily detect her anger. It grated on her that he refused to tell her where he was, yet trusted another instead.

And if I don't know where I am? he asked her, his voice silky, almost...deceptive. And he didn't say if he knew the guy or not.

I won't know if it's him until he gives you the information I gave him.

She sighed tiredly. Why am I getting the feeling you're setting me up, Torren?

She couldn't ignore it any longer. He wasn't where he was supposed to be. His telepathy wasn't cut off. If PSI had him, he wouldn't have a chance of linking with her mentally. Which meant PSI didn't have him. But neither was he helping her find him. Her frustration level, high to begin with, was only growing daily.

Have I ever hurt you, Carmella? She couldn't ignore the affection he felt for her. The truth of his loyalty to her. It was all there. Just as it had always been.

No. She pushed her fingers restlessly through her hair, glancing back at the stranger.

I won't start now.

Torren wouldn't, but what about the stranger? She had to do something soon. She was becoming too frustrated, too near to losing her control. And this unknown man wasn't helping. He made her hot. Too damned hot and in all the wrong ways.

Carmella sighed tiredly. Her temper was fraying at the edges. Ever since the first glimpse of that man the night before, she had been tormented with images of him rising over her, taking her, his hard cock driving into her repeatedly. The muscles of her cunt clenched as she fought to pull her thoughts back.

His lips quirked in wicked humor, a dark blond brow arching faintly in question as his gaze stayed on hers. Damn, he looked too sexy-too male. And clean. Son of a bitch if the man didn't look clean. There were few in the bar that could claim that distinction, even herself.

The stranger was dressed completely in black. Black boots, jeans, shirt and leather overcoat. He looked as tough as rawhide and too tempting for his own good.

The dark clothing seemed to only further accentuate his almost white-blond hair and wicked blue eyes. His dark skin, the sardonic quirk of his lips, the well-trimmed dark gold beard and mustache all combined to make him look like a pirate. A marauder. A sexy, untamed male.

She kept her gaze on him as she stood up from her chair and began to work her way to the bar, ignoring the heated pace of her heartbeat that seemed to echo in the depths of her pussy. What was it about this man-a stranger-that affected her as no other had?

She moved through the crowded room, ignoring murmured invitations from various men as she passed, keeping her gaze on the stranger until she slid between him and the bar stool beside him.

Neither budged. Her breasts were pressed tightly against his chest as he stared down at her broodingly, the heat of his body whipping through her nipples where they pressed against the cool expanse of his leather overcoat.

"Bartender, whisky," she gave her order as she fought to keep from panting.

As the bartender moved to fill the order she felt a wide palm at her hip. It was steady, moving no further, cupping the curve of her body with a heated caress. She raised her eyes to him.

"Who the fuck are you?" she hissed low enough that only he heard her words.

She felt like ramming her knee into the intriguing bulge between his thighs when his sensual lips tilted in a mocking smile, his hooded eyes glimmering with lustful purpose.

His head lowered, moving next to hers, his lips whispering against the sensitive lobe of her ear as he whispered, "Your most erotic fantasy." His voice was dark, deep, a sensual rasp over her senses that sent her clit throbbing, her heart pounding. "Are you going to say no?"

Carmella's eyes widened as the memory of her fantasy the night before surged through her mind.

Say no and I'll let you go. It was her fantasy. Or was it?

He moved back slowly, his expression erotically intense, his lips parted just enough to make the sensual male curve a temptation she could barely deny. At her hip, his fingers flexed, stroked, his fingertips inching beneath the snug hem of her shirt at the waistband of her pants.

She flinched at the stroke of pure sensation as his fingertips smoothed against her bare flesh. Calloused. Warm. Creating an erogenous zone where none should exist.

Psychic. She knew he was, but she couldn't sense any emanations of power at all. Carmella had a sensitive awareness for those psychic waves, yet she could detect nothing.

"I'll do better than that," she whispered at his ear, licking her lips, allowing the tip of her tongue to barely glance the strong line of his earlobe. "If you want it, big boy, you have to take it. Think you can?"

Before he could reply she collected her shot glass, threw back the hard liquor and moved away from him. She glanced back to see him watching her, his head lowered, his gaze brooding. The look sent an arc of pure arousal pulsing through her body and a sudden, overriding image of him doing just as she had dared him to do.

Oh, bad girl. Torren was laughing at her as she swept from the room. A challenge like that would be hard for a man to refuse. You just gave him permission to force you, Carmella.

Only if he's man enough. She hadn't yet found a man who could overpower her. Psychic or not.

Torren was quiet for long, intense moments.

You might get more than you bargained for. His thought was heavy with warning, and a small, thrilling spark of lust she had always felt he kept carefully hidden.

You had your chance. She threw the door open to the small suite of rooms. You wanted a bimbo, honey, instead.

The door bounced on the inner wall then swung forward again. Carmella caught it and slammed it closed before clenching her fists and fighting for control. She could feel the anger, the throttled desire and frustration building inside her. She needed a good fight but there was none available. No, she needed a good fight and a hard fuck. She trembled at the thought, the muscles of her pussy rippling.

"Where are you?" she growled as she stalked to the dingy window of the room, looking out into the darkened street with a sense of helpless rage. "I'm tired of this game, Torren." The sound of her own voice was a comfort for her, even though it wasn't needed for him to hear her.

If only it were a game, Carmella. His lingering regret washed through, and a frown creased her brow as she felt it. I wish it were no more than a game. Then you would find ease and I would find peace.

She laid her head against the pane of glass, ignoring her reflection as well as the regret that lay heavy in her heart.

Yeah, she agreed silently. If only it were a game.

Chapter Seven

The knock came on the main door to the suite the next morning, just after a quick breakfast of bacon and toast purchased from the restaurant downstairs. She came to her feet slowly, sending out a cautious mental feeler for any signs of aggression outside the wood panel.

She sensed Torren then, slipping into her mind, watching cautiously.

Can you tell who it is? she asked suspiciously.

I don't feel danger. No sign of aggression. The knock came again.

Gripping the heavy blaster pistol strapped to her side, she moved slowly to the door. She lifted the long weapon from its holster, keeping it at shoulder level as she quickly turned the door knob and threw it open. She moved to the side of the frame and brought the weapon to bear on a more than impressive chest.

She breathed out deeply as she stared at the visitor smirking down at her.

"What the fuck do you want?" The instant antagonism was followed by a hard pulse of moisture between her thighs.

Without waiting for an invitation, he placed his hand on the door and pushed past her, stepping into the room.

The aggressive arrogant move had her forcibly tamping down the power that sparked inside her. She could feel her stomach tightening, heat flaring in the depths of it. He lifted a brow mockingly as he passed her.

She quickly holstered the blaster as she moved back into the room, slamming the door behind her. Fury surged hard and fast through her veins as she fought the overwhelming response as the man turned to face her.

Her senses were going crazy, impressions tumbling in on her, a confused jumble of fear and knowledge. And danger. She could feel it licking over her flesh like a lover's caress.

This is your doing, she accused Torren furiously. I know this is your doing. You can't hide it, you son of a bitch. What are you up to?

You don't know any such thing. Settle down, Carmella. See what he wants. Torren's demanding presence did little to still the sudden confusion running rife through her.

Her eyes narrowed on the stranger as his gaze flickered to her heaving breasts beneath the snug fit of her black top. Her nipples peaked, and her senses fractured beneath the lust in his eyes when they rose back to hers.

"I would think what I want would be obvious by now." His blue eyes were sparkling with laughter as he watched her.

Carmella snarled. Arrogance strengthened every line of his face and glittered in his eyes.

"Well, let's pretend it's not," she suggested sarcastically. "Who the hell are you and what are you doing stalking me?"

He crossed his arms over the black shirt he wore, causing the material to stretch over the bulging muscles of his arms. Strong, thick muscles. She gave herself a mental shake as she felt Torren's amusement.

If this is your little buddy, Torren, I'll roast you when I find you, she promised him silently.

"I imagine Torren's been in contact with you by now," the stranger suggested softly. "He sent me to bring you to him. I'm Ryder."

Carmella stilled. He didn't say Torren had sent him to help her find him, but to take her to him.

Torren? Does he know where you are?

It's possible. She could hear the mental shrug in his voice. If it's really Ryder, then anything is possible.

And how the hell am I supposed to know? She watched the other man carefully as she mentally thought of all the ways she could kill Torren. Slowly.

Ryder watched her mockingly as she fought for answers, his demon's blue eyes tracking each curve of her body until he returned to her face. When he saw her gaze, a confident, sensual smile crossed his expression. She could see the male superiority in his gaze, the complete assurance that she would do as he wanted.

The aggressive arrogance in his attitude had her forcibly tamping down the power that sparked inside her. She could feel her stomach tightening, heat flaring in the depths of it. He lifted a brow mockingly.

Carmella. Torren's warning thought drew her attention from the other man. You're bleeding power again. Rein it in.

She breathed in deeply. The amount of psychic static her powers generated would bring any and every PSI agent within a ten-mile radius running if she weren't careful.

"My shield covers you," Ryder told her as his lips quirked in amusement. "Go ahead and get mad. I'm sure I can handle it."

He wore arrogant superiority as easily as he wore the faded black jeans. His voice resonated with it, sparking something inside her that she tried to convince herself was anger alone. But she knew better. And she knew Torren would as well.

Son of a bitch, she didn't need her lover trampling through her mind right now. It was strange as hell to lust after another man while the man she had fucked more than once looked on. But it was also discomfortingly arousing. It added an edge she didn't want to look deeply into.

"And how the hell am I supposed to be sure Torren even knows you?" She propped her hands on her hips as she watched him distrustfully.

"Because I just said he did." He shrugged his wide shoulders, his arms still crossed over his muscular chest as he watched her, almost laughing at her.

"Oh, and I'm just going to accept that," she assured him, thickening the mockery in her voice. "I don't think so, big boy."

He chuckled, a low, rough sound that caused her cunt to clench heatedly.

"Torren told you I was coming, Carmella. He's with you now. The code was simply Ryder. Or, ride her. I rather liked the idea of the latter."

You didn't, she hissed silently, furiously.

Oh come on, Carmella, I'm sure he misunderstood. But she heard the laughter in his voice. The knowledge that he most likely had done just that.

Ride her! She hoped her snarl conveyed itself across the mental channel. Ride her! I should let him while you watch, you sick bastard.

The surge of lust that speared her mind shocked her. The thought of it aroused him almost as much as it did her.

"I don't know you, and Torren never mentioned you to me," she assured him softly as her hand lowered to palm the butt of the pistol. "Try again. Get the code right this time."

"You didn't have a code with Torren, but you slept with him," he growled, a glimmer of possessive anger sparkling in his gaze. "Now you'll sleep with me."

Damn, he sounds kinda pissed over it. Carmella ignored Torren's amusement at the other man as she stilled. She belonged to no one but herself, yet this man acted as though he had somehow claimed her for his own. A claiming she had no say in. She didn't think so.

"Torren doesn't acknowledge you," she informed him softly. "And you have no rights to me. Period."

"Yes, he has acknowledged me." His eyes narrowed on her expression. "As a matter of fact, he's rather amused right now, I believe."

"Prove it," she challenged him, her senses flaring, anticipation spreading through her body. She could force the fight she needed so damned bad, then she could talk reasonably. She would show him first, though, that she wouldn't be mocked. She wouldn't be ordered. Not unless he could do what no man had before.

"I can give you what he couldn't, Carmella," he told her softly. "I can make you submit."

Her eyes widened as she felt her face pale. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" he asked her softly. "I think you do, baby. And I think you're dying to find out if I can."

You expect me to just follow this bastard? she snorted silently to Torren. What does he do, buy his arrogance wholesale?

Torren's answering amusement wasn't much help.

Carmella watched Ryder as she stilled the pulse of arousal and fury churning through her system. Emotion only clouded her mind, and as desperately as she needed to find Torren, she would be damned if she would just accept and follow anyone.

Unfortunately, Torren was doing little to help her. He was neither agreeing nor disagreeing with anything Ryder was saying. His amusement whispered through her mind, as though he enjoyed the confrontation playing out before him.

"And I think you're a bit too damned arrogant," she growled. "I want to find Torren, not fuck." She forced the lie through her teeth as she faced him. "You aren't saying anything to convince me you can help me with that."

"That's your pride talking," he said softly. "You already know Torren sent me. And trust me, I can find him. But not without boundaries. I lead. You follow. It's that simple."

Nothing was that simple. Carmella could sense the hidden currents flowing from him, the dominance that was as much a part of him as the blue of his eyes, or the brilliant white of his hair.

She breathed in deeply, fighting for patience as she stared across the room at him. He was too forceful. Too dominating. She could feel her body tensing, the urge to fight swelling within her. He made her want things she knew would never truly exist, and it terrified her.

She pushed her fingers restlessly through her hair as she fought to think logically. Okay, Torren had sent him...

I wouldn't send anyone that couldn't do the job right, Carmella. His thought was suddenly strong, pulsing. He's saying all the right words, but I don't know for sure.

His suddenly cool demeanor worried her.

Then how the hell am I supposed to know? she snapped silently.

There was no answer forthcoming.

"Standing here looking at you isn't a hardship, but it's not getting us any closer to Torren either," Ryder smirked. "Are you ready to ride or not?"

The blatant sexuality of the question had her hackles rising instantly.

"Excuse me?" She could feel her power pulsing, energizing.

The grin that tilted his lips did little to ease her mind. It was pure sexuality, unapologetic, richly sensual.

"I'm ready to leave now. Get your things and let's go."

He expected her to just follow him? To mindlessly accept that he could be trusted?

"I don't think so." She braced her body, watching him carefully. "I don't just follow anyone, Ryder. Not even on Torren's command. Which he hasn't given me, by the way. It's not going to be that easy."

Challenge? she asked Torren.

There was a long, thoughtful silence. It's the only way to know for sure. I know how he fights. But the challenge you put out last night might get you more than you're bargaining for.

Her responses leaped in a betraying surge of arousal at the thought. She smiled slowly, watching Ryder's gaze darken at the movement.

"Torren's a smart bastard." She shrugged her shoulders negligently. "But I'm not exactly stupid. You haven't yet proved you can lead and until you do, you'll have no loyalty from me." He was cocky enough, Carmella gave him that. If arrogance and superiority equaled strength, then he'd have it licked. But they didn't. They often equaled a too-large ego and too little power.

Carmella smirked in Ryder's direction.

His gaze became hooded, sweeping slowly over her body as she stood facing him. She kept her body loose, prepared to jump. She wouldn't let him surprise her.

"Who said anything about wanting your loyalty?" he murmured, the blue of his eyes deepening. "The strongest rules and rides. Are you sure you can handle that?" The sexual connotations had her brow rising slowly.

Her lips quirked at the challenge. "Think you're man enough?"

"Oh baby." He grinned then, and there was no hiding the heat of lust that flared in his gaze. "I know I am."

Chapter Eight

Overconfidence had been many a man's downfall when it came to her, Carmella assured herself. She had faced off against more than one, and only Torren had ever beaten her. And even then, Carmella felt it was closer to a draw than an actual loss on her side.

As she placed her pistol and assorted knives out of the way, her eyes narrowed on him. Balancing herself carefully, she allowed the shields around her powers to drop. She felt Torren reaching out across whatever distance separated them, his own power shielding the room, covering them from PSI detection.

Instantly the room hummed, crackling with energy as the force of her elemental power began to grow within her. She would fight him with everything she had and she would show him who would rule and who would ride. She snorted silently, watching him carefully as he flexed the powerful muscles beneath his shirt and watched her with a smug quirk to his lips.

"I'm giving you one chance, Carmella," he said softly. "We can do this the easy way."

"Can you tell me where Torren is located?" she demanded as she let her arms rest at her sides, her fingers flexing as energy traveled through them.

He sighed, shaking his head mockingly. "Sorry."

She shrugged in return, allowing a smile to tilt her lips. "Then I guess we'll have to fight it out, won't we?"

"Carmella, if I take you down I'll fuck you." He almost shocked her with his explicit words. "It won't be nice, or easy, and it sure as hell won't be the least bit romantic. I'll plow as deep inside your pussy as I can. And it won't stop there."

Carmella tried to still the surge of lust that swept through her womb. She had never been taken down, dominated, fucked until she screamed. She had fantasized about it. Had dreamed of it. But it had never happened. She shook her head slowly.

Well, he's confident anyway. Torren's thought was too amused to suit her.

Shut up and let me concentrate, she told him absently.

With a threat like that you'll lose for the hell of it, Torren quipped as Carmella tried to push him from her mind.

"Promises, promises," she sighed mockingly as his gaze flickered to the beaded tips of her nipples beneath her snug top. "You're such a tease, Ryder."

Ryder chuckled softly as his gaze returned to hers. "Taking you down will be a pleasure, Carmella."

She licked her lips slowly, sensually. "Are you going to talk me to death, big boy, or actually make a move?"

He made his move with a speed she didn't expect, leaping for her in an effort to enclose her in his arms.

He was fast. She had to give him credit for it. And, son of a bitch, if he wasn't powerful. Static filled the room, flipping around her as she spun out of reach, ducking and twisting to the side as he grasped for her. At the last minute, she extended her leg in a kick that had him cursing as it glanced his shin. Power filled her.

He hadn't come at her with a psychic blow, but depended on physical strength instead. As she flipped around to face him she sent a surge of static in his direction. Crackling mid-air like an invisible whip, the arc of energy should have struck him across his chest, putting him down for several long moments.

Instead it fizzled out against an invisible barrier inches from his body. Her eyes narrowed. Someone had to be providing Ryder with his own amplifying powers. "Call off the guard dog," she snarled. "Fight me alone or don't fight me at all."

"Did I say I was going to play fair, Carmella?" he asked her gently as he glided around to the other side of the room. "Your powers are elemental. Fire, if I remember correctly, with a few lesser talents thrown in. Do you think I'd drop my guard?"

She lifted her lip in a sneer. Anger surged through her, but the lust pounded just beneath her skin.

"You aren't defenseless," she accused him softly as she worked her way to the center of the room, watching him carefully.

"Neither are you, baby." He grinned. "Come on, Carmella, burn me. I dare you."

She laughed softly. "Come and get me, Ryder." She spread her arms wide. "If you can."

She sensed the attack coming. A whip of dead space. It nearly terrified her. She dropped to the floor, sending a surge of fire in the direction it came from as she processed immediately whether to jump or roll. She jumped, clearing the disarming shock with less than an inch to spare as she threw a blast of deadly flames at Ryder's head.

She heard him laugh as she hit the floor and rolled to safety before coming to a crouch, watching him carefully. The son of a bitch wasn't even singed. He stood casually against the wall, once again protecting his back. She narrowed her eyes at the implied weakness.

She jumped to the side as another arc of disarming power flew toward her. Flames met it, outlining its strength and width as she rolled across the floor and sent a fireball as big as his head toward him at the same time.

He jumped out of the way, aiming again.

"You're getting old." She jumped the whip of power that would effectively still her own for up to hours at a time. "Damned disarming shit. Figures you'd be a passive. Maybe I'll get to ride you." She threw a blade of static at his side, forcing him to glide further into the room as she rolled away from yet another disarming beam. "Dammit, don't you know how to do anything else? This is getting boring."

She jumped the next beam, timing the jump and her position. She threw a wall of flames, turned in mid-air and aimed a kick at his tall body. Her foot connected with his shoulder, throwing him off balance as she landed on her feet and attacked.

A quick kick to his stomach interrupted the next disarming force. A fist to his eye got the next one. She managed to land a strike to his kidneys, but even with the flames spreading around them, he caught on quickly.

She couldn't halt her cry when a blazing force of power collided with her head. Not his hand, but power. Pure, unadulterated psy-energy that threw her halfway across the room and left her shaking her head to clear her mind as she jumped to her feet.

Flames shot through the room, a shield around her, as several similar forms of flames flared in different areas. She kicked out as she passed him, only to have him catch her ankle and twist.

Recovering, Carmella flipped, intending to catch his jaw with the other foot but only glancing a blow off his shoulder as a dagger shaft of pain sliced through her arch.

"Bastard," she growled as the disarming force sizzled along her foot. Any higher and she would have been down.

He attacked then. His leg swept under her feet as they touched the floor, taking them out as she twisted at the last moment, catching her weight on her hands and flipping away from him. At the same time, she sent a charge of static electricity at what she hoped was his undefended back.

"Son of a bitch!" His curse had her smiling in triumph as she crouched, holding her weight on her knee, the other leg stretched out for balance and strength, her fingers touching the floor as she instantly assessed a point of attack.

She moved as he turned, giving her a chance at his broad back. Coming to her feet in a surge of power, she aimed for it as she anticipated the expected move for him to turn and protect it.

Sheer surprise shot through her as his arms suddenly surrounded her. Flames licked over her body, then extinguished as he chuckled.

A strangled scream escaped her throat as she felt him absorbing the power she was releasing, drawing it into his own body rather than being burned by the fiery waves.

She struggled against his hold, kicking back, slamming her head into his shoulder as he lifted her off her feet, his arms tightening around hers as he kept them clamped to her sides. Chuckling in victory, he lowered his head, his lips grazing her ear.

"Winner rules and rides," he growled. "My rules are I ride you."

Chapter Nine

The naked lust in his voice seared her cunt. She couldn't escape his hold. No matter how she fought, wiggled or kicked back, he never faltered. She had never-not in her entire life-been so effectively overpowered. The feeling of helplessness, of utter submission, did nothing to stem the raging lust the fight had brought on. It made it worse.

"Bastard," she snarled, barely able to push the word past her lips as she fought for breath.

Flames built beneath her skin, but a second later sizzled out as the effects of a mental psychic blast suddenly paralyzed her. Her muscles went lax, despite the fury overwhelming her.

Damned psychic disarmer. She fought the numbing effects of the mental blast, determined she wouldn't give in. Not this easily. Damned cheat.

He grinned down at her as his hold shifted, one arm going behind her legs as he cradled her against his chest. She couldn't halt the shiver that raced through her body, had no way to tighten her muscles, steel her will against his effect on her. The force of the mental disarming relaxed every bone and muscle in her body while paralyzing the ability to move or to use the psychic abilities she possessed.

Disarmers were rare, but incredibly powerful.

"Now now, Carmella." He smiled down at her softly as he dropped her lightly on her bed and began undressing. "You made the rules, darling. I intend to fulfill them."

She could feel her breasts swelling as she struggled against the paralysis, willing strength back to her limbs so she could fight him, struggle, rip the clothes from his body. A fury of lust was rising inside her; where it came from she wasn't certain. But she wanted to test this man, tempt him, make him as wild for her as she was becoming for him.

"God, you're beautiful." His husky voice surprised her as he knelt, straddling her knees, his hard body rippling with muscle, the length and width of his cock causing her eyes to widen in surprise...in a tingle of feminine fear. "Tell you what. I'll make a deal with you. When I strip these pants off you, if you're not just as fucking wet as I am hard, then I'll let you be. Otherwise, you're mine, Carmella."

Torren, she whispered his name, torn between emotion and lust. She could feel him watching her, wanting her. He was aroused, his carnal excitement reaching out to her with surprising strength.

Her womb pulsed, her cunt igniting in a surge of need that left her breathless. She could feel her breasts throbbing as the nipples became tighter, harder, anticipating his touch to her body.

Her gaze flickered to the strength of his erection and she couldn't hold back a moan at the thought of him working it inside her, stretching her, possessing her. The thick root was as darkly fleshed as the rest of his body, as though he tanned in the nude. Heavily veined, the plum-shaped head throbbed erotically.

"Are you wet, Carma?" he asked softly as his hands went to the stretchy waistband of her form-fitting pants. "I bet you are. What do you think?"

She couldn't breathe, that was what she thought. His knuckles rasped against the flesh of her stomach as he began to ease the pants down her legs. She was defenseless. Unable to tighten against the excruciating pleasure of his touch, she could only lay there, feeling the shudders of pleasure work over her body as he undressed her.

Torren! The mental scream was desperate.

It's okay, baby. He won't hurt you. Despite the gentleness in his tone Carmella knew he was watching, feeling, knowing every word spoken, every touch.

She should be ashamed. Mortification should be searing her soul. Instead, her body responded with a blaze of heat that rocked her to her core.

Ryder's gaze became hooded, dark with hunger, as he stared down at her pussy. She thought he would speak, but he drew in a ragged breath instead as he moved to undress her. Her boots were unlaced and jerked from her feet along with the thick socks she wore beneath them. He pulled her pants quickly from her ankles, then moved to her upper body and worked the snug tank top over her head and arms, leaving her spread out before him.

"You're wet." He made it sound like an accusation, but his voice was hoarse with his own desire as he spread her thighs and moved between them once again.

Carmella was panting now. She could feel her juices flowing through her vagina, hot and slick, preparing her for him.

Torren. She felt lost, desperate. The pleasure searing over her body was terrifying her.

She felt him there, within her mind, sharing her pleasure in a way he never had before. The edge it gave to her own lust was razor sharp.

"I could take you now and you would love it." His hands smoothed up the outside of her thighs to her waist. "Are you tight, Carmella? Will I have to work my cock inside you or will it penetrate easily?"

She growled in desperation. She wished he would just do it. She didn't care how he achieved the penetration as long as he penetrated her.

"I bet you're as tight as a fist," he whispered as he leaned closer, his lips caressing hers. "I bet I have to work every inch inside you."

Oh yes. She shivered in anticipation as she watched him closely, slowly feeling the effects of the disarming beginning to ease. If he didn't hurry and start she was going to do it for him.

One hand moved caressingly along her side before cupping her breast slowly. His long fingers cupped the swollen mound before his thumb and forefinger moved to grip the nipple between them. Lightly. Oh God, she didn't want lightly. Carmella whimpered, the blood surging hard and fast through her veins as she fought to keep from begging.

"How do you like it, Carmella?" He licked her lips slowly, the heat of his tongue, the sensuous pleasure in the moist caress driving her insane. "Slow and easy, or hard and fast?" His fingers tightened on her nipple, pulling at it gently, working the flesh as sharp spears of pleasure drove into her womb.

She was within a second of having complete control of her body when he suddenly moved. She screamed out in anger as he flipped her to her stomach. Laughing-damn him-he was laughing as she began to struggle against him.

Carmella bucked, writhing beneath his harder, stronger body as she fought him. She was powerless. The touch of his skin, the very nature of his powers holding her own back, locking them inside her as they mixed with the surging lust screaming through her body.

"Say no, damn you." He nipped her ear as his legs tightened at her thighs, holding her still as she thrashed against him. "Say it, Carma. Now."

His cock nudged between her thighs, sliding in the thick cream her body had produced to ease his path.

She fought him as he tucked one hand beneath her, lifting her hips, holding them still as his cock kissed the entrance to her pussy.

"Do it," she nearly screamed. The heat of lust was driving her insane. Having him hold her despite her struggles, determined to take her, was nearly more than she could bear.

He chuckled, controlling her easily as she felt the head of his cock work into the entrance of her clenching cunt. Oh God. He was so big, so hot. She tightened as though to push him out, hearing his breath catch as her muscles clenched around the tip of the invader.

Her hand tightened in the blankets beneath her as she fought to find purchase against the mattress with her feet. She'd be damned if she would make it easy for him. She nearly bucked him from her for an agonizing second.

"Oh, that wasn't nice, Carma." His voice was strained. A second later he delivered a stinging smack to her rear.

Carmella stilled, whimpering at the dominant, forceful blow. Heat flared on the cheek of her ass, traveling directly to the building fire in her cunt. She stilled, panting, feeling the cream easing from her vagina as excitement blazed through her body. She had never known anything so damned hot. She had never felt so helpless and yet so feminine.

He wasn't trying to take anything she wasn't willing to give. Rather, he was taking her. Period.

His hand landed on her undefended ass again and she could only back into it, crying out as moisture covered her body and wave after wave of pleasure/pain streaked through.

He held her easily, the erotic spanking making her insane as she felt her flesh heat. From one rounded cheek to the other, his hand slapped with firm pressure that had her screaming in need.

"God, you look so pretty. Your sweet ass flushed and red." His voice was thick, filled with a dark male arousal that had her pussy creaming further.

"Do it," she cried out, shaking, needing the feel of his cock stretching her, invading her, more than she needed air to breathe.

"My rules," he whispered again, though his voice was strained, rough with his own lusts. He wasn't unaffected, his own control was stretching its limits, she thought deliriously. "God, you feel good, Carmella."

He held her hips as the head of his erection worked its way farther inside her heated pussy. She felt the muscles protesting, parting, little darts of sensual pain ravaging her system.

"Raise up." He pulled back on her hips with one hand as the other locked in her hair.

She wanted to scream out at the explicit dominance of the move as he moved her to the position he wanted her in. She was on her hands and knees, kneeling before him, her head arched back, her eyes widening in surprise at the erotic thrill of the forbidden.

She could feel Torren now. Ghostly fingers stroking her nipples as his excitement flared inside her. Oh God, it was too good.

He's taking you, Carmella, he whispered silently, erotically. I can feel every sensation in your body. You love it. You love having him fucking you like this. Holding you down. Don't you?

Carmella whimpered, dazed, confused by the overriding sensations building inside her as Torren made her more than aware of how much he liked the psychic voyeurism.

At the same time, Ryder pushed deeper into the quivering depths of her cunt, the width of his cock searing in the pleasure/pain of the penetration. She was so wet, so slick for him, she could hear the soft sounds of her flesh sucking him in, protesting any retreat.

"Ryder." Her back arched as the pressure on her hair intensified, drawing her back farther. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

"You." His voice was a hard growl as the short thrusts of his penis lodged him deeper inside her.

She was so full, stretched as tightly around him as a fist and glorying in each stroke of sensual heat it built in her body. She was shaking, whimpering, unable to protest anything he would want of her.

"Do you feel Torren, Carmella? Can you sense how much he likes feeling you get fucked? Getting taken?" Ryder's harsh words were followed by an abrupt powerful thrust of his hips that sent his cock burying into the very depths of her pussy.

"Yes," she screamed out in awareness, in ecstasy. It was too damned good. Too much.

She was impaled, empowered. She moaned weakly as she felt and heard both men cry out a second before Ryder lost control. His hand left her hair as both hands gripped her hips and his cock began to thrust hard and steady inside her gripping cunt.

She cried out, tortured, tormented by a pleasure that was more than she could have imagined.

She was helpless in the grip of Ryder's lust, her needs and Torren's pleasure. For the first time in Carmella's life a man had managed to best her. She felt small, helpless, feminine and in such heat she feared she would burn them all in the conflagration.

The muscles of her pussy clenched around Ryder's thrusting erection, aware of the fact that the act itself should have been humiliating, considering her lover was experiencing each sensation through his psychic connection to her.

"Yes," Ryder hissed behind her as she began to back into his thrusts, demanding more.

His hand smacked her rear again. Then again. Lost in the pleasure, in the forceful domination of the act, she could only cry out, pushing closer, demanding more.

"God, you're beautiful, Carmella." His voice was rough, almost broken. "And so fucking hot you're burning me alive."

And she didn't care. If the flames of who and what she was engulfed them all, she would have no regrets. At least, not if the building, pulsing knot of sensation in her womb was allowed freedom first.

Mindless, exacting, the pleasure built inside her with an intensity she could have never expected. Her clit was pulsing, swelling, even as her womb began to shudder with the shock of heated intensity flaring through her. She whimpered, losing herself and fighting to hold onto her sanity.

When the explosion came she knew in that one blinding instant she would never be the same. Her eyes widened as she heard Ryder encouraging her in the release. It erupted in her womb, then tightened and exploded in her pussy as she fought to hold back the flames building beneath her flesh.

Hard pulses of rapture shook her, threatening her mind and the last dregs of control as she flew apart beneath the rapid, forceful strokes inside her vagina.

She heard Ryder cry out, was aware of the hot, hot blasts of his semen deep inside her clutching cunt. She moaned instinctively though she knew she was dying, flying, coming apart in ways she could have never imagined as the pleasure disintegrated every cell in her body.

Carmella could only tremble in reaction as she felt Ryder ease her to the bed. Hard, warm arms wrapped around her, a broad chest cushioning her as her eyes closed in exhaustion so complete she didn't even think to fight it.

"Don't let me go." She shivered as she felt him pull the blanket over her.

"Never." She heard the whisper but wasn't certain if it was real or her imagination.

But his arms didn't let her go. His chest didn't move except for the soft rise and fall of his breathing. The hard body sheltering her didn't budge. She could sleep. For once in her life, Carmella felt safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryder felt her slide into unconsciousness as she lay in his arms like warm, firm silk. Her hair flowed over his arm, her head rested against his chest. He breathed in deeply, tired, drained from the forceful release he had experienced inside her tight pussy.

Had he ever known pleasure that intense? Had another woman touched him so completely, so effectively, as this one did? He understood Torren's warnings then. The ones that cautioned him that dominating Carmella, mastering her and her powers, wouldn't be easy because her innocence, her needs, would sink into him so completely.

She had loved the thrill of the fight. Had relished being helpless in his arms, unable to escape. She had blazed as she felt Torren experiencing the act through their link. The added pleasure, the taste of the forbidden, had almost stolen her control. Almost, but not quite. He hadn't yet taken that last measure of strength she possessed.

I told you it wouldn't be easy. Torren's thought reflected his own regret. You'll have to be harder on her.

Ryder snorted. Why did I get the shit job, Torren? I have to piss her off so you can soothe her?

It didn't bother him that this woman would belong, eventually, to both of them. What did bother him was that he would be the one to hurt her.

She'll forgive you. She'll forgive us both in the end. It's the only way to prove you can master her, Ryder. She has to know it. She knows I can't do it alone. It wouldn't have done me any good to try. The job was always yours.

Chapter Ten

Carmella had never felt the "morning after" blitz of nerves and self-consciousness. She was usually out of bed long before any partner who dared to share it, and in control of herself. Show no weakness. She had been taught that rule early in life.

When she awoke hours later, wrapped in Ryder's arms, his heat and strength enveloping her, the subsequent emotions that followed held her still, silent, as she fought to make sense of them.

Ryder's legs were tangled with hers, one hard thigh pushed high between them. Her head was pillowed on his chest, one arm draped over his waist. It felt too right, too comfortable. And yet she felt hopelessly ensnared.

Torren was silent for now. She had gone to sleep with Ryder's arms wrapped around her and Torren's psychic energy soothing her. The unusual ménage had left her uncomfortable in the face of the once-again changing relationship with Torren. It left her feeling as though she were drowning when it came to Ryder, though.

Carmella wasn't a fool. She knew next to nothing about Ryder and she wasn't about to trust her life to this man just because the sex was great. And the sex was great. God, was it good. Thrilling, dominant, everything she had fantasized over for years. But that didn't mean she had to lose her head. And damn, Torren wasn't making this any easier on her.

"I can hear you thinking. You're going at it a mile a minute." Ryder's deep, warm voice stirred her senses. It was a caress, a stroke of longing over emotions she had fought for so many years.

The large, graceful hands that stroked over her back stirred more than just her senses. She could feel the arousal heightening. It was unfamiliar, confusing. She didn't like being affected so easily.

"Read thoughts too, do you?" Carmella moved to roll from his embrace, but his arms tightened around her as he pulled her beneath him, bracing himself on one arm as he rose to stare down at her.

"I can hear the static," Ryder whispered, his lips lowering to hers. "Let's see if I can give you something else to worry about."

His blue eyes glittered in stark, sensual arousal. Carmella felt her breath catch in her throat as the soft mat of his close-cropped beard caressed her cheek a second before he shifted yet again and his lips covered hers.

It wasn't a hard, dominant kiss. Carmella trembled, her fingers clenched on his shoulders as his lips whispered over hers. Stroking, encouraging, asking permission in this, rather than taking.

Confusion swamped her as she stared up at Ryder. He watched her curiously, his expression tender, a glimmer of humor, of heat in his eyes as his lips nudged against hers, parting them for the soft lick of his tongue.

Her heart was racing, emotions and confusion overwhelming her senses as he touched her so gently.

"You taste good, Carmella," he whispered against her lips, the caress firing nerve endings she didn't know she had.

His lips nudged against hers again, his beard rasping pleasantly against her skin, a warm roughened caress that had her shivering in response, fighting to breathe. Her gaze was locked by his, held mesmerized, ensnared by the brilliance of his desire, the warmth in his gaze.

Carmella could feel a whimper gathering in her throat and fought it back as his tongue licked against the seam of her lips once more. It was hot, heated silk and tempting desire. She couldn't deny the need to taste any longer.

Mouth watering, heart hammering, she touched her tongue to his. Her breath slammed in her chest as he stroked it, his gaze never leaving hers. Sensation speared through Carmella's body with the force of a tidal wave, leaving her shaking in the aftermath. Her womb clenched, her pussy ached. And still he stroked, nudged, teased her with those perfect, sensual lips.

Carmella fought the need to devour the taste of his mouth. The gentle, delicate stroking of her lips was too good to let go of. She had known only a few kisses, and never one like this. It was like ambrosia of the senses.

And Ryder wasn't unaffected either. His cheeks had turned a dull red, his eyes darkening, his breathing rough and heavy as his hands flexed, one in her hair, the other against her waist.

"Damn, you're sweet." Ryder broke the kiss, resting his forehead against hers as his chest rose and fell, hard and fast. "I could eat your lips like candy, Carmella."

"More." She couldn't resist the temptation.

She reached up, tangling her hands in the long strands of his thick hair as she tilted her head.

"More?" He licked at her lips as she nudged against his-close, but not what she needed.

"Ryder. Please." She arched closer as his palm stroked from her waist to her thigh and back again, and yet he still wasn't kissing her, wasn't satisfying the building need she had for his slow hunger.

"Please what?" he whispered against her lips, staring into her eyes as she fought to keep them open.

She tried to get closer to the teasing temptation of the kiss, but he only moved back, always just a breath from the touch she needed.

"Tell me what you want, Carmella."

What did she want? She didn't know. She wanted the sweet languor that had drifted through her senses at the tenderness he had given her moments ago.

"The kiss," she answered, hungry for more. "Please kiss me like that again. Soft. Like you mean it."

Ryder paused, a glimmer of surprise in his eyes a second before heat replaced it. His head lowered, his lips nuzzling against hers, and Carmella flinched from the pleasure.

She couldn't hold back the whimper now. She couldn't still the overpowering, unfamiliar need rising in her chest like a greedy beast gasping in desperation for more.

The sweet ache traveled to her swollen breasts, her hard, inflamed nipples. It washed beneath her flesh, across her abdomen, then down to strike ruthlessly at her tender clit, her weeping pussy. Carmella twisted against him, reveling in the soft stroke of his lips and tongue as her eyes closed, too heavy, too caught in the web of arousal he was spinning around her.

"Yes, baby," he soothed, his voice hoarse, his own control sounding strained. "Feel how good it is, Carmella. How good it can be. You're burning me alive."

Carmella could feel the tautness of his body against her, the fine film of perspiration that gathered along his flesh. The knowledge that it was affecting him as greatly as it was her made the intensity deepen, strengthen.

Emotion swelled inside her. Blistering, frightening, as he cradled her body closer to his own, the light mat of dark blond hair on his chest rasping her tender breasts.

"I need more, baby," he growled, his breath panting from his chest. "Let me have you. Let me in, darlin'."

She lifted her eyelids, staring up at him as he watched her with drowsy sensuality. He was asking her? Had anyone ever asked her?

Carmella couldn't hold back her cry as her lips parted for him. What came next shocked her senses, tightened every cell in her body. His tongue pressed into her slowly, stroking over hers as his head tilted, his lips covering hers with tortured restraint.

Heat enveloped her; so sensual, so evocative, she could only tremble against the sensations moving through her. Ryder seemed no less helpless in the grip of the flood of pleasure. His body was tense, tight, as he fought the carnal demands to experience the almost innocent sweetness of the caress.

The hunger raged just beneath the surface, though. The inferno of demand was only stoked higher, hotter as they fought their bodies' demands to ease the building arousal in exchange for the agonizingly gentle caress of lips upon lips, tongues stroking, learning, tasting.

Chapter Eleven

The silky warmth of Ryder's beard caressed her cheek as his head tilted again, deepening the kiss further. Carmella's nipples were roughened by his chest hair, sending flares of sensation rioting through her body. It was the most erotic, most sensual act she had ever known in her life.

"Ambrosia," he whispered as his lips slid from hers, his beard rasping her skin as his lips trailed across her cheek, along her neck.

His hand wasn't still either. It cupped her breast, his thumb and forefinger catching a nipple firmly between them as Carmella arched into the touch. She couldn't process the complete sensory overload that gripped her body. Pleasure, hot and sweet, twisted through her womb, making her pussy weep in need.

"Ryder." She sighed his name. Needed to hear it, needed to know it was real. She fought to hold back her agonized pleas as the sensual ache built between her thighs.

"Carmella," he answered her, his tone wicked as his head lowered to lick a thrusting nipple.

Carmella jerked against him, drawing in a shattered breath as the pleasure curled around the tip before streaking to her sensitive womb and causing it to spasm with the strength of the sensation.

Before she could recover he enveloped the hard peak in the heated cavern of his mouth before his lips closed around it, drawing on it with a lazy hunger that had her hands clenching tightly in the hair close to his scalp as she fought to hold onto sanity.

She trembled, shuddered from the force of the pleasure, as she fought to sort through the emotions tormenting her now.

"This is killing me." She twisted against him as he suckled at her breast, his tongue laving it, curling around it as though her nipple was a favorite sweet treat.

"Will you die happy then?" he asked her lazily as he began to kiss a path down her perspiration-slick stomach toward the moist ache between her thighs. The heated throb there was a physical pain. The muscles of her cunt clenched in hunger as the building sensation in her clit drove her higher toward the mindless pursuit of release.

"I'll die happy," she moaned weakly as he moved down her body, parting her thighs, his fingers sifting through the tiny, desire-soaked curls that covered the mound of her cunt. "Just let me come."

"Not yet." He licked into her belly button, murmuring his appreciation of her as his lips continued their path of discovery to her aching pussy. "I want to taste you this time, Carmella. All of you."

A second after he spoke his tongue swiped through the slit of her pussy with a caress so destructive she nearly exploded. His tongue rasped the swelling pearl of her clit, sending sparks of sensation tearing through her body.

"God, Ryder." Her hips arched, her hands moving from his hair to tangle in the blankets of the bed. God forbid that in her pleasure she should pull his head away from her with her desperate grip.

It was so damned good. His tongue worked its way slowly along the soaked slit, probing, teasing, drawing yet more of the frothing cream from her pussy. Her body was tight, her flesh tingling as he ate at the tender curves of her cunt, making her insane for more. Making her insane to come. She could feel the inferno building in her womb, through her pussy, her clit. She writhed beneath his careful strokes, fighting to draw him closer to the little bud tormenting her with its need.

"Stop teasing me," she panted as he skirted around her clit once again and moved lower to lick at the juices spilling from her vagina. "I can't stand it, Ryder."

"You're so good, Carmella. So sweet and hot." He was breathing hard, fast, his voice rough with his own arousal. "I could eat this sweet pussy all day long."

She cried out as his tongue dipped into the well of her cunt, thrusting deep and hard inside her, the gentle rasp of his beard adding to the erotic sensations with an intensity that left her breathless.

He caressed her pussy as he had her lips. Smoothing over the inner folds, his tongue licking, flicking at the hungry mouth of her vagina as he tormented her into mindless lust.

Then he licked up again, circling her clit, coming closer to the swollen bead but never really giving her the relief she needed. Then his mouth covered it as he suckled it between his lips, his tongue rasping, hot, fiery strokes that destroyed her.

Her orgasm tore through her with the strength of a hurricane. Velvet waves of sensation flooded her entire being, tightening her body further, forcing a shocked scream past her lips.

Before she could recover, before the last violent vibration of release could ease, Ryder was rising between her thighs, coming over her, his lips covering hers as his cock began to ease into the tight tunnel of her cunt.

She tasted her juices on his lips. It was tangy, with just a hint of an earthy musk as his tongue speared deep into her mouth, his erection working inside her pussy.

He filled her slowly, pausing as he settled into the cradle of her thighs, the head of his cock pressing deep and hard into the very depths of her cunt. Carmella shuddered at the pleasure, the need rising inside her once again. His gentle lovemaking was more than she could bear. Never had she known such depths of arousal, such deep, all-consuming pleasure as what she felt now.

"I can't wait," he whispered, his voice rough, his lips moving over hers with an edge of desperation. "Now, Carma, I can't wait any longer."

And he took her. Carmella cried out as his cock retreated then pushed back in a hard, soul-destroying stroke. His hands gripped her thighs, raising them, pushing her legs back to open her further for his invasion as he began to fuck her with an almost mindless rhythm.

He stretched her, filled her. Each stroke was a lash of shattering pleasure inside her pussy, deep in her womb until she was begging, pleading, needing him harder, faster, needing the release building inside her with a desperation that terrified her.

Ryder was groaning into her neck now, biting her sensually, before licking over the small mark, kissing it, driving her insane with the added touch. His body flexed, bowed, his muscles rippling beneath her hands as she gripped his shoulders, holding on as he rode her through the driving need for release.

When it came, Carmella swore she was dying. Her eyes flew open, widened, her breath halting in her throat a second before a low, tremulous wail issued from her.

"Yes, Carma," he groaned. "Come around me, baby. Come for me, Carma..."

His harsh male cry joined her in the symphony of rapture. Carmella felt him tighten, his cock jerking, his hot seed spilling inside the depths of her vagina in heated spurts. And still he thrust, stroked, driving her through her orgasm as she cried out his name.

The aftermath came slowly. Shocks of pleasure echoed through Carmella's body as Ryder collapsed beside her, drawing her against his moist chest as he too fought for breath, for recovery. It was a unique feeling for her. A sense of security, of warmth, and one she wanted to hold onto for a long time to come.

And Carmella fought for understanding. Because she knew, deep in her soul, that when she lost Ryder-and she would lose him-it would destroy a part of her. He completed her. Fulfilled her. How would she ever be able to accept less again?

Chapter Twelve

I was less then? Torren. Amusement crackled in the intrusive thought as Carmella heard his voice echo through her head, answering to her last thought. He had been amazingly silent as Ryder had taken her, yet she was aware now that he had been experiencing each second of it.

I'll find you soon. She didn't tell Ryder she had made contact. For a moment she wondered if he knew how close Torren was to her thoughts at all times.

Follow Ryder. The command was harsh, uncompromising. He'll find me. You have to do this his way, Carmella.

Dammit, Torren. What are you getting me into? She cursed silently. He knew you were there last night. He knows you shared it.

Of course he does. She felt his soft sigh. There are things you don't know, Carmella. Just be careful. Do as Ryder tells you.

She snorted silently. She didn't think so.

"I have to shower." Carmella tried to pull herself from Ryder's arms. She needed to escape his touch so she could make sense of her own confusion, her own fears.

Something wasn't right here. Something wasn't making sense and she hated her own suspicions worse than anything, because she had a very bad feeling Torren knew a hell of a lot more than he was saying.

"Do you think I don't know he contacted you just now, Carmella?" Ryder asked her softly, his voice almost menacing. "I can feel his energy all around you. You don't have to hide it."

Confusion filled her as he watched her. His gaze speared into her, accusing and harsh.

"I don't know you. If you're who you're supposed to be, then we'll reach Torren with no problems," she whispered. "I can't just trust..."

"Don't know me?" he snarled. "If you don't know me, damn you, it's because you refuse to look."

He pushed himself from the bed, turning his back on her; displaying the most delectable male ass she had ever laid eyes on. Smooth, firm, curved so temptingly it made her hands itch to cup it. Damn. How had she missed seeing his backside? It was a fucking work of art.

"Stop staring at my ass like that." His voice was a rough, angry growl.

"Why?" She laid back on the bed, a flare of regret rushing through her as he dragged his pants up his well-muscled legs. "It's damned fine looking."

"Get a shower." He didn't comment on her appreciation of his male form. "I'll go back to my room and shower. I'll meet you back here so we can head for Torren's location."

She frowned at that, raising up on her elbows as she watched him.

"Then you do know where he is?" Which meant Torren knew the location as well. "He's not with PSI, is he?"

He paused, the muscles of his back tightening at the question as he turned from her.

"PSI hasn't taken him. Yet."

Silence stretched between them for long, tense moments. Carmella rose slowly from the bed, watching Ryder carefully.

"Where is he and how long has he been there?"

"He's several days from here, but getting there won't be easy, Carmella. You have to trust me. Implicitly."

Carmella picked up the towel she had thrown across a chair the night before and wrapped it slowly around her naked, sensitive body.

"Trust you, huh?" she asked him softly as he turned to meet her gaze. "And how am I supposed to do that? You've given me very little reason to do so."

His expression was somber, quiet. "I've given you more than I've ever given anyone else, Carmella."

She drew in a deep, hard breath. There was something about the way he said it, the regretful tone of his voice, a glimmer of longing in his eyes that threw her off balance, made her want to trust him. Made her want to give him everything, anything he needed.

She looked away from him, fighting her needs, what she saw as his needs.

"I'm sorry," she whispered finally, shaking her head. "Trust isn't just given..."

"Spare me, Carmella." He jerked his shirt on, then his boots, lacing them quickly. "We can't wait around here any longer. We leave tonight. Get ready to go."

"Ryder." She stopped him as he reached the door.

He paused, turning to her slowly. His expression was hard, fierce, his eyes glittering with suppressed anger.

"Did you know where Torren was all along?" she asked him, hating the suspicion forming in her mind.

His lips twisted in amused mockery. "I know many things, Carmella. If you would take the time to learn how to look, so would you."

He stalked from the room and, seconds later, she heard the door slam with an abrupt, sharp sound. She winced, getting the feeling he was a bit too restrained in the way he closed the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ryder stalked down the short distance between his room and Carmella's, slamming his own door viciously behind him. Son of a bitch, this was more complicated than he had wanted it to be. He hadn't wanted to get this close to her this fast. Hell, he hadn't wanted to get this close to her period.

He shook his head at his own ignorance.

I told you she wasn't the trusting type. Torren growled the dark thought. Dammit, of course she's suspicious.

She had the chance to bond with me, Torren, he snarled silently. While I took her, she could have opened up.

It grated that she hadn't. That she had fought the final acceptance of her heart. Without it, he would never regain her trust once she learned his deception. And yet he knew that the moment she opened herself to him, she would know the lies. It was a double-edged sword and one that left him a little pissed off.

She had the same chance with me many times, Ryder. It will come when it's meant to.

Ryder could sense Torren's frustration, his impatience. The end of this debacle was nearing and he knew they both looked forward to its conclusion.

Dammit, I never thought I'd end up sharing the woman I loved, and not regretting it, Ryder finally groused silently. Damned good thing it's you, Torren. I'd have to kill anyone else.

Yeah. Same goes. Torren's mocking laughter had Ryder's lips kicking up in a grin.

They were both possessive bastards. They always had been. It amazed him that the thought of sharing Carmella didn't fill him with fury. But, he had known Torren was a part of her from the first touch he had made to her mind. She loved him, yet the love was incomplete. That had changed when she awoke in Ryder's arms. As though her heart, her woman's soul, had been waiting for the last piece of the puzzle to be complete. It was strange as hell.

Hurry and get her here. Torren was running out of patience. Our time's running out and Reidel has already contacted me twice for an update. The third time she'll start making demands.

Reidel was likely already doing so.

We'll leave within an hour or so, Ryder promised as he headed to the shower. I want to get this completed as quickly as possible. Carmella's frustration only fed his, made his sexual hunger for her darker, more intense.

I'll be waiting for you. Torren's impatience was beginning to affect him now. Between him and Carmella, Ryder's own emotions surged hotter, more volatile than before.

Ryder felt the psychic tie disconnect and he sighed wearily as he stepped in the shower and turned the lukewarm water on full blast. Son of a bitch, if life wasn't getting too damned complicated.

Chapter Thirteen

"Where are we headed?" Carmella closed the door to the fairly new land and water Hummer.

The new motors, created just before the fall of the psychic government fifty years before, were powered by energy-rich sun crystals. Discovered deep within the earth's surface, the crystals, once exposed to the sun for several years, trapped a reusable solar power within the many faceted chambers they held.

The cloudy gray crystals, once energized, were nearly as clear and perfect as diamonds. The discovery had rocked the energy-poor world at the time. Fossil fuels were nearly exhausted, and only the most powerful of the citizens could afford the minute amount of electricity being generated.

"We're headed south," Ryder told her quietly as he engaged the motor and pulled away from the inn. "We'll cross the river outside town and head into West Virginia. I want to stick fairly close to the coast, though it will make the trip longer than it would be going straight through."

"And we'll end up where?" she asked him patiently.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he glanced at her.

"Figure it out," he finally suggested with a shrug of his shoulders.

Carmella sighed heavily as she sat back in her seat. Men amazed her. He acted like a betrayed lover. What the hell did he want? She thought only women pouted when the commitment thing became an issue. And it wasn't like she actually balked at. She just wasn't willing to trusting the man without proof. Good sex did not always mean a good relationship. But, damn, if it wasn't really good sex.

"Reading minds isn't one of my talents, Ryder." Though she admitted it would sure as hell come in handy right now.

"Reading me could be," he told her, his voice clipped, cool. "If you wanted to."

She glanced at him a bit mockingly. "I can imagine the perverted things that run through your head," she grunted. "I don't need to be a mind reader for that one."

She watched his lips thin and shook her head in irritation. He was worse than a damned female virgin looking for commitment. What the hell was wrong with him? She didn't need another man complicating her life, making her question herself on a daily basis. Torren did just fine with that, and she didn't have to tolerate him as a lover anymore to boot.

Not that she had to tolerate Ryder exactly. Her cunt ached at the thought of his penetration, his thick, heavily veined cock working inside her, stretching her, filling her.

She barely controlled the shiver of arousal that would have shuddered over her body.

"Get ready." Ryder's voice was cool as he headed the Hummer out of town. "We'll be crossing the river at the old shipping docks just after dark. It could get hairy."

As he spoke, he touched one of the controls on the dash, activating the virtual screen on the windshield that was used in place of headlights. Instantly, a colorized, crisp view was reflected back at them. The windows at the side of the door darkened further, enclosing them within a cocoon of intimacy that had Carmella instantly wary.

She had been similarly enclosed in vehicles before. With Torren, and on occasion, other men they worked with. She never felt the hot, anticipatory surge of arousal that flushed her body now, though.

Carmella stared at the view screen in front of them, showing the silent streets. There were few lights as the land slowly darkened, but the heat and motion detector on the screen easily picked out the bodies lurking in what would have otherwise been shadows.

The night folk were getting ready to move in-the vigilantes, the psychic rebels, the predators of the fallen city. What had once been a thriving, profitable area had been turned into a rubble-filled hellhole.

The rebuilding had begun in what was considered the upper portion. There, the more affluent citizens had managed to keep themselves protected with guards, heavy iron fences and attack dogs. Now, the upper district was watched with jealousy and fury. Once again the less privileged were losing out to those who were protecting themselves with the added help.

The best food went to their markets. Markets that the lesser citizens were not allowed entrance to. The scraps, the decayed portions left days later, were then shipped to the downtown district. It was this lack of equality that had first given the psychic government a hold on the land. A promise to keep the land equal. To use their gifts to stop corruption and crime. It had bred the worst wars the world had ever known.

"Why aren't you using the old bridge?" she asked as the Hummer turned along one of the broken streets and bumped its way toward the old docks.

Ryder glanced over at her as he maneuvered between the collapsing buildings and deeply pitted path that had once been a wide, well-paved road.

"A heavily armed, well-equipped Hummer traveling over that bridge would be hard to miss," he told her quietly. "The bridges are watched by both PSI agents and vigilante forces, especially at night. I want to avoid as many as possible."

"There's no way to hide a damned tank, Ryder," she said. "And you're heading into one of the worst areas imaginable. West Virginia won't be easy to get through undetected."

"We'll be well protected." He didn't sound unduly concerned. "After we pass through West Virginia the going will be easier. Many of the lower states are building back faster than they are in the north. Same can be said for parts of the west. Evidently, the pioneer spirit is still alive and well."

That didn't surprise Carmella in the least. She remembered her grandmother's tales of the areas he was talking about. Strong, determined men and women would rebuild. She'd heard that in the south the psychic witch-hunts had ended decades before because most of the citizens had natural talent. Enough that they didn't outright kill unless it was needed.

"Many of Tyre's followers were said to have headed for the Keys," she said then, whispering the dreaded name as she fought the fear in her chest. "They never found Tyre's body, did they? Or the Tyrea's?"

"No. They thought the Tyrea still lived after the government fell. But no one was certain."

The Tyrea was said to have possessed the powers of all the elements. Fire, wind and rain. She had been the most feared of the psychics, and rumor was that she had also been the one who finally turned the tide in the last bitter wars.

"Do you think he's still alive?" It was her greatest fear, that he lived.

"No, I don't think he is," Ryder finally breathed out. "He was just a man, Carmella. An extra-ordinary man. A man driven insane by the manipulations to his brain. Like the rest of them, he couldn't control the fallout."

"And what of those who are his descendants?" she asked him, praying her voice was even, that the fears that filled her were hidden.

"I don't know." He glanced at her, his look intent. "There were over two hundred of the bastards to begin with. Before they were taken out, there were ten times that many. Who knows what happened or the repercussions that came of it? According to tests later, the children of the original group had no insanity, merely a lust for power. Those who didn't became rebels were marked for death by their brothers and their fathers."

The last decade of the wars had been horrendous.

"Those of Tyre's line are automatically killed, even now," she pointed out.

He sighed wearily. "That wouldn't benefit the new government in any way," he said softly. "Too many of us, especially the stronger psychics, can make that link. We can only pray that one day the horror will ease, and somehow, we'll find a middle ground again."

Carmella stared at the view screen, knowing full night would have fallen, the darkness obscuring the desperation of a land torn apart. Her grandmother had warned her, in those days before she split her apart from the two sisters Carmella had idolized. They were each of the Tyre. To survive, they would have to be separated.

She hadn't seen her sisters since she was ten. She had lost her grandmother, and she couldn't even remember her parents.

"We're moving into the dock area," Ryder warned her. "After we cross the river it should be pretty smooth."

The river was a mess. It moved with a strong current, though it was said to be much lower now than it had been more than a hundred years previously. Below the surface the possibility of disaster waited. Washouts from farther upriver had collected all manner of debris. Broken bridges, the hulking remains of sunken ships and a shattered society lay in wait.

They moved into the water slowly as Ryder activated the marine propeller at the back of the vehicle, and the airtight locks on the motor and doors. Artificial air began to instantly pump into the small confines as the Hummer became a mini motorboat moving into the murky depths of the less than secure Ohio River.

Chapter Fourteen

"Are you ever going to stop pouting?" Carmella asked him hours later as the vehicle sped across the deserted, fairly intact highway Ryder had chosen as their route to wherever the hell they were going.

She turned in her seat watching his brooding expression. It was really rather cute, she thought. He was trying not to actually pout, but his expression was one of pure male offended ego. The lowered brows, the narrowed set of his eyelids, the firm line of his mouth. He wasn't pleased with her. He had been upset ever since the confrontation at her room in the inn.

"I do not pout, Carmella." He flicked a glance at her out of the corner of his eyes as he navigated the vehicle using the virtual screen in front of him. "I'm concentrating."

She looked at the dash. The impressive display showed radar tracking, speed, and a small directional map with part of the course laid out.

"Concentrating on what?" She unclipped the belt that strapped across her shoulders and waist so she could lean more comfortably against the door and watch him. "Looks like the vehicle does most of the work."

Ryder grunted. "They cost enough. They should."

Carmella frowned at a sudden thought. "How did you manage to get a state of the art Hummer and still keep the skin on your back?" she asked him suspiciously. "Takes a lot of cash to acquire one of these babies."

"I had the funds. I wanted it." He shrugged easily.

"Why would you want it?" She didn't like the suspicions rising in her mind. "Why would you need it? Why not a smaller one?"

"You're a very suspicious woman, Carmella." A small smile tilted his lips. She felt her womb clench in response to the look of complete male confidence. It was too sexy by far.

"I'm still alive because of it." She was betting he could write the book on how to be an aggravating psychic male.

"Possibly." His smile flashed in the dim light of the vehicle. "If you want answers you're going to have to do better than that, though."

"You know, Ryder, you betray me and I won't be a happy person." She felt the need to warn him of this. "The last son of a bitch who tried to sell me out to a PSI agent is rotting somewhere in hell. I don't think you want to join him."

Actually, he was most likely nursing more than one burn scar, but she felt a tough attitude starting out might be important with Ryder.

He smiled again as he glanced at her. The rakish, devil-may-care grin immediately set her hackles up.

"I'm a disarmer, baby, and an absorber," he reminded her. "And a damned good one. Better make sure you do it right the first time you try, because if you don't, it's your ass that will pay the price."

She frowned with what she hoped was fierce severity. "What does that mean?"

"It means I'll set your ass on fire if you even attempt anything so asinine towards me again. A little harmless tussle is one thing. You try to blindside me and I'll take it seriously."

"Excuse me?" She blinked incredulously. "A harmless tussle? Is that what you call it? If you hadn't cheated with that shield someone was helping you keep around you I would have fried your ass."

"Uh huh," he agreed lazily as he flipped one of the many buttons on the middle of the steering wheel before taking his hands off it to stretch in indulgent unconcern. "You convince yourself of that, darlin', if you have to. But I know better."

"What do you mean by that?" She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, ignoring the heavy lidded look he gave the full mounds, as well as the way her nipples hardened and peaked for his appraisal.

"It means we both know better," he growled. "Take your shirt off."

She blinked at him in surprise. She felt her body tense, tighten, at the darker tone of his voice, the sexual intensity that filled it. She glanced at the display on the virtual screen. The vehicle was evidently on some sort of autopilot, because his hands were busy loosening his pants rather than steering.

Carmella was aware of the fact that somewhere along the line the subject had been diverted, but with the heat building in her cunt and the arousal clawing at her womb, she decided to tackle it later. Now, alone in the vehicle, darkness surrounded them and the time to enjoy the hard body in the seat across from her was too much to resist. She pulled her shirt off as he directed.

"God love us," he seemed to pray as her breasts were bared before his eyes. "You make me lose my mind, Carmella."

He pushed his seat farther back, reclining it fully, creating a bed of sorts. Searching the side of her seat for the lever, Carmella did the same.

Ryder raised a narrow padded extension from the floor that fitted between the two wide bucket seats, making a complete bed. Carmella raised her brows in surprise. "Nice," she murmured.

"Effective," he corrected. "Undress."

"Demanding, aren't you?" she suggested, fighting to keep the smile from her voice.

The dominance in his tone did something to her that she knew it shouldn't. It turned her on, made her weak with arousal, with need. She had never known such a level of excitement before Ryder. She feared she never would again with any other man. There was something different about Ryder. Something that reached deeper than the physical, and that terrified her more than the thought of betrayal did.

"I can be more than demanding, Carma." His voice whispered over her senses as he pulled his boots and pants off before coming to his knees.

Carmella had just pulled her own off, and turned back to him, when his hands caught in her hair and he lowered his head to take her lips in a rapacious kiss. She moaned into the blistering, demanding possession. Her mouth opened for his spearing tongue as she met it with her own. They clashed in a duel of lust and need that had her quivering in anticipation.

Ryder didn't ask for anything. He was surging with lust, his body tense with it, hungry for her response. That knowledge had her heart swelling with feelings she didn't want to recognize. And somewhere deeper, she felt a connection, a bond to him that burned hotter than mere emotion.

His kiss was like a flame itself. Hot and moist, his lips and tongue stroking, tasting, drawing her deeper into the inferno he was creating, rather than her. Her hands moved to his neck, releasing the small leather thong that held the thick strands back from his face. As it fell forward, she moaned in satisfaction, in pleasure. Until he drew back from her.

She bit at his lips as he pulled away, needing more. His kiss was like an elixir of passion. She was becoming addicted. But what he presented seconds later wasn't bad either.

He rose before her, his knees on the makeshift bed, his head bending low to accommodate the roof of the Hummer as his cock nudged at her lips. His moan was a rough, demanding growl as her lips opened, her mouth covering the bulging head as her tongue stroked the underside hungrily.

"Yes, baby," he whispered roughly, his fingers tunneling into her hair, clenching on the strands to hold her in place. "Your mouth is damned near as hot as your sweet cunt."

She tightened on him, suckling slowly at the turgid flesh, feeling the hard throb of lust that pulsed just under the velvety skin. She stroked the satin expanse of extra-sensitive skin just under the head of his erection, glorying in his strangled moan as she did so.

She wrapped her fingers around the thick shaft, caressing the bold shape of his cock as she sucked as much as possible into her mouth. He tasted of heat and desire, of hard hot male and aching passion and Carmella couldn't get enough of him.

She drew slowly, wickedly, on the throbbing cock, feeling the slick dampness of his pre-cum as he moaned in pleasure above her.

"Yeah," he sighed roughly as she tongued the head. "So good, Carmella. Your mouth is so damned good."

His fingers clenched tighter in her hair, his breath rasping in his throat as she licked and suckled his cock like a favorite treat. And it was. A treat she had never known. Clean, male passion-hot and rich-making her body tighten, making her heart swell with each rough groan from his chest.

He held himself still as her lips moved over him, stroking him. Her tongue whipped across the sensitive underside, probing beneath the flared head before suckling him in hard and deep once again.

"I want to come in your sweet mouth, Carmella," he groaned out explicitly, his cock throbbing in warning of the eminent release. "I want to feel you sucking the life out of me."

Carmella whimpered. She suckled harder, faster, feeling him begin to move, to fuck her mouth with quick, hard thrusts as his body tightened. His hands held her head still, steady. She could feel his gaze on her, the naked lust she knew would fill it urging her on.

Her hands stroked the now damp shaft, her lips tightening as his thrusts became harder, faster. She was starved for him. The taste of him, the heat of his ejaculation.

When it came, she moaned as deeply as he did. Hard, fierce jets of rich semen spurted into her throat as he drove his cock as deep between her lips as he dared. He trembled, biting off a rough curse, holding her head firmly in place as he shot another thick stream of his seed inside her mouth.

His muscles were bunched, his cock twitching and throbbing in her hands as he moaned her name. Carmella cried out, the sound throttled, hoarse with need as she licked the flared head clean of the last trace of his semen.

"God, you're going to kill me." He was still hard, his cock still pulsing with life as he drew back from her. "You make me crazy, Carmella."

Chapter Fifteen

Carmella lay back on the surprisingly comfortable bed the seats had made, staring up at Ryder as he moved between her thighs. Her body was sensitized, primed for his possession. The empty ache in her pussy was mind destroying, desperate. She needed him now. No preliminaries, no hesitations.

Her hips arched for just that, a cry tearing from her throat as she felt the head of his cock at the weeping entrance of her cunt. He pushed into her slowly, stretching the sensitive tissue with exquisite pleasure/pain as he worked his cock into her.

Carmella arched into him, fighting for breath as the erotic intensity rippled through her body. She was on fire for him. Her flesh heated as her need became desperate, so close to orgasm she could feel her womb tightening in preparation for it.

She stared up at Ryder, the brooding sexuality in his features shadowed by the dim lights of the virtual windshield, his blue eyes glittering with passion, his bearded face appearing rough, rakish, as he watched her vagina swallow the thick length of his cock.

It was amazing, shattering, the sensations that rocked over her body as he thrust inside her. The piercing pleasure of the slow thrusts had her panting for more as his erection widened the small entrance. Each inch was an agonizing pleasure as she waited for the moment he would fill her completely.

Her pussy ached, throbbed. The tissue, sensitive to every touch, echoed with the hard pulse of his cock as he filled her, heating her vagina, increasing the sensitivity of the inner channel.

"I could fuck you forever." His voice was a harsh, dark growl. "You're so hot and tight around my cock it's all I can do not to come inside you now."

"Did I ask you to wait?" She could barely speak for the rioting waves of pleasure washing through her body. "Oh God, Ryder, don't wait."

He slid into her to the hilt. She could feel the head of his cock throbbing, flexing in the depths of her pussy, making her insane to feel him moving, thrusting hard and deep inside her.

He bent over, one arm bracing her shoulder, the other wrapping beneath her as he covered her. His weight was a sensually heated blanket of desire. Every touch of his body along hers stroked nerve endings, awakening them to the pleasure of his touch.

Carmella could feel the blood singing through her veins, throbbing in an explicit demand for his driving thrusts. Her hands rose to his shoulders, clenching the hard muscles that tightened beneath her touch. Her head lowered, her lips caressing his chest, her tongue stroking, licking at his skin as he groaned above her.

"Leave me some control." He was panting as his hips flexed, pressing his cock deeper into the sensitive tissue that cupped his flesh.

She bit at his chest. Her teeth nipped, her tongue stroked as he moaned in defeat. He began to move in long, slow thrusts that had her crying out in clawing hunger. She had never known passion so intense, lust so hot and all consuming.

"Do it," she cried out breathlessly, her hips writhing beneath him as he stroked slowly into her body. "Please, Ryder, fuck me."

One broad hand tunneled into her hair, the other gripping her hips tightly to hold her in place as he drove her insane with the deep, slow strokes into her pussy. She could feel her moisture there gathering, frothing, creaming with the blistering carnal hunger flaying her body.

"God, you're so soft and tight," he whispered at her ear, his breathing hard and quick. "I don't want to come, Carmella. I don't want to ever stop fucking you."

She lifted her legs, clamping them around his waist as he rode her with a leisurely pace. It wasn't enough. It was driving her crazy, making her scream, her voice hoarse with the arousal pounding through her veins.

Their flesh was slick with the effects of the lust burning through their systems, the smell of sex, the sound of suckling female tissue and hard driving male filling the interior of the vehicle.

"If you don't move your ass, I'm going to burn blisters on it." She tried to scream her outrage that he was deliberately, cruelly taunting her, but the words only came out as a gasping plea.

She tightened the muscles of her cunt around his invading erection, feeling her flesh ripple around him as he groaned hard and deep in her ear. It was effective. He began to move harder, faster, holding her still beneath him as the pleasure intensified to a level bordering pain.

Carmella gasped for breath, feeling the surging sensations gathering in her womb, tightening it as her pussy clenched around Ryder's thrusting cock. Slowly, every cell in her body became taut, sensitized, hot...

Her eyes flew open as the surging orgasm exploded low in her stomach and began to rush through her body. Her wailing cry was forced from her throat, the hard pulse of her release gushing through her cunt. Ryder moaned thickly, his body stiffening, his own climax tearing through his body.

It felt never-ending. Rippling and surging, a tidal wave of intensity that swept past her control, her shields and her blocks, leaving her open. Aware. Broken.

He had betrayed her. In that one blinding moment when the heart and soul opened, connecting with Ryder's, Carmella knew a sweeping, all consuming rush of fury and pain. The son of a bitch had betrayed her.

The orgasm rushing through her had barely stilled before fire erupted from her hands, sweeping down his back only to be absorbed just as quickly by his body.

Hard hands slammed her wrists to the makeshift bed as she screamed out her fury, twisting beneath him, desperate to be released.

"You bastards!" She cursed him and Torren together. "You son of a bitch bastards, I'll kill you."

Carmella stared up at Ryder's hard, savage features as he held her down easily. His eyes were narrowed, his expression calm, stern. His cock was still lodged inside her, hot and thick, despite his release.

"You have lousy timing," he told her softly as she felt bands of power encircling her body, holding her still, defenseless, as he moved back from her body.

"Fucking PSI agent." She shook her head as bitterness overwhelmed her. "You and Torren both. You betrayed me, Ryder."

She struggled against the bonds, hating herself for trusting him or Torren, but hating them more. She fought her tears. Damn them, she would not cry over either of them.

"Amazing how you can see only those things you want to see," he remarked as he got dressed.

The Hummer moved along the road, growing steadily closer to their destination, to Torren. She knew now why her commander had been so damned hard to find, why he had sent Ryder to her. The elaborate plot made her almost as sick as the truth she had glimpsed in Ryder's soul.

The unique shield that all Fyrebrands possessed had only one key. There was one way to see into her soul, into the part of her that could never lie, even to herself. That key was love. Only a true disarmer would reach the lock and use that emotion to open the doors into her heart. But in doing so, she had glimpsed his as well. What she saw destroyed her.

He hadn't just betrayed her. She ignored the love staring her in the face, the need and the dreams. She had seen the betrayal, the truth of why he had come for her. As judge and jury. As the last step between her and death. She had seen that her secret was no longer safe, even from herself. And she knew, in one blinding second, that none of it mattered without trust. And Ryder didn't trust her.

Chapter Sixteen

"The Tyrea was an elemental. The strongest ever known with the power to pull together all the forces of the elements with just a thought."

Carmella tried to ignore him hours later, but there was no stopping the sound of his voice. "Tyre could control the minds of men, with the secondary elemental powers as well as disarming talents. He was the most powerful man to ever live. So far, of all the little bastards he planted behind the Tyrea's back, only a few have been blessed with both power and honor. We couldn't take the chance that you were one of the few."

As an explanation, it sucked. He had played her. Every moment they had been together he had been lying to her, drawing her in, easing her, reassuring her until the moment her soul accepted what her mind didn't want to see, and opened for him. Love. She had fallen in love with him in one blinding instant, and in the next everything inside her had shattered.

Her insides felt raw, ripped away by the stark, blinding truth of what she had seen in his heart and the pain of knowing it existed. God, had she ever hurt so badly in her life? Had she ever known such desolation within her own soul? Even as the rage had built inside her, the flames erupting from her hands, she had pulled back on the power, trying to control it, to extinguish it. Even though a part of her relished the overriding satisfaction of knowing that at least for an instant, she had caused him pain as well.

"I'm not in the mood for a history lesson, Ryder. This has nothing to do with Tyre and everything to do with you being a jackass. Get over it. I will."

She wouldn't look at him as he drove the vehicle, concentrating instead on the visual display screen as she anticipated facing Torren as well. She had glimpsed his expression earlier. His face was lined, heavy with regret as he watched her. But she knew he didn't regret his actions. It was what she had done that he regretted. What he had seen inside her soul that ate at him. What had he seen that would make him lock her in invisible chains, make him watch her with such anger?

She wouldn't cry, she promised herself as she stared back at him. She would not let him see the tears that were damned near choking her right now. Her stomach was roiling with the pain, her heart ready to explode with it. Son of a bitch, it was just her luck to fall in love with a PSI agent. She thought she was smarter than that; thought her powers would be enough to protect her. She had been wrong.

It was the curse of Fyrebrands. Of the few documented, each had told of the moment their lovers had touched their souls. There were no secrets, no apprehensions between such couples. They were bonded.

It was said it had been the way of Tyre and the Tyrea. That before Tyre convinced himself he was a god, he had first been a man, and his soul had touched the Tyrea's. Carmella's great-grandmother. But even as great as that love had been, it had done nothing to stem the evil inside Tyre.

"I wasn't a jackass, Carmella," he growled. Satisfaction surged through her as she heard the anger growing in his voice. "I let you see the truth. You chose to overlook my feelings for you. All you could see was the deceit."

"Are you fucking crazy?" It was a rhetorical question. Of course he was crazy, he was demonstrating that now. "You think this is about your job with PSI? Do you think I was so stupid that I didn't already suspect, Ryder? Do you think you're the only PSI agent to have ever come after me?"

He lowered his brows into a brooding frown, a question in his eyes that he refused to voice. She smiled slowly, mockingly, as she watched his jaw bunch with fury.

He, of course, wanted to know if she had fucked any of the agents sent out after her. Let him wonder. The mental exercise would do him good.

"You're a descendent of Tyre Leyton and his lover, the Tyrea," he said softly. "You couldn't be trusted without testing, Carmella."

"And did I pass your little test, Ryder?" she asked him softly. "When I let you into my soul did you see the monster you expected to see?"

He didn't show surprise, but he would be too good for that. At least he was now aware that she knew how he saw her. A monster. There, lurking behind his deceit, what he thought was his love for her, had been the twisting, deformed image he thought resided inside her. The image of what he expected to see, even after she had opened herself to him, had nearly destroyed her. He had never believed in her, not completely. He had never thought she was honorable or innocent of Tyre's crimes, and she feared, after seeing the strength of that shadow, that he never would.

"I never thought you were a monster, Carmella." He shook his head, though he avoided her gaze.

She wedged herself uncomfortably into the corner of the seat watching him, her insides burning with pain as she tried to come to grips with everything she had lost in the space of a few, fragile seconds.

"You're such a self-righteous bastard. You and Torren both," she breathed out, resigned. "Have you managed to convince yourself that I deserve to die now? Another monster put away, isn't that how it works, Ryder?"

"Goddammit, Carmella, where do you come up with this crap?" He was fuming, watching her with such brooding anger that it set off a firestorm of fury inside her. He had no right to be furious with her. No right to hold her in chains or in shields. She hadn't lied to him. He had lied to her.

"How did it feel fucking a monster, Ryder?" she snarled, baring her teeth as she fought her pain. "Was the novelty worth it? Do we fuck different than normal women?"

She could feel Torren's presence strengthening around her and fought to keep a shield between her and the man she had once welcomed into her heart and her mind. He had lied to her as well, and she couldn't forget it.

"I won't continue this argument with you." Ryder shook his head, his expression troubled. She liked that. Liked seeing the sudden, internal conflict in his gaze.

"What argument, Ryder? Am I proclaiming my innocence? I want to cut your fucking heart from your chest, I'm not denying it."

"Stop it, Carmella." He breathed in heavily.

"Do you think these chains will stop me, Ryder?" She lifted her hands, the invisible bands of energy cutting a wound in her soul that she feared would never heal. "Do you think you're not the first bastard to try to restrain me?"

"Dammit, Carmella, I just want you to cool off," he snapped. "You're in no frame of mind to follow me and most likely more than capable of attacking. Give yourself time to cool off."

"You son of a bitch, you put me in chains," she screamed, her fury overwhelming her. "You fucking lied to me and on top of it all you didn't even have the decency to try to believe in me. And you expect me not to be angry?"

"You washed my fucking back in flames, Carmella," he yelled back at her. "I'm not in the mood to be roasted tonight, baby."

"You deserved it." She moved forward until they were nearly nose-to-nose. "And don't fool yourself, moron. If I wanted you roasted you would be toast now, not sitting there with the little added power you managed to absorb. You were just waiting on an excuse, just waiting to lock me down and to convince yourself how dangerous I was. The blood of Tyre," she snarled. "A monster, just like he was."

She watched his face closely, his gaze becoming cool, shuttered.

"Get some rest." His voice was perfectly pitched, even and firm. "We have a long ride ahead of us."

Carmella threw herself back in the seat, staring at him with a sneer on her lips. "You won't keep me restrained much longer, Ryder."

"You're disarmed for the moment, Carmella. Try using your powers and you'll only hurt yourself."

She smiled. A tight sarcastic curve of her lips that she noticed had him frowning in suspicion. "I have never depended solely on my powers, Ryder. I will get out of these chains, and when I do, you will never get the chance to get them back on me."

He stared at her for a long, tense moment before he sighed deeply and turned away from her. Carmella drew in a hard breath as she pushed back the pain, the tears. It didn't help to cry. Tears solved nothing. She laid her head against the side of the Hummer and closed her eyes.

Ryder's shield was reinforced with her own. She wasn't powerless, no matter what he thought. He was stronger; she had no doubt. His disarming abilities gave him an edge she couldn't fight with her gifts, but there were times when stealth and cunning far exceeded physical power. Times when a woman just had to show a man how stupid he was, whether she enjoyed the exercise or not. Ryder was about to learn.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fix it. Or else. Ryder breathed in deeply as Torren's thoughts smacked into his brain with the force of a fist against his head. He nearly swayed with the pain and the shock of having his shield overtaken so easily. He was stronger than Ryder had thought.

Bad move, Torren. Never show your greatest strength. Remember? Torren had pounded it into his brain years before.

Let me past that shield, Ryder. You're killing her. Fury, a friend's pain, it all echoed in the thought.

Ryder glanced back at Carmella again. She looked so small, huddled in the corner of the seat, her eyes closed, her face pale.

I'm not controlling that shield, Torren. He ached with that knowledge. The only shield I have around her is the one controlling her powers. Carmella is blocking herself.

Torren's shock, his worry, filled Ryder's brain. Ryder could feel the other man gathering his strength, and sending himself back toward Carmella. Psychic frustration filled the interior of the Hummer.

Goddammit! I warned you. Torren's thought was cold, bitter. What the hell did you do to her, Ryder? What did she see in your soul?

Ryder frowned. Love. His deception. What more could she have seen?

There had to be more. Torren's force was nearly demonic in its anger, its fear. She's known deception before. She would have seen the truth of your heart, whatever it was. What was it?

You're making excuses for her, Torren. His own thoughts were bleak. She struck out in anger alone. Because I deceived her. Because you did. She released her power because of that anger, just as Tyre did. The world had yet to heal from that wound.

There was silence. A complete numbing silence as he felt Torren stepping out of his thoughts slowly, shock resounding around him. What had he said to so surprise the man who had once sworn he could never be surprised?

You're a fool. Torren was in no way pleased. Not that Ryder cared, but still... Now fix it. Fix it, or you'll deal with me.

The other man was gone as quickly as he had invaded Ryder's mind. He sighed deeply, tiredly. He'd be damned if he knew what to do now.

Fix it, he grunted silently. Torren was strong...stronger perhaps than Ryder had suspected. But no amount of strength could just fix this.

Chapter Seventeen

They arrived at Torren's location two days later. The beach house was sheltered behind large dunes and swaying palms, its weathered outer planks bleached by salt and wind.

The sturdy, one-story house looked inviting, comfortable, but Carmella was not relaxed. The Hummer came to a stop outside the opened front door as Ryder turned from her, his gaze going to her wrists and ankles. A surge of power enfolded the invisible shackles and within seconds they had fallen to the floor.

Time's almost up, she thought to herself a bit sadly as Ryder exited the vehicle before opening the door for her to step out as well.

"Torren's here?" The shield she had placed around herself kept her from sensing the psychic path she often used with her commander.

"Come in and find out." He gripped her arm as he led her into the beach house.

And there stood Torren. Just inside the large living room, watching their entrance with hooded hazel eyes. His expression was as calm and tranquil as she had ever seen it, but she knew those eyes. He was seething with anger. With her, or with Ryder?

"Try both," he answered her silent thought with a whiplash of harsh fury.

And she didn't really give a damn. He was as handsome as ever. His flowing, dark brown hair rippling to the middle of his shoulders, his hard muscular body standing straight and tall, as perfect and confident as always. Seeing it-seeing him-only made the fury burn hotter inside her.

She stalked across the room, and came face to face with the man who had saved her life and her soul more than once.

She smiled up at him, baring her teeth as he frowned. Before he could flinch she had clenched her fist and drove it with all her remaining strength into the side of his face.

Torren stumbled back, his eyes rounding first in surprise then narrowing furiously as he stared down at her.

"I deserved that," he growled. "But you deserve this."

Before she could evade him, one hand locked in her hair, the other at her hip as he jerked her to him, his lips grinding down on hers. Carmella could only whimper as she struggled against him. His tongue plunged into her mouth, staking his claim on her senses and her mind as he held her tight against his hard body.

The length of his cock seared her through the confining shields of their clothing. His hard hands were a brand at her hip and her head, his passion a blazing conqueror as he tried to possess her soul with the kiss.

Carmella quaked inside. She thought she could resist him. Thought her love for Ryder would make her immune. Unfortunately, in that instant, she realized that Torren, too, had the key to her soul. He always had.

She whimpered in distress. There was no escape. Her hands tightened on his shoulders as she fought the response she was giving him. She was trapped between the two men, heart, body and soul.

"Not trapped, Carmella. Protected. Always protected." Ryder whispered at her back, his hands smoothing along the curves of her rear as his lips stroked over her bare shoulder.

Protected? They had betrayed her. Never trusted her. She moaned into the kiss, fighting them and herself as emotion and sensation overwhelmed her.

She had fought for so long. Fighting was a necessary part of her, but in this instance, her body refused to draw the necessary strength to do anything but revel in each caress it was being given.

Finally, when she thought she would pass out from the fiery heat running rampant between the three of them, Torren lifted his head. He stared down at her, his eyes dark, his expression carnal.

"Now, we can talk. You hit me again, Carmella, and I'll paddle your ass."

Carmella jerked away from the two of them, stalking to the other side of the room before she turned back to face them.

"What is this fascination you two have with spanking me?"

She didn't like the sudden dark intensity that swept over their expressions.

"Oh, you'd like it. Eventually," Ryder promised her, his smile a bit too ruthless to suit her.

She snarled back at him. "Don't bet on getting the chance to try it. I've had my fill of lies from both of you. Now tell me what the hell is going on here or I'm gone."

She watched them, amazed at the differences between the two men, and yet, how much they were alike. Carmella blinked, suddenly realizing how much she cared for each man. How much she loved them, both.

Torren, for obvious reasons. They had been lovers as well as friends. He had covered her back, protected her, helped her survive. Ryder had just taken her over. Her heart had given her no choice when he had shown her both the dominance and the gentleness he held for her. But he didn't trust her. Torren couldn't trust her. Not really. Not if he had set this plan up to begin with.

"Carmella." Torren breathed in deeply. "I know you're angry. Very angry. And I know little of this is making sense to you right now."

"Now there's an understatement," she snapped as she crossed her arms over her breasts.

"Do you trust me, Carmella?" he asked her, his voice soft, reflective.

Did she? She stared back at him, seeing the softness in his hazel eyes, seeing the man she had loved, in so many ways, for so long.

"You know I do, Torren. I wouldn't be here if I didn't." She would have run as hard and as fast as her legs would have carried her the moment she realized Ryder was a PSI agent if she hadn't trusted him.

Ryder crossed his arms over his chest as he watched them, his gaze soft. She didn't want him soft. She wanted him angry. She wanted them all angry so she could rid herself of the fury rushing through her.

"How far do you trust me?" Torren asked her.

Carmella could feel her heart speeding up in her chest at his tone of voice. It was hot, sexual. A tone he had used only rarely with her, even while they had been lovers.

She swallowed tightly, her gaze swinging between the two of them. Torren and Ryder both would be aware of her conflicting emotions right now. Her inability to decide which man held more of her heart. Which she could bear letting go? From the looks of them, neither intended to let her go.

"Right now, only about as far as I can see you," she snorted. "Either of you, if you want the truth."

"You know I've studied the advanced psychic phenomena," Torren told her softly. "The old records, and many of my own suspicions."

She nodded slowly. She was well aware of that.

"Fyrebrands are often unique in many ways." He shrugged. "Their passions are hotter, more tempestuous, requiring a greater amount of control from the person possessing them."

"I'm aware of your theories, Torren." She had never bothered to worry overmuch about them until now.

"The personal control eventually weakens a person without an outlet. It breaks down. It breeds a loss of emotion, a loss of joy." He speared her with a hard, intense look. "I've noticed both in you."

"I'm loyal." She braced herself for whatever came next. "You've never had reason to question that, Torren."

"And I don't question it now." Command, stern and unflinching, filled his voice. "Your soul touched Ryder's, but you held back. Just as you did with me before all this began. You kept your control rather than giving it to him. That was what caused the shadows of distrust that you saw."

She shot Ryder a hateful look. "What have you convinced him of?" she snapped furiously. "You didn't trust me."

"You didn't trust me." He shrugged lazily. "If you had, you would have first, been honest with me. Second, you would not have shadowed that inner part of yourself, Carmella. The part that reveals everything you are."

She was breathing hard and fast now, looking between the two men who each held a part of her soul. Both men too handsome, too damned sexual. Being caught between them, even like this, was too intense for her to handle.

"I'm not one of your experiments." She turned on Torren then, knowledge flooding her mind. They wanted her to feel helpless. Caught between them. Controlled. Bound to them both.

"Unfortunately, you are." Ryder's voice was a rough, sexual caress across her nerve endings. "Your life depends on it, Carmella. I won't let you throw it away because of stubbornness."

She fought to still her breathing, to control the anger beginning to flood her.

"And exactly how does my life depend on whatever the hell you two are hatching up?" She looked from one to the other, seeing more than just concern, more than just desire.

"When you go in with us for testing at PSI headquarters, Carmella, there will be no hiding who and what you are. Without evidence of control, you'll be signing your own death sentence. You know that."

She fought the tremble that threatened to shake her body. "Then I won't go in. I have no intention of going in." She turned to Torren, trembling now as she saw the truth on his face. "What have you done, Torren?"

"Wrong." Ryder's voice rose at her declaration. "You're mine too, Carmella. Mine and Torren's. You know it, and I know it. I won't let you take the easy way out on this. Goddammit it. PSI headquarters sent me out to look for you. They know you exist."

She could feel the blood draining from her face. They knew who she was. They knew where she was. How? Could they be right about her shields, her controls? Or had Torren betrayed her? She watched him, felt him, but couldn't believe he would do so.

"Ryder can disarm you, as you've seen, and what powers he can't absorb, I can. But if you give up control, together we can amplify those powers as well as still the unprovoked anger that sometimes fills you, Carmella. But we can't do that unless you open to us completely. You have to open to us willingly."

Us? She screamed the thought at Torren. Her gaze swung between the two men, realizing...knowing, that neither man planned to let her go. She wouldn't be a lover to one; she would love two.

Us, Carmella. Ryder's response was a sensual caress through her mind, leaving her trembling in the aftermath.

"How?" She ran her fingers through her hair in desperation. "For God's sake, Torren. He has never trusted me. Ever."

"Because you haven't let him in. You haven't truly let either of us in," Torren snapped. "You are not normal, Carmella, no matter how much you wish you were. Neither are we. The very talents that make you different make your emotional processes more difficult. We will complete you. To do that, we need you just as you need us. Ryder opened himself completely to you, just as I did. It's the reason you can feel my honesty and see his suspicions, otherwise you would have never seen those shadows, which rose when you blocked him."

"No..." It couldn't be that easy.

"I was there!" Torren yelled back at her, furious now. "Do you understand me, Carmella? I was there. Do you think I would have trusted your mind to anyone without observing it? Do you actually believe I wasn't there when you gave him the last part of your heart that I could never seem to hold?"

Her eyes widened, equal parts fury and arousal filling her in one blinding instant. He had been there? Watching? In her mind... She swallowed tightly, her gaze moving slowly to Ryder. She had fought to keep Torren blocked during their trip to his location. Had fought to try to make sense of her needs for both men, when she knew-or thought she knew-she could have only one.

"You're too complacent," Ryder told her softly. "You aren't blocking nearly as well as you should, and you're getting careless. Your frustration level is too high, Carmella. It affects your objectivity and your performance. It's too high, because you refuse to submit to what you know you want."

She laughed. She couldn't help it. In their faces, more amused than really offended, she laughed at both of them. They intended to share her. There had never been a danger of losing either man. The whole elaborate plot was to cement Ryder's hold on her before they slapped her with the truth.

"You're joking? Right? You're turning this into something sexual. Something that you can so obviously help me with," she sneered. "What do you have in mind, Ryder? Double-teaming me? Let's see, I've already fucked Torren." She shot him a distasteful look. "Not that it ever did me much good. And I'm not real pleased with you at the moment, either."

"Didn't do you much good?" Torren kept his voice soft, a warning in and of itself. "Carmella, it's not like you to lie, baby. You forget; I'm a seer, among other things. I knew what was coming. I knew who was coming. I wasn't about to screw it up by giving you the illusion that you could get anywhere else, what you will only get one way."

Carmella bit her lip. She didn't like the sharp contraction that fisted her womb as he spoke. She sure as hell didn't like the way her juices seemed to flood her pussy.

She turned to Ryder as he moved, walking to her slowly, his expression filled with determination.

"You said you loved me," she whispered. "This isn't love. From either of you."

"Isn't it?" His expression turned immeasurably gentle as he reached her, his hand rising to touch her face. "Does love have a definition, Carmella? Isn't it acceptance, complete acceptance of the one you love? Complete protection and the fulfillment of their needs? No matter those needs? You need what we have to offer. Not just for yourself, but for us as well."

Chapter Eighteen

Carmella fought to breathe just as hard as she fought the heat tingling under her skin. Her muscles tightened as the sensations gathered in the pit of her stomach, working their way over her body.

She looked at Torren, seeing the heat in his gaze, the affection, his concern.

"You don't love me." She shook her head as she turned back to Ryder. "Neither of you can possibly love me. This doesn't make sense."

Confusion didn't sit well with her. The morass of longings, fantasies and desires that had always tormented her had been something she had never thought to actually experience. She could have, at any given time, but her fear of allowing herself that greatest fantasy had always held her back. Now, faced with the only two men she had ever cared for, Carmella was terrified.

"Carmella, I love you beyond life. I did months ago, when I first touched your mind, first entered your fantasies. In all those fantasies, Torren lingered just out of view. You didn't even realize yourself what you were doing. For a while, I didn't realize what you needed."

She shook her head desperately, fighting him, fighting herself. She flinched as Torren came closer. His eyes, usually a cool, tranquil hazel, now glittered with darker highlights as he watched her.

"He holds your woman's soul," he whispered as Ryder's hands moved to the hem of her blouse. "But you and I both know, Carmella, that I too hold a part of your heart."

"No." She wanted to jerk away from them as she felt the heat intensifying under her skin. "You don't understand. It was a just fantasy."

Her nipples were so hard, so filled with longing, she felt as though they would burst as the cloth of her shirt raked over them. Torren gripped her wrists, raising them a second before his mouth covered one swollen peak.

"Oh God." Her knees weakened. Her gaze flew to Ryder. He pulled the shirt up her arms, his hand gripping her wrists as Torren released them. All the while, he watched the other man suckle the smooth, supple flesh.

His eyes darkened in arousal and when he looked at her, they were filled with approval.

"Every Fyrebrand has her weakness," he whispered as he dropped her shirt to the floor. "This is yours, Carmella. And I give it to you, whenever you want it, however you want it."

As he finished speaking, Torren gripped her nipple between his teeth, exerting just enough pressure to leave her gasping on the edge of pain as his tongue flicked over the little tip with sensuous delight. Carmella's eyes widened at the sensations, a breathless scream issuing from her throat as her body jerked, shuddered in the embrace of the two men.

"Easy, Carmella." Ryder's lips brushed hers, the warm rasp of his beard causing her to whimper at the added sensation. "I want you to let go. Just let go. Let me and Torren take care of you, baby. It's okay."

Carmella shook her head, though she couldn't control her gasp as Torren began to suckle greedily at her flesh once more. She had to have control. She couldn't lose it. She couldn't take the chance. To relinquish it to either of them meant the power surging through her body-flames erupting, scorching her-would then be their responsibility to tame. Her control, her need to control, was too much a part of her.

"Please, Ryder." Tears welled in her eyes as she stared back at him. "I can't do this."

"You don't have a choice." For all its gentleness, his voice was firm. "When I return to the agency with you, Carmella, there will be no doubt in anyone's mind that you have bonded with both of us. That your powers are controlled. That I control that part of you. That you are no danger to them or to anyone else. I will not risk your life."

He didn't give her time to answer. He took her lips in a kiss that effectively stilled any other argument. Not that she would have argued further. Torren's hands were pushing the waistband of her pants over her hips, Ryder's tongue was devouring hers, and all Carmella could do was hold on and pray she could at least hold a measure of her restraint close. Dear God, she didn't want to hurt them.

She had already burned Ryder in her fury. What was she capable of with no control whatsoever?

"Shush your fears, baby," Ryder whispered against her lips. "I'll take care of you this time. I promise. Just trust me. Me and Torren. We won't let anything happen."

Cool air chilled her tender nipple as Torren released it, moving back as Ryder picked her up in his arms. Carmella held onto him, caught in the dizzying knowledge of what was to come. Torren knew her powers. He wouldn't falter. Surely he wouldn't. He never had. And Ryder knew the damage she could cause. He could disarm her. He could keep her from hurting any of them. Couldn't he?

She whimpered as they laid her on the bed, quickly removing her boots and her clothing before removing their own. Her head was whirling with the knowledge of what was coming. Fears and desires, fantasies and reality, collided with such chaos that she couldn't seem to find an anchor to hold her tumultuous emotions stable.

She could feel her flesh prickling with power, heating her, intensifying the sensations of Ryder and Torren's hands smoothing over her body. Ryder came up beside her, one arm going under her shoulders as he lifted her into his embrace.

"I'm just going to hold you, baby," he whispered at her ear as he reclined against the headboard, pulling Carmella against his chest as Torren eased her legs apart. "Just hold you, and show you that you have nothing to fear."

Nothing to fear? She could feel the lust scorching her insides, flooding her pussy. It was all she could do to hold back her cries as she watched Torren lower himself between her thighs while he gazed at her cunt in hungry fascination. Torren loved driving her insane with his mouth when they had been lovers. She could have handled it. She had before. But before, she hadn't had Ryder's back bracing hers, his hands cupping her breasts, his fingers tweaking her nipples as he whispered encouragement in her ear.

"Easy, baby," Ryder soothed her as Torren pushed his hands under her rear, lifting her to his mouth. "Slow and easy. You like that, don't you?"

His fingers tightened on the hard points of her breasts as Torren's tongue distended and began a slow, lazy swipe up her soaking slit.

She felt her scalp prickle in warning. The flames were building in her mind, terrifying her.

"No. No, please..." She thrashed her head against Ryder's chest, fighting it, terrified of the consequences.

"Trust me, Carmella," Ryder whispered at her ear. "You have to trust me, baby. Let me have the heat. I can take it. Give it to me, Carma."

Torren's lips covered her clit, his tongue stroking around it, never touching it, causing it to swell further as the pressure echoed through her body. Each caress felt deliberately timed, slow and intense, provoking the ultimate pleasure.

Carmella tightened fighting the sensations, the pleasure. She had never given control of herself or her powers to another living person. To do so now terrified her. They could use her. Could destroy her.

"Carmella." Ryder's voice was stern, the sound of it causing her pussy to clench in need.

Torren moved one hand from beneath her buttocks, sliding slowly along her flesh until it stopped between her thighs. She shuddered.

"Torren... Please..." She was panting now, a fine film of perspiration coating her body as she felt his fingers stop at the entrance to her greedy cunt. "Torren, I can't do this..."

He moaned against her clit. Carmella couldn't stop the strangled scream that escaped her throat as she arched closer to his mouth. Oh God, it was too good. He was destroying her with his touch. She lowered her hands, trying to push him away, only to have Ryder catch her wrists again and stretch them behind her head as he moved her quickly.

Before she could do more than cry out, he had her on her knees as Torren turned on his back, pushing her thighs wide, his tongue spearing hard and fast inside the soaked depths of her cunt. Pleasure spasmed through her womb, raced through her bloodstream.

Torren's body was stretched out before her as Ryder knelt beside her, holding her arms behind her back, staring down at her with an expression of savage sensuality.

She struggled against his grip, then screamed out as Torren's hand landed heavily on her buttock. Her entire body stilled an instant before she felt the flames beginning to rise from her skin.

"God, no!" she screamed out, trying to move away from Ryder, terrified of what would happen now.

Torren wouldn't stop, wouldn't allow her to control her response. He slapped her ass again, then did the unthinkable. His fingers parted the cheeks of her rear, one running down the cleft until it speared the tiny little hole waiting below. His finger slid in deep, hard, pushing through the sensitive tissue, stretching her, opening her.

"Torren." She tried to scream his name, but her wail was one of such pleasure it shocked her own ears.

Torren's tongue was a demon of lust. Spearing into her sensitive cunt, thrusting through the thick juices, lapping at her greedily as he slid his finger easily into her back hole.

"Beautiful, baby." Ryder held her steady as his head lowered to lap at her nipples. His teeth raked them, his lips covered them, suckling deeply as Torren continued to fuck her tormented pussy with his wicked tongue.

She was shaking, sweat dripping from her body, as she held onto her control with the thinnest of threads.

"Let go, Carmella," Ryder whispered from her breast. "Give it to me, baby. Let go."

She shook her head, gasping for breath. A hand landed on her buttock again. She wasn't certain whose. The little sting only deepened the pleasure of Torren's tongue thrusting rapidly into her spasming pussy, and Ryder's little nips at her sensitive nipples.

She couldn't hold on. She knew she couldn't.

When she felt them moving her again, she could only whimper, her body following their commands easily as her mind scrambled for balance. There was none. Before she could do more than scream his name, Ryder had stretched out on the bed as Torren moved up beside her, helping her to straddle the other man's body. Carmella stared into his dark eyes as he held her hips down, encouraging her darkly as Ryder's cock began to sink slowly into the tormented depths of her cunt.

"Torren, please..." Her voice was a ragged plea as her body began to greedily suck Ryder's thick cock into it. "I'm scared."

Her head was resting on Torren's chest as he knelt beside her, his arms supporting her as Ryder began to work his erection inside her. Too much. Too good. She was crying, tears falling slowly down her cheeks as the pleasure became unbearable and the heat inside her began rising once again.

"You're so tight," Torren whispered in her ear. "I remember how tight your sweet pussy is, Carmella. I know how he's stretching it. How good it's making you feel. When he's in-all the way in-your sweet cunt gloving every inch of his cock, I'm going to take your ass. I'm going to take it, Carmella, and you're going to love it."

Torren's hand slid down her back, his finger sliding inside the little hole once again as Ryder groaned out beneath her. She bucked, driving Ryder further inside her as she fought for more of the hot pressure from Torren's finger.

It was too much. She needed it too much. She bent over Ryder's body, going into the arms that opened for her, then enfolded her, screaming out against Ryder's chest as his cock and Torren's finger stole her sanity. She was lost. Adrift. She could do nothing now but trust them to do what was best. To protect her and themselves.

She was only vaguely aware of Torren moving. The feel of cool lubricating gel being worked inside her anus. Long, broad fingers stretching her, preparing her, as Ryder lodged every inch of his cock deep inside her.

Carmella whimpered, awaiting the final invasion. The ecstatic pain she knew would be more than her mind could control. She turned her head on Ryder's shoulder, her tears wetting his flesh.

"Please," she whispered as she felt Torren move behind her, the head of his cock pressing against her rear entrance. "Please, don't let me hurt you."

In that second she lost her breath, and her control. Torren gave little concession to her anal virginity or her fears. With steady, intense pressure he began to ease the thick length of his cock into the ultra tight entrance, his fingers spreading her rear cheeks apart, his groan echoing around her.

It was pleasure and pain. Heated rapturous agony. An inferno.

As Carmella felt Torren's cock slide inside her in a stroke of lightning-hot pleasure, she lost the last remaining shreds of control. She was a vessel now. Pleasure so rich and intense it bordered on pain. Impaled, penetrated, taken. She felt her soul splinter and images she could have never imagined began to ripple through her as Ryder and Torren began to move inside her with deep, powerful strokes. Torren laughing with her as he fucked her during the months they were lovers. She saw his laughter but felt his sadness. She was partly his, partly another's. Without Ryder, without his natural balance, his ability to make her love, none of them had truly been whole.

He completed the circle they were meant to be. Ryder, watching her from afar, impatience and fear driving him as he dreamed of her, searched for her, felt her anger and her grief until the moment he saw her picture in a file. Then he knew her. All of her. Ached for her.

Power swirled around her, through her, inside her, until it erupted, as she had always feared it would. They held her tight, fucking into her, driving her insane with the pleasure until it exploded. She exploded. Heart, body, mind and soul. The orgasm that swept through her entered the soul of each man, just as they, too, reached the fiery peak of their releases.

Hot blasts of semen poured into her body as flames tickled along her flesh, only to be absorbed by the two men. Pleasure speared through her pussy, her womb, stealing her breath, her silent screams a mere breath of sound as she flew from her own body and mingled with the souls of the men who had finally pierced the boundaries of her power. Completed.

Darkness swirled around her then as the violence of her release stole her awareness. She could feel the ripples surging through her body, the power pouring from her mind, only to be absorbed by the men sheltering her. With it the last of the dark restlessness that haunted her evaporated, and she felt the peace that began to take its place.

Carmella came to long seconds later; held between Ryder and Torren as they gasped for breath, sweat dripping from their bodies as Torren finally eased his cock from the tight grip of her anus. Ryder was still buried inside her, though the steel-hard insistence of his erection had eased somewhat. His hand clasped her head to his chest, his lips whispered over her ear, her cheek.

"We love you, Carmella. We both love you," he told her, his voice tender, immeasurably soft. "We're bound now, always."

And they were. He eased her to his side, sighing deeply as drowsiness began to overtake them all. Clasped to Ryder's chest, Torren warming her back, she was protected. Safe. For the first time in all the years she could remember, Carmella slept easily, at peace.

Epilogue

Shannon Reidel stared at the closed file on her desk, smoothing her hand over each one, a sense of accomplishment filling her. Three down. So many more to go. The stamp on the outside of the files proclaimed them completed. Inside, the final tests on the three women were evaluated, notated and determined as a "Safe Risk".

She thought of the three woman and the agents she had sent after them. Testing hadn't been easy on them. It was exhausting, but they had come through it perfectly. And happily.

They were beautiful young women. Each possessing characteristics so reminiscent of their mother that it was heart-breaking. Their reunion had been joyous. They had been filled with laughter, with tears and joy, as they all embraced beneath the protective regard of the men who accompanied them. Men who loved them, completed them, eased them.

The three women, direct descendents of the two most powerful psychics the world had ever known, were safe. But they weren't the last of Tyre's seed. There were others.

She pulled the files across the desk, her hand laying on each, pausing for long seconds as she closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. So many were out there. So many of the children had already perished. Fine, honorable men and women who had been bequeathed the power of Tyre, without the cerebral damage he had incurred during the experiments to advance his powers.

So long ago. So long. She lowered her head, shaking it, her chest aching with her pain.

He had been a good man once. Long, long ago. Before the experiments. Before he had been driven insane by his own power, his own fears. Before he had been taken from her.

She rose to her feet, walking slowly to the small bathroom off her office to the mirror above the sink. She touched her face. It was still unlined. Still as perfect as it had been the day she had walked away from the man who held her soul.

Her eyes were still clear, her body perfectly toned. For nearly a century and a half in age, she looked damned good. She tilted her head, wondering if the scientists who tried to rate her powers, who tried to tamper with them, could have ever envisioned what they created. There wasn't a gray hair on her head. Nothing to indicate she was more than the thirty years of age her file proclaimed.

The Tyrea.

She gripped the sink tightly. Tyre. Dear God, how long and empty the years had been without him. How desolate her life had been, until she had come up with a way to heal in part, the wounds he had created.

Sweet Tyre, she thought, how I miss you.

She lowered her head, remembering his kisses, so bold and dominant, his touch firing every cell in her body to life as their souls mingled. The gift and the curse of an elemental whose main power was that of fire. A Fyrebrand.

But it had all been over so quickly. Her fists clenched as she fought back her tears. Tears were for the deepest part of the night. The long black hours when she had nothing else to do but to remember. His touch. The sound of his voice. The curve of his cheek. And she had never forgotten a moment, a touch.

She breathed in hard and deep, staring back into the office, thinking of the lives that had yet to be saved. And those that would be lost. So many innocent lives. So much left to accomplish. And it was her payment. Her atonement. Her curse for ever convincing the man she loved that such power could be controlled. That the experiments could aid the world. Her fault. On her shoulders lay the near destruction of the world, and now on her shoulders lay the reparation of it. It had begun with these three. But it would be a long time before she would see the end.