

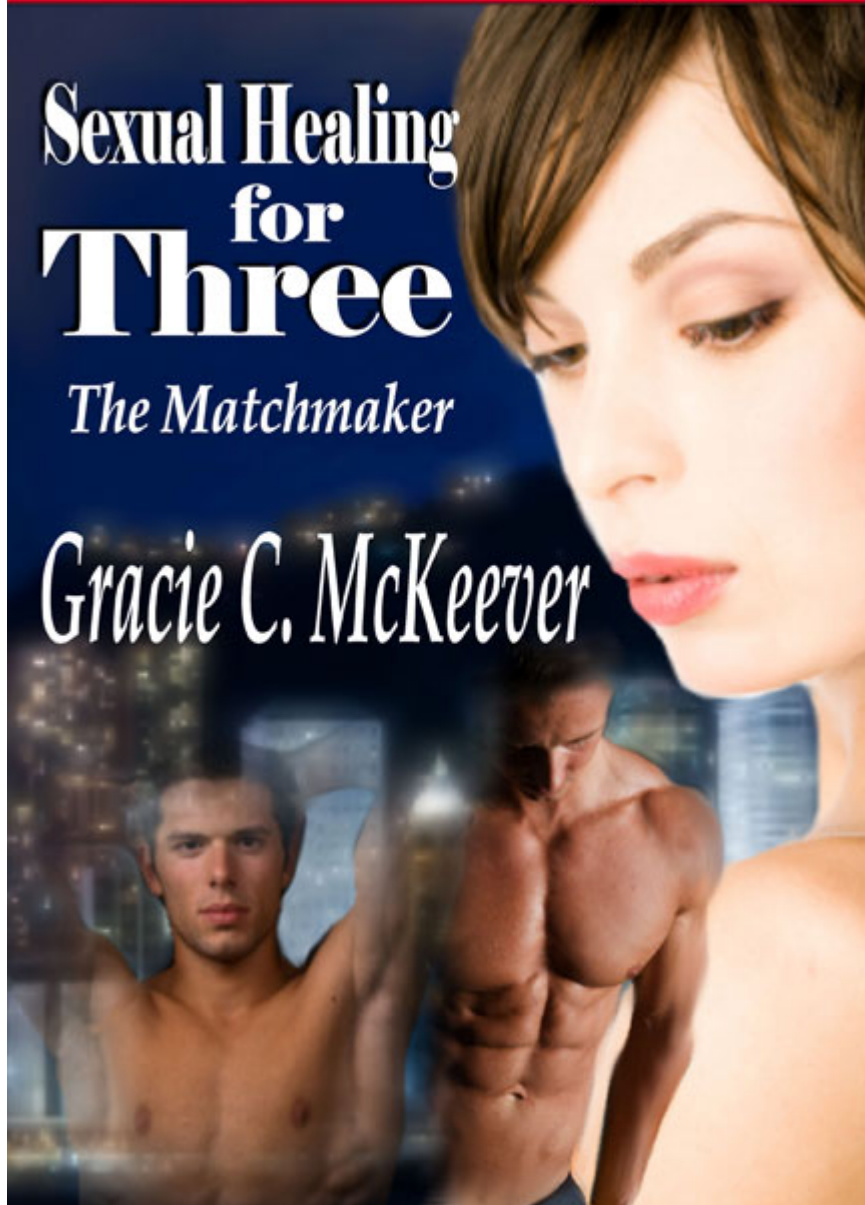
Siren Publishing

Ménage Amour

Sexual Healing
for
Three

The Matchmaker

Gracie C. McKeever



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MENAGE AMOUR



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DEDICATION

For Thomas...Thank you for all your great ideas and generosity.
They're always appreciated.

Sexual Healing for Three

The Matchmaker 5

GRACIE C. MCKEEVER

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Prologue

ER, Belfiore Hospital, Bronx, New York, Current Day

Invisible as air, Donna Vega glided through the white sanitized room, weaving around the people surrounding and frantically working on a body lying motionless on a stretcher.

Her body.

Oh crap.

Was she unconscious or dead?

Curious, she sidled closer to the action and peeked over several heads and shoulders. She finally recognized the man at the center of the action inserting a chest tube as a nurse busied herself cutting off the balance of Donna's blood-stained clothes.

Chance.

His name slipped out of her mouth just above a whisper, but it still surprised her when he looked up from what he was doing to stare directly at her, frowning as if he could see her.

"Dr. Novak?"

Chance blinked and shook his head at the nurse's question, then went back to work tending to Donna's various injuries.

She'd watched him work in the past, numerous times, his lean, tanned fingers quick and efficient, steady and sure. But now she knew what it felt like to experience his touch under optimal circumstances. She had experienced the slow, tender passion of a man who knew how and was more than willing to please a woman and not just the cool, impersonal touch of a medical professional obligated to patch a battered woman up.

Donna closed her eyes and swallowed hard, wondered if she would feel Chance's intimate, sensual touch again. She certainly couldn't feel it now, and his hands were all over her, not as steady and sure as usual, but performing all sorts of medical procedures on her in the name of diagnosing and stabilizing her condition.

She caught several terms that alarmed her, the least of which was "extensive internal injuries and bleeding."

Donna perked up her ears and watched as another man clad in scrubs breezed into the room and rubbed his hands together as if preparing for a tasty banquet. "Someone call for a surgery consult?"

Surgery? Oh no.

She wanted to stick her fingers in her ears to keep from hearing just what kind of shape she was in. From what she could make of the laundry list of damages Chance ran down—broken ribs, tension pneumothorax, possible blunt liver trauma, and varied lacerations, contusions, and a concussion—she didn't sound like she was doing too well.

And the hell of it was she couldn't remember what had happened to her.

The last thing she did remember was...what? Damn, her memory was so foggy.

"Definitely a candidate for surgery," the new arrival said. "At the very least, we'll need to do a peritoneal lavage to evaluate—"

"There's no indication for surgery, not without a CT scan, Davis. Surgical literature—"

“You can’t count on the bleeding to stop before exploration. That’s too risk—”

“Damn it, I’m not cutting her open!”

“You’re right. You’re not, Novak,” Davis whispered, put his hand on Chance’s arm, and squeezed. “You’re too close to this case, too close to this patient. You need to recuse yourself.”

Chance jerked away, and Donna didn’t think she had ever seen him looking as uncertain and...Crap, he was scared. She *was* in bad shape if Chance, a man who could heal the sick and injured with just a touch, like Christ, was scared.

“I know what I’m talking about, Davis. We need to go with conservative treat—”

“She’s going into arrest!”

Donna turned her focus from the two men debating to the other doctors and nurses jumping into action and preparing to apply an electric shock to her body.

How many times had she watched this same scene played out on her favorite television shows and movies? How many times had there been a negative outcome? But at least in the movies, the actor got up after the director yelled, “Cut!” none the worse for wear.

The only *cut* in this scenario would be into her if Davis-the-surgeon had anything to say about it. And she sincerely hoped that he didn’t.

“Clear!”

Donna watched her body violently buck off the stretcher when Chance applied the paddles to her chest, then listened to the piercing sound of her heart continuing to flatline.

This isn’t happening! I can’t be dying. I’ve only just discovered love. I’ve only just discovered how beautiful and wonderful it can be. I’ve only just discovered how right and normal it is to have two men to call my own.

Maybe that was it. Despite what Angela had said about her having two soul mates and there being nothing wrong with her indulging her

desires with both Chance and Russ, God was punishing her now for being too greedy, for taking more than her fair share and depriving other women of enjoying the same perfect affection and union she had discovered so late in life.

I discovered them too late.

Was it too late for her? Was it too late for them?

Donna listened to the shrill sound signaling her life in limbo, felt a sudden pull, warm and comforting, as a tunnel emitting a bright, shimmering glow opened to her right

The light was *real*? Was this really happening to *her*, die-hard cynic, nonconformist, and man-eater supreme Donna Vega, going to meet her maker in such a conventional, lame manner?

"It is not yet your time."

"Then what's all this?"

"You need to come to terms with the path I have chosen for you."

"Chance and Russ?"

"I do not blithely bestow gifts. Come to me now and we will put things to right."

Every story she'd ever heard about the bright light told her the opposite of what the deep voice was telling her. All logic told her not to go into the light.

But His voice was so serene and soothing. She needed that now, needed His strength, needed the peace and tranquility He was offering. She was so tired of fighting.

"Come, child."

Donna gazed longingly at her body and the scrub-clad people desperately trying to save her life. She didn't want to let them down. She didn't want to leave Chance. But she didn't want to disappoint Him either.

She closed her eyes and reached her hand out to the iridescent figure before her.

Angela would be so proud of her for taking such a leap of faith.

Donna said a prayer as the piercing sound of her flatlining heart followed her down the long passageway toward His arms.

* * * *

An abnormally busy morning in the ER had depleted him. A gunshot wound, a stabbing, a couple of asthma attacks, a drug overdose, a heart attack, a stroke, a tour-bus-meets-van-driven-by-a-drunk-driver, plus the regular sniffles, lacerations, aches, and pains all added up to Chance being too exhausted to help the most important patient in the world to him.

It was his mother all over again. He hadn't been able to save her either.

"Doctor, she's been down for twenty minutes."

He didn't give a damn. He wasn't giving up on her until there was nothing left in him to give. He still had a little energy left. He just had to find a way to channel it, to bring Donna back.

"Chance?"

He felt Davis's hand on his shoulder again and pictured the man's gloved hands cutting into Donna's precious body and invading her vital organs.

Chance took a deep breath, tilted back his head, and that's when he saw it—Donna's apparition floating above them, reaching for a pair of glowing hands. "No!"

She flinched and glanced back over her shoulder, her mouth open in a little *o* of surprise, as if she hadn't expected anyone to see her.

"You can't go. Not like this. I won't let you."

"You don't have a choice, Chance. I have to do this."

"Dr. Novak?"

He heard the confusion in the nurse's voice and noticed the furrowed brows of the other residents and nurses as they stood around him waiting.

Chance closed his eyes and stepped out of his body, psychic self detaching from his corporeal self as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. His spirit floated up to where Donna's hovered between him and the shimmering tunnel, then looked down to where he continued to feverishly work on her body.

Donna gasped when he reached out to grasp her hand.

He understood her shock. As gifted as he was, and as accustomed to the strange and unexplainable, he had never experienced this sort of bilocation in his life before, didn't have as much experience with astral projection as some other Wicca practitioners, though he knew this sort of thing was possible.

But since he had met Donna, *all* things seemed possible to him, even redemption.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm either going with you or I'm bringing you back."

Donna shook her head and looked down the tunnel, as if for her cue.

Chance followed her gaze and squinted against the blinding light surrounding the ethereal figure before them. "Please..." His voice broke, and he swallowed hard to gather himself. "Don't take her from me."

"And your brother? What of him?"

Chance didn't have an answer. He loved Russ, and he loved Donna. He didn't want to give up either of them.

"And you will not have to."

The figure waved his hand, and Chance suddenly felt light-headed. He caught a glimpse of himself collapsing to the floor below and closed his eyes against the heaviness. Distantly he heard his staff shouting for help and the sounds of several pairs of feet pounding into the room, more doctors and nurses he suspected, to assist.

He didn't want to leave things like this, but he had no choice.

He had decided long ago wherever Donna went, he would follow. Life was not worth living otherwise.

Chapter 1

Wantagh, LI – One Month Previous

Angela stood before her kitchen window sipping vanilla and hazelnut blend coffee as she watched Russ Merrick, the architectural landscaper, at work in her backyard.

She told herself if she wasn't a happily married woman, she might have been excited by the sight of the man's bulging biceps and his long legs and strong thighs encased in a pair of well-worn blue jeans as he toiled in the early spring sun. Not that she didn't admire the man's athletic build, of course, but Russ belonged to her sister. Or at least he would once Angela got the two of them together.

"Have we figured out a way to introduce your sister and the landscaper yet?" Her husband slid his arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck as he pulled her back against him.

Angela smiled, leaned into him, and placed her free hand atop both of his. He knew her too well, compliments of their more-than-a-quarter-of-a-century marriage. "I haven't decided yet." She took another sip of coffee.

"You could just invite her over for lunch or dinner one Saturday," Freddie suggested.

"An ambush? I like the way you think, but Donna's so suspicious now. I don't know if she'd go for it."

"Wouldn't you be suspicious after four marriages in almost as many years?"

"I suppose." Angela closed her eyes, reaching out to Russ, dipping beneath his aura. He was a strong man—both emotionally and

physically—determined and forceful. Angela thought her thoroughly bossy control-freak sister would have her hands full with hi—

Angela gasped, just avoided spilling her coffee, as she opened her eyes. She put her cup down on the kitchen counter to be on the safe side then slowed her breathing as much as she could before Freddie sensed something wrong.

She'd felt another male, a second spirit that belonged with Donna. This had never happened before! Surely there was some mistake?

Angela closed her eyes again to tune into the new man's life-force. He was younger than Russ by several years, but that wasn't the interesting part. What was interesting was that she sensed a connection between the two men. Each possessed similar, strong auras, though Russ's surrounded him in cascading rings of indigo and purple, and the other man's surrounded him in shimmering waves of turquoise blue.

Brothers?

She was so shocked at the realization since Russ had never mentioned, never even *hinted* at a sibling. This and her own failure in sensing him got her curiosity percolating.

If they weren't brothers, or half brothers, then certainly they were first cousins.

Freddie held her tight. "Something wrong, baby?"

Angela quickly shook her head. She didn't know whether to share her little discovery with Freddie or not. She wasn't used to hiding anything from him and didn't want to start now, but this was so unprecedented.

There was something about the second man's energy that drew her. She sensed a free spirit, someone in tune with his psychic gifts. She couldn't quite put a finger on what those gifts were yet, but she sensed their strength. Was there also Native American ancestry in his blood, or was he a practicing Wiccan? Or, better still, maybe he was both? Each was an interesting and surprising prospect in and of itself, all of which she was looking forward to confirming.

Angela didn't know why the surprising part, not when she had two fey brothers-in-law already and a brother and nephew who shared her psychic abilities. It just never failed to amaze her when she came across kindred, gifted souls.

Unlike her two sisters' husbands, who had come into their gifts late in life, however, this newest man understood the powers he possessed, knew how to use them, and had been using them since he'd been a young child.

Two men were different in so many ways, but alike in the ways that counted most.

Angela was still a little disconcerted about the whole situation. She'd never before been one to make moral judgments. Okay, at least she hadn't made them often. And she wouldn't make any now. She was just a tool, she decided, one bred to do what needed to be done to find her siblings their soul mates and to get each together with said soul mate. That Donna had two just made things a little more interesting than usual for Angela, but nothing insurmountable.

She squeezed her eyes tight at her next vision, one of Donna and the younger stranger together at a hospital.

Angela didn't sense any danger or pain, not to her sister or the man, just professional courtesy and an underlying affection and rapport, one born of constant contact and friendship. At this distance, she couldn't tell how close the relationship or how long it had been in effect, and with Donna so notoriously private since childhood, Angela had little hope of learning anything from her sister about the man unless she pushed the issue.

Angela grinned when she realized how she would get the three together and that Donna, in her inimitable stubborn fashion and refusal to be manipulated, would play right into her hands. "I know what I'm going to do to get Donna together with them." Angela realized her mistake when she heard Freddie's sharp intake of breath behind her, and he caught her by the shoulders to turn her around and face him.

“Did you say together with *them*?”

“Come.” She smiled, gently pulling from his grasp to take his hands in hers and lead him out of the kitchen, towards the living room. “This match is going to be a little different from the rest of my brothers and sisters. We’ve got some things to talk about.”

Chapter 2

“Looking forward to tonight as much as I am?”

Russ smiled and turned to Angela as she sidled behind him near the lighted paving stone fountain. She looked like she had swallowed the canary and his cage.

He loved her like a sister, had to love someone who had so much optimism and enthusiasm for life. Russ had been kicked in the teeth too many times, both literally and figuratively, however, to believe in Angela’s fate or her theories on soul mates.

They’d talked about her faith often during breaks when she’d bring him and his crew sandwiches and iced tea or whatever else the beverage of choice for the day was. He and Angela got into some serious philosophical discussions about spirituality and family that made him think about his brother more often than usual. So much so, Russ wondered if Angela was a conduit of some kind or maybe that she had the power to cast spells the way she had claimed.

Outside of his brother, he had never met a Wiccan before, his closest experience to the religion whatever he came across in the movies or on television. So to say Angela and her beliefs and gifts interested him in a purely intellectual way would be an understatement. He’d always had an open mind and been open to new ideas. Unfortunately, everyone else he came across wasn’t so open. It was the main reason he kept his appetites to himself and had for a long time.

“I don’t think my anticipation could ever match yours, Angela.”

She hooked an arm through his as they walked across the patio, through the garden blooming with vivid splashes of color from

Angela's perennials, toward the terra-cotta driveway. "You need to have more faith, Russ."

He'd lost any faith he did have somewhere between his abusive stepfather running out on them when Chance was barely a toddler and his mother getting mowed down and killed by a hit-and-run driver almost ten years later. "I'm not much for spirituality," he murmured.

"Oh pish-tosh. If you can sit and listen to me prattle about my New Age pagan beliefs, then you're more spiritual than you think."

"I find what you have to say interesting."

"I think you might find some faith tonight."

"Your sister going to give me religion?"

Angela chuckled. "More like *agita*."

"This is how you treat the man whose company constructed your dream backyard?"

She patted his hand. "Blessings often come in disguise."

So this Donna was a blessing in disguise, huh?

Russ wondered if her disguise resembled any of the other blind dates his ex-wife Suzie and her friends had fixed him up on in the past or if there was a family resemblance between Donna and Angela.

Sure Angela was a happily married woman and mother of five, but Russ still admired her fresh and easy beauty. Not to mention she was well preserved for a fifty-year-old. He should be so lucky if her sister had inherited the same excellent genes and looked half as good. He'd almost come right out and asked for a picture, but since Angela had never offered, he hadn't wanted to be uncouth—like Suzie and their daughter sometimes accused him of being—and broach the subject.

Physical attraction was actually the least of his worries. There were other darker elements of his personality that any sane woman might not want to deal with despite any attraction. The questions weren't whether he would find Donna attractive or whether Donna would help him find religion, but whether or not his demanding preferences would send her off to seek refuge in the nearest convent.

“So, I shall see you again in a few hours.” Angela unhooked her arm from his and patted his hand one more time as if to send him on his way.

Oookay. He was being dismissed to go get good and ready for Donna the Man-eater. He could take a hint. He guessed he should count his blessings, except he was on his way home to an interrogation from the kiddies that would put Angela to shame. Talk about precocious.

Russ slid into the driver’s seat of his black Ford Explorer, waving to Angela as he started the engine and pulled out of her driveway.

In no more than ten minutes, he was pulling toward his driveway with a honk of the horn.

Wes and Kim halted their one-on-one, Russ’s thirteen-year-old daughter cradling the ball under one arm as he pulled into the space beside the makeshift basketball court in the driveway.

“Hey, Dad!” they chorused, rushing around to the driver’s side for what felt like some sort of double-team. Uh-huh.

Stand firm. Suzie’s advice echoed through his head as he opened the door and got out of his SUV. Now standing firm in his business—bullying contractors, facing down and finessing miserly bankers and accountants, delegating to and commanding his staff—he handled without blinking an eye. But at home as a part-time dad, he had a particular soft spot for his kids, especially his little girl. He had to be on guard with her at all times because once she batted those baby blues—a skill she had honed to deadly precision in the last two years—he was a goner.

“So can we order pizza for dinner?” His sixteen-year-old son dogged his heels as Russ headed toward the back door and entered the house.

“I’m sick of pizza.” Kim was right behind her brother and Russ.

“What would *you* rather have? Quiche? Tell her, Dad. Real men don’t eat quiche.”

“Well, we have had pizza every day since you’ve been he—”

“You’re starting to look like one big hundred-and-forty-pound pizza. I’m going to start calling you pizza face.” Kim poked out her tongue and Russ had to bite his to keep from laughing out loud. He didn’t want to encourage the girl.

“That’s better than having bedhead.”

“I do *not* have bedhead! Dad!”

Oh, Wes had gone and done it now. You didn’t talk disparagingly about a girl’s hair or weight ever. Hadn’t he taught the boy anything? “Look, guys, let’s compromise.”

“Great,” Wes grumbled as he plopped his lanky frame onto one of the wood-and-leather barstools at the maple island. “Guess that means pizza with”—he paused here and dramatically gagged like a cat with a furball stuck in its throat—“vegetables.”

“Vegetables are good for you,” Kim retorted.

“Not on a pizza.”

“How about I order one meat lovers for us guys and a—”

“Broccoli and mushrooms, please.” Kim daintily handed Russ the menu from Papa Gio’s as she took a seat at the island opposite her brother, and Wes made one of his famous goofy, rubbery faces at her.

“Eww. You are such a dork,” Kim stated.

“Takes one to know one.”

“Kids...”

“So, what’s on the agenda tonight, Dad? Got any new movies from Netflix?”

“You tell me, Mr. Shirker. Did you get the mail? You’ve been home all day,” Russ teased. Wes used to come on jobs with him all the time when he was younger, but since he’d gotten older, not so much. And this current stay, Russ didn’t want to bug the kid too much about coming to work since it was supposed to be a break, as Wes was so fond of reminding him. Besides, Russ half suspected the kid was sweet on one of the neighborhood girls and was playing things close to home to keep tabs on her.

Kim confirmed his suspicions when she smiled sweetly and said, “Not *all* day.”

“I only went over to the Bensons to hang out for a couple of hours, Dad. And I made sure to bring the brat.” Wes glared at his sister, and Kim stuck out her tongue again as Russ chuckled and took the cordless from its base on the wall to call for the pizza.

“So, did we get anything from Netflix?” he asked.

“Yeah, but I didn’t look in the envelope yet.”

Damn, Kelly Benson was pretty enough to get this kid’s mind off of DVD’s? Russ was going to have to keep an eye on him. He didn’t want the boy screwing around, getting some girl pregnant, while he was here and giving Suzie reason not to send him to his dad’s for the summer, not to mention cause her any more gray hairs. She was always saying she was *not* ready to be a grandmother at forty-three. Like Russ wanted to be a grandfather at forty-five?

Russ dialed Papa Gio’s and ordered the two pizzas, some cheese sticks, and a couple of cinnamon rolls. Kim was into her health food, but she wouldn’t say no to Papa Gio’s cinnamon rolls. She had a sweet tooth that wouldn’t quit and hadn’t yet become obsessed with her weight, and he hoped she never did. She was just right to him, except for the little buds he saw sprouting under the front of her turquoise tank top.

Christ, he thought he would have more time before she got breasts!

The idea of horny teen boys sniffing around his little angel gave him a few more gray hairs of his own. Lucky for him he looked distinguished with them—or so he’d been told—streaking his sandy-brown hair at the temples, where Suzie thought she looked plain old. Sure it wasn’t fair, but life was crappy sometimes.

“Oh yeah, Daddy, you got a call while you were out.”

“From who?” Russ turned to his daughter hoping it hadn’t been the office with some last-minute emergency.

He had a competent field manager in Stu Rossman, who had been with him longer than any of his men, practically from the beginning of the business, and could handle most any occupational situation that came up. He had another handful of guys who had been with him several years and had proved reliable. Even Derek Crawford, one of two apprentices he had only recently added to the payroll, had established himself as a quick learner and a hard and trustworthy worker.

Normally, Russ wouldn't have been out in the field and so hands-on. He had moved more towards the management end of his business—*Merrick Outdoor Designs*—in recent years. But every once in a while, a project like the Calminetti's home came along that just begged for his personal attention. And every once in a while an apprentice came along whose potential screamed for honing.

Derek had that potential and his hunger for knowledge made Russ enjoy coming to work every day, made him miss his brother and long for the days he'd dreamed of passing down his knowledge to a close male relative.

He realized then that his newest employees were surrogates for Chance and, perhaps to a lesser degree, Wes.

Kim ripped a page off of the memo pad on the island top and handed it to him. "It was from Uncle Chance."

"Chancellor called?"

Wes and Kim both giggled behind their hands, and Russ realized his slip. Whenever he was upset or excited—or when they were younger and he was trying to be the stern older brother/disciplinarian—he called his brother by the hated name. Using the name in front of anyone, or even when they were alone, was also the surefire way to piss off his brother.

"He said he's sorry he hasn't called in a while. He was busy trying to get settled."

Settled? Where was the kid off to now? Russ wondered as he read the message.

“So when do we get to meet this mysterious uncle of ours?” Kim asked.

“Yeah, Dad.”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t see a number on the message, only a note that Chance would call back. Damn it, what was his brother playing at with the cryptic shit?

“He sounds cool. I think I might join the Peace Corps too,” Wes said, the usual hint of awe in his voice whenever Chance was mentioned.

Russ was just dear old dad who put a roof over their heads, clothes on their backs, paid the bills, and bought the more-than-occasional necessary teenage accessories like cell phones, iPods, and Wiis. Chance was the mysterious daredevil who traveled to exotic locales and came home to become a doctor who probably saw all kinds of exciting and gory things in the ER.

To Russ, Chance was just the runt little brother, the same way Kim was a brat to Wes. There was no mystique or cool factor. Sure his brother had joined the Peace Corps at eighteen, left the country, and hadn’t returned until four years later to go to medical school. Even then he’d been honing his skills halfway across the country on the West Coast up until a couple of years ago. He’d been too busy with his studies and practice to do more than chat with Russ over the phone periodically rather than return to New York for a visit with his then-married brother and young niece and nephew.

He still missed his brother after all these years and wondered if Chance had finally found what he had been looking for. “I thought you wanted to be an architect,” he said to Wes, trying not to sound slighted.

“Can’t I do both?”

“Of course you can.” Okay, to be fair, the kids did think it was pretty cool that their dad had been a marine who’d seen action in Desert Storm. Wes was especially fascinated with his dad’s tribal tattoos and said he couldn’t wait to get his own when he was eighteen.

For the boy's mother's sake, Russ had managed to talk Wes into waiting until then. Who'd known when he'd had his own put on twenty years ago that he would be setting himself up as a role model for his own son?

"So, Dad, you never did say what's up for the night?"

Russ looked at his son and wondered how to tell him and his sister he was going out. He'd been home every night after work since their most recent stay. "I thought we already said. You're going to watch movies and try not to stay up too late just because it's a Saturday."

"Dad." Wes huffed and rolled his eyes. "That's the whole point of spring *break*."

At least they weren't out flashing their breasts at strangers and drinking shots off of oversexed *Girls Gone Wild* wannabes' asses. Staying up late was tame compared to that. And the kids *had* volunteered and gone with their old man and his company to New Orleans and helped with the rebuilding after Katrina two summers in a row rather than take a vacation.

"So, uh, Dad, you're not going to be watching movies with us?"

The girl was as sharp as a tack and prettier than a runway model. He was in some serious shit when it came to laying down ground rules for her dating habits. He didn't want her to wind up with some horny deviant like him. "Not this time."

"You're going out?"

Russ cleared his throat. "To a celebratory barbecue and unveiling at my client's."

Kim clapped her hands, then pumped her fist. "Yes! Dad's got a date."

"A *blind* date."

"Yo, dude. Bummer," Wes said.

Russ laughed and playfully cuffed his son as the doorbell rang. He pulled a couple of twenties out of his wallet and handed them to Wes, who grabbed the bills and ran from the kitchen through the living room to answer the front door.

“Dad.” Kim took him by a hand and patted the barstool beside her. “We need to talk.”

Oh Christ, was he about to get schooled on the pros and cons of dating in the twenty-first century by his thirteen-year-old daughter? He *needed* a seat for this.

“I just want to say I’m glad you’ve decided to go out and have a social life.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Because we all know it’s been, like, forever. And everyone needs a social life to let off some steam and have some—”

Russ put up a hand, palm facing his daughter in a stop sign, or what her generation called a talk-to-the-hand warning. “I get the picture, missy.”

She grabbed his hand and held it. “Oh, Daddy, you’re so funny.”

“Well, I’m glad you find me amusing.”

Kim squeezed his shoulder and leaned in to kiss his cheek. “We worry about you.”

“We?”

“Wes would never say it, but he does too. And he and I and Mom all agree you need to get out more, see someone.”

Russ smiled at the idea of his ex-wife sitting down with their kids, strategizing about his love life. It just went to show how amicable Suzie had been during and since the divorce. In fact, he and Suzie were better friends now than they had been when they were married, definitely better friends than when he’d first dropped his bombshell and explained to her why they couldn’t stay married any longer. He thanked Christ every day that Suzie wasn’t the vindictive type.

“So, you all just sit around and talk about your old man when he’s not around, huh?” Russ asked his daughter now.

“Not like gossip or anything, just out of concern.”

“Uh-huh.”

Kim leaned in to peck his cheek again, then rubbed a palm down his whiskers as she slid off of her seat. “You need a shave, Dad.”

“I thought women liked the Don Johnson look.”

“Who?”

“Sonny Crocket,” he said and got another blank stare, so he tried again. “*Miami Vice?*”

“Oh, you mean Colin Farrell!”

“Uh, yeah.” Might as well quit while he was ahead. There was no way he was competing with Colin, even on a good day. As scruffy as the actor could be, he was still a pretty boy, something Russ definitely was not. Unless he did shave, then he just looked like a boy, period.

“Trust me, Dad. You don’t want to give the ladies whisker burn.”

Christ, this girl was going to send him to an early grave! “Where’s your brother with those pizzas?”

“Somebody rang?” Wes appeared on the threshold of the kitchen, balancing five boxes in varying sizes like a seasoned waiter, and made his way over to place his stack on the island top.

Saved by the pizza man!

Chapter 3

Chance glanced up as he finished suturing a little boy's forehead in one of the exam rooms and spied Donna Vega pacing in the hallway.

He'd bet one of her Safe Haven charges was being treated in one of the other exam rooms, and Donna was waiting for the results like a nervous mother hen.

It seemed like not a week went by when she wasn't here in the ER filling out the required forms, holding a battered woman's hand while she got patched up and reassuring the woman that everything was going to be all right, or just waiting to take an abuse victim and/or her kids to their new home and circumstances.

Chance had first met Donna six months ago when he attended one of her seminars on how to recognize the signs of domestic abuse and violence. He'd been enthusiastic about putting his new knowledge to work in the ER and required all of his staff to take the seminar too.

Chance now patted his six-year-old patient on the leg and gave the boy's mother an encouraging grin. "He's good to go."

"Thanks so much, Doctor. When I saw all the blood, I was worried it was more serious."

"Head lacerations tend to bleed a lot."

"I'd heard that, but still..."

"Emanuel's going to be okay. He's a real trooper, aren't you?" Chance ruffled the little boy's dark curls and was rewarded with a snaggletoothed smile that tugged his heart as Emanuel vigorously nodded his head.

"It didn't hurt at all!"

Chance wondered if Emanuel's mother noticed he hadn't given the boy any anesthetic or that the cut required a lot fewer stitches than might have been necessary had Chance not put his gift to work on the gash before the first suture had been placed. He was pretty careful when he did his thing, and parents were usually so preoccupied with their kids' pain that they rarely noticed anything supernatural about Chance's methods except that he got the job done. He had to be a lot more careful treating adults, though. Even in pain and suffering, they noticed the excessive warmth of his skin when he placed his hand on a wound or the slight glow that emitted from his fingers when he employed his abilities.

Mrs. Vasquez grabbed his hand and gave it a firm shake. "Thanks again, Doctor."

Chance rubbed and squeezed her shoulder with his free hand, radiating comforting thoughts and emotions, glancing over her internal organs with gentle psychic fingers and stabilizing her still-elevated vital signs.

Mrs. Vasquez gradually relaxed beneath his touch.

He was careful not to push too much. He didn't want to draw attention to what he was doing so just exuded enough of his energy to make her feel at peace in the knowledge that her son was going to be all right. She would go home with a sense of mental and physical well-being, as would Emanuel. The little crush Mrs. Vasquez had on her son's doctor, however, wasn't something Chance could do anything about.

He easily released Mrs. Vasquez before she got the wrong idea and turned to help Emanuel down from the exam table, then crouched in front of the boy. "Going to be more careful on the monkey bars, little man? Keep your mother's stress levels down?"

Emanuel nodded. "Okay."

"My man!" Chance put up his palm facing the boy and chuckled when the little boy gave him a solid and resounding high five. He stood and pulled a couple of ubiquitous lollipops from a pocket of his

lab coat—one cherry vanilla swirl, the other grape—and handed both to Emanuel. He had a notorious sweet tooth, but the candy really came in handy when he treated kids. “For being so brave.”

“Thank you, Dr. Novak!”

Chance ruffled the boy’s hair again, accompanying the mother and son out into the hallway where he finally caught Donna’s eye.

His heart instantly flipped over, his cock hardening and swelling as if she’d touched him with more than just a gaze. Her eyes did things to his body that no other woman’s hands had managed to do in his more than three decades of life.

“Ms. Vega.” He grinned.

She returned it and tipped her head. “Dr. Novak.”

“So what brings you here to my fair emergency room this go-round?” The last time, she’d accompanied a woman who’d needed five stitches to close a gash above her right eye, an injury the woman insisted she had been clumsy enough to get when she *slipped* in the bathroom.

A likely story, Chance had thought.

Don’t bet on it, Donna’s look had echoed.

Chance grinned now at the memory of his previous meetings with Donna. He’d seen her in action often enough to be impressed with her zeal and dedication. In fact, he saw a bit of himself in her, especially the unfortunate dark half-circles beneath her doe eyes. The half-circles did nothing to detract from her peaches-and-cream beauty, however, only enhanced it, made her seem more human instead of the superwoman she tried to project to the world.

She needed a hug and a cuddle in the worst way, and he wanted to be the man to give these and more to her. Problem was, he couldn’t see an in past her woman-on-a-mission, no-time-for-a-social-life shields. They were always up, almost impenetrable, and one of the first things he had noticed about her for the simple fact that he couldn’t read her like he read the average person when he tried. Of course he rarely tried. His own personal ethics and the Wiccan Rede

by which he lived and breathed forbade him from going but so far with his gift of telepathy. Now the empathy and healing he used as often as he could without completely depleting himself. Reading or influencing someone's mind was an unforgivable invasion of privacy, but there was nothing in the Rede against giving the healing process a little push.

Chance regulated his empathy now to tune into Donna and sensed her weariness before she even opened her mouth to sigh and respond.

"You want the long version or the short?"

"I want whatever version you feel like giving me." Chance closed the couple of feet between them and rubbed her back, letting his hand linger just long enough to warm her skin through the thin silk blouse she was wearing. She just barely leaned into his touch, zinging heat and electricity straight to his rock-hard dick with her instant reaction before she pulled away slightly. It was enough for him to get the message, though—stay away!

She was only going to let him in so far.

"He could have killed her, Chance."

His heart stuttered at the despair and pain in her whispered words, his arms aching to go around her and just hold tight. Instead, he turned to follow her gaze and saw the woman in the exam room behind him having her ribs wrapped while a police officer stood watch and questioned her.

"If I was a man..."

Chance turned back to Donna, unsurprised to see anger and determination replace her earlier hopelessness and knew she would have killed the man responsible for hurting her ward, or at least she would have tried to.

"Is she going to press charges?"

"I finally convinced her it was the best course of action at this point. We're going to relocate her and her kids to Safe Haven while the bastard's cooling his heels in jail. By the time he posts bail, *if* he

does, we'll be well on our way to getting her and the kids new identities."

"Damn, that's drastic. No other option?"

Donna shook her head. "Wish there was, but this guy's an animal. It's a wonder he hasn't killed her already. And the kids, of course, would be next."

"Where are they now?"

Donna turned to nod at the two small figures huddled together on the orange plastic chairs in the waiting area. They couldn't have been more than four and five. "They're emotionally drained and all cried out. I told them I'd check on their mommy before I came back and took them to get something to eat."

Chance checked his watch. He had some time to kill, maybe twenty minutes before the next emergency came in. "Tell you what. Why don't I take you all across the street to Charlie's Grill for a couple of burgers and some fries?"

Donna grinned, and his heart pounded blood to his cock so hard and fast he thought it would burst out of his pants.

This woman did wicked things to his body without ever touching him, and he had to recite the periodic table in his head to get himself under some control.

"I thought you didn't eat meat," she said, and for some reason her knowledge gave him hope that she didn't just see him as a colleague, that somewhere along the line she had either listened to news about him through the hospital grapevine or had purposely solicited information about him. The latter thought especially made his dick twitch.

"They serve soups and salads too. Maybe they aren't as healthy as stuff at a health food store or the hospital cafeteria. But I figure you and the kids would appreciate getting out and away from the hospital for a while, and Charlie's features some pretty cool video games."

Donna gave him a genuine smile that lit up her mink eyes.

Damn, he was a goner.

“Sounds like a plan then,” she said.

Now Chance grinned. Normally, she’d have said no, and he saw the sudden realization of her slipup when her eyes widened right before she sighed again.

“It’s been a long day.”

“You don’t have to explain. Obviously, you need a break. Come on.” He turned to make a beeline for the kids, but she stopped him in his tracks when she grabbed his arm.

“It’s not just that I need a break.”

He turned to stare at her. “No?”

“I need to talk to you about something...personal.”

Now this was interesting. Not just the hesitation in her voice, which he hadn’t witnessed since meeting her, but the *personal* part. Personal how, and what had he done to deserve such an unexpected surprise and treat? At least he hoped it was a treat. “Sure you want to do that in front of the kids?”

She frowned, then burst out laughing, consequently bursting his bubble. “It’s not that personal. I just have a little favor to ask.”

Chance squinted at her with mock menace, determined not to let her know she had so thoroughly sunk his hopes. “You want a favor from the Godfather?” he rasped in his best Don Corleone imitation.

It had the desired effect, Donna’s girlish musical giggles heating him from the inside out.

Damn, he had just gotten his boner under control too. What was he thinking to make her laugh and get his juices flowing again?

She grabbed his hand. “Come on, nut. We’ll talk over burgers.”

* * * *

Donna needed a man. Not just any man, but someone bright, articulate, and relatively attractive if she was going to be looking at him across a table half the evening. She needed someone convincing

enough as her date to get Angela-the-matchmaker off her ass with all the hook-up schemes.

She didn't have a soul mate, didn't believe in them, end of story.

But a half an hour later, with a cheeseburger and French fries platter half eaten—she was going to have to double up on her aerobics and weight training to work it off for sure—Donna was tongue-tied and at a loss how to open.

Fortified with pockets full of quarters for the greasy spoon's video games compliments of Chance, Naomi's two kids were occupied and certainly giving Donna the privacy she needed to say what she wanted. Sitting across from Chance, however, gazing into his familiar, intense brandy eyes, she couldn't think of a coherent thing to say. That she had blurted her need of a favor was bad enough. That she wanted him to say yes once she broached the subject again was even worse.

Never mind. He was definitely a man, and he fit all of her aforementioned prerequisites to serve as an escort to Angela's backyard-completion celebration, especially the attractive part. And maybe that was the problem in a nutshell.

Donna was attracted to him, too attracted. She didn't like being attracted to Chance, to any man. Attraction led to desire, which led to lust, which eventually led to loss of control and hot, sweaty sex on any available surface. That was something Donna could not allow—loss of self-control. The sweaty sex on any available surface wasn't something she'd totally discount, of course. She just couldn't lose control, couldn't lose sight of what was important to her, couldn't let desire and sex take her focus off of her calling to help women less fortunate than her.

But damn, if she was going to fall down on the job and into bed with anyone, Chance was the perfect candidate for the position—any position, all positions.

Stop it! That's not why you're here. Keep it clean and all business. That's it. Present your case in a cool, calm, and logical

manner. No need to get intimate and personal. It's just a favor. He'll either go for it or he won't.

"So, about this favor?"

Her gaze shot from a pair of the most sumptuous lips on a man she had ever seen to Chance's eyes before instantly sliding down to his mouth again. She licked her own lips, wondering what it would feel like to sink her teeth into his slightly fuller bottom one.

"Earth to Donna." Chance waved a hand in her face.

Donna swallowed to keep from drooling. She had never been so turned on and nervous around a man before. Not that she thought Chance noticed. She was good at covering her discomfort around him, had a lot of practice hiding her emotions. She didn't like giving men the upper hand, and like nothing else, showing her emotions gave them this and more.

When she gave a man the upper hand, he invariably took advantage and hurt her. Her ex-husband Peter had. Her ex-boyfriend Bo had. And then there were the countless other men she'd given the time of day to who thought that women had been put on this earth strictly for their amusement, someone on whom they could take out their frustrations on the world.

If men didn't hurt women physically, then they screwed with their minds and emotions, neither option acceptable to her.

Donna was not going to let herself become a basket case wondering what *she* had done wrong. She would not be the fall girl again.

She cleared her throat. "I think I might have spoken too soon before. Please forget I mentioned anything."

"Like that's going to happen." He peered at her, pushed her platter to the side, then leaned his elbows on the table. "Spill it. What's the favor?"

Donna homed in on the crystal pendant dangling from a thin black leather strap around Chance's neck. She recognized it as something Angela might wear. That woman wore all kinds of mystical-looking

jewelry, and every piece meant or did something for her—aided healing, aided lucid and prophetic dreaming, aided clairvoyance.

Tempting fate, Donna impulsively reached out to touch Chance's pendant and wondered what sort of aid it provided for him. His Adam's apple bobbed an inch above her fingers as she brushed his skin, and she instantly became wet from the contact.

God, how could she be so turned on from a mere touch and with her clothes still on?

She should have jerked back her hand, but she didn't, too attracted to Chance's body heat and the heat from his crystal, each holding its own distinctive energy. She didn't know how she knew this, but she did.

Damn it, Angela, the interfering busybody, was rubbing off on her. .

She glanced up into Chance's eyes, fingering the pendant as he silently waited. "The favor I need..."

He arched a brow, just looked at her.

"My sister's having a barbecue to celebrate and unveil the work she just had done on her backyard, and I need a date to go with me to the party, but it's okay if you say no. I'll perfectly understand. I mean, we barely know each other, and it's kind of last minute and—" Donna cut herself off, her jaw unhinged. God, she was babbling! She never babbled. She was a forty-eight-year-old workaholic, not an oversexed teen with a crush. Babbling was a sign of an immature, unfocused mind, and Donna's mind was always focused. Her job seeing to the needs of abused women and sometimes their children demanded nothing less of her.

Chance reached for the fingers that were busy fondling his crystal, took her hand in his, and gently squeezed. "It's a good thing I'm a doctor and the hospital is nearby. You might need a hit of oxygen after expelling that mouthful."

She slid her hand from his. "I knew this was a mistake." *It was a mistake in more ways than one.*

“Who says?”

“Look, like I said. Forget I asked.”

“Not likely. Cat’s out of the bag now.”

“Chance...” Her eyes dropped to his lips again, then down to the pendant. In that instant, she realized she really didn’t know all that much about Chance Novak other than he was a colleague, one she saw far too often in the line of duty.

To throw a *date* into the mix of their professional relationship would just make things too complicated, even if it was understood he was just doing her a favor, a favor she still wasn’t sure she wanted him to agree to. If he said yes, well, that presented more problems than it solved.

“When’s this party?”

“You really don’t need to do this.”

“I want to.”

“Why?” She gave him her steely man-eater glare and expected him to gasp and back off like most men with good sense would have. But Chance didn’t back off. He met her stare head-on with one of his own, engaging her in an impromptu match of stare-down, which she lost after several long, breathless moments.

This sort of defeat was unheard of!

“I know you may find this hard to believe, as grumpy and mean as you can be, Donna Vega, but I like you.”

“I’m not mean.”

He chuckled, reached for her hands again, and held tight enough that she would make a scene if she tried to pull away, but not tight enough to hurt her. It was the perfect combination of tenderness and strength and made her nipples pebble.

How does he know?

“I noticed you didn’t dispute the grumpy part.”

“I can be a real bear when I haven’t had my daily quota of caffeine.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“And have you noticed I have a ferocious sweet too—”

He released one of her hands to pull a cherry and vanilla swirl lollipop out of his lab coat pocket and handed it to her. “I’ve got one too.”

“I know. I’ve seen you doling out an endless supply of treats to your younger patients.”

He shrugged. “I’m a regular candy man.”

And she bet he could make it all taste good too. She was sure *he* also tasted good.

Stop it! It’s just a date.

“It’s tonight.” It was way too short notice. Yeah, that was it. He wouldn’t be able to go. It conflicted with his schedule. He was an ER doctor after all and—

“Works for me.”

Donna had to stop herself from gulping. “Don’t you have to consult your BlackBerry or something?”

“This must be your lucky day. I get one weekend off a month. It’s one of the few perks of an administrative position. This is my weekend.”

“How old are you?” she blurted. He didn’t look old enough to be a doctor, much less one in an administrative position.

“What age would make me an acceptable candidate as your escort?”

Damn, he saw right through her. She hated that. “How old, Chance?”

“How insulted would you be if I ask you the same question?”

Pretty damn insulted, but this didn’t stop her from planting a fist on her hip and glowering at him while she waited for his answer.

He plowed a hand through his shoulder-length chocolate-brown hair and finally grumbled, “Thirty-seven.”

So she hadn’t lost her touch, and he wasn’t totally immune to what Angela called her L&D—Lethal and Deadly—look. And

evidently, he was some sort of prodigy to be a chief resident at so young an age.

“So what? Am I too young? Too old?”

He was too everything! Not only was he drop-dead gorgeous and sexy, he was drop-dead gorgeous, sexy, and eleven years younger than her. Not to mention he was some sort of vegetarian, and she loved meat. He was just wrong for her on *so* many levels.

But now that she had started with the interrogation, there were so many other questions she wanted to ask him, so much she wanted to know, not the least of which was whether he had Native American blood in his family. Not that it mattered. She was just curious. His eyes had an exotic slant, and along with his perpetual bronze complexion and high, pronounced cheekbones, they denoted more than just Caucasian ancestry to her.

Wouldn't Angela just have a field day with him?

She should have stuck to her original plan and gone stag, just suffer whomever Angela had fixed her up with for the evening—because she knew that's what the *celebration* was all about—and be done with it until the next time. Going out with Chance, however, someone she actually liked, was not a good idea. Going out with him would start something that she wasn't sure she could easily stop.

“So, Donna, are we on for tonight?”

She raised her eyes to his. “If you still want to go.”

“I'd be honored.”

She pasted a grin on her face that didn't quite reach her heart. She felt too doomed, but still managed to croak, “Me too.”

Chapter 4

His hands wrapped around her throat and squeezed—tight, tighter, tightest—until her eyes started to tear. He was no longer in control of his actions, had lost it somewhere around the middle of her endless harangue, one he had heard a million times—a million times too many.

The red veil of anger that had settled over his vision wavered and intensified, changing shades from crimson to the palest rose and back again until he couldn't see or hear anything except the voice in his head that wanted all his attention and her complete silence. She needed to be quiet, just this once in his life, and he promised he would be a good son, the best son she could ever have and not the no-good bastard like the man who was his daddy.

Her gurgling pleas dragged him from the deep vortex of fury to where he had descended minutes before. He had tried to fight off the urge, had been successful so many times before, but not this time. She had gone too far, driven him over the edge. It wasn't his fault. It was hers.

No wonder his daddy left her. What man could take all that yacking and yammering? What man wanted to have his faults pointed out to him every minute of every day? What man could take it without finally breaking? Not him, that was for damn sure.

He was doing the world a service. No one would miss her. She was a bitter fishwife who didn't have any friends, and was it any wonder?

Couldn't she see what she was doing to him, that she had caused this, brought this on herself? It wasn't his fault. It was hers, her fault.

“That’s right, bitch. Die. Shut up and die!” Her eyes bulged now as he pressed his thumbs against her hyoid bone and shook her. He felt the bone give way beneath his fingers, and she finally went limp. He, however, remained as rock-hard as when the thought of choking her first entered his mind. Maybe he was as perverted and dirty as she accused him of being.

Wow, killing her had been so easy, the transition from a cloying torture of his brain to a clear head such a welcome relief he wanted to cry. He should have done it a long time ago. But he’d tried so hard to be a good son, the son she’d always wanted.

He released her and let her slide down to the dingy burgundy living room carpet. He then stepped over her unmoving body and walked to the back of their trailer home to go to the bathroom.

When he switched on the light and glanced at himself in the mirror, he froze, examining the flat eyes staring back at him.

Were those his daddy’s eyes? He often wondered since his mama always said he looked just like the no-good whoremonger, right before she either slapped or punched him in the face as if to exorcise the man from her memory through punishing him. He wasn’t sure if he looked like his daddy or the man was a whoremonger. He’d barely been walking when his daddy left, so long ago he didn’t remember the man except for what she told him.

Maybe he wasn’t the bastard she had always made him out to be. There were two sides to every story, and he had only heard hers. Now there wasn’t even that side anymore.

Good riddance.

He glanced down at his arms where a trail of blood trickled down them. She’d dug her nails into him trying to get him off of her.

He shook his head and pulled off his white T-shirt. Before dropping the shirt onto the tile floor, he wiped the blood from his arms.. He’d have to burn it, along with everything else, before he left.

“No one will miss her.”

He listened to the voice as he went out back to retrieve the container of lighter fluid his mama kept around for barbecues and grilling. Those occasions were few and far between, reasons to celebrate with her son dwindling as she aged.

He came back into the house with the container and left it on the kitchen counter before going to the bedroom to pack one duffle bag. It was about all he needed to hold all his stuff.

He stripped out of what he was wearing, left the puddle of clothes on the floor, and took a quick shower before throwing on a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

He crouched beside his mama's dead body now and wondered what his daddy had seen in her. Had she ever been a happy woman, one who smiled and laughed at dirty jokes rather than frowning and branding the teller a perverted heathen? Had she ever been someone who would be missed by anyone except the son she bore?

Would he miss her?

He couldn't honestly say one way or the other. She was all he knew, had always been a part of his life—one he could do fine without, he was sure.

He knew what had to be done now, that his life had changed forever, and he would have to leave. Go far away.

* * * *

He woke with a start, trying to shake off the nightmare.

No. It wasn't a nightmare, more like fond memories of how he had won his freedom.

He had these memories a lot when he first left home, but their frequency dwindled over the last eighteen years until the incident was something he only thought about once in a while.

He felt no guilt about what he'd done. He had better things to do and occupy his time and mind during the ensuing years. He had gotten married—twice. He had killed twice when the women hadn't lived up

to his expectations, each somehow reminding him of his mama in one way or another—mouthy, overbearing shrews who needed to be taught a lesson. They were women who needed to keep their mouths *shut*.

They couldn't accommodate his hunger, couldn't do to him what needed doing. What use were they? He considered it his duty to rid the world, once again, of so much useless trash.

There had been women in between too, some pretty, some plain, some shy, some boisterous. Some women he had spared from his complete wrath and left alive, just a little the worse for wear. None of them were what he wanted or needed. Only in the last few years had he come to understand what this was.

He'd denied the realization when it initially dawned on him, fought it fiercely with every blow he rained upon a hapless woman who had the misfortune of thinking he was sexy and wanting to share his bed. But now he was coming to accept his sexuality, his needs, especially after he'd met and been with a man strong enough and willing enough to properly discipline him.

He hated that he'd kept his distance with John. As much as he'd loved John, as much as he'd wanted to submit and give himself fully to the older man, he'd been too afraid to step over that final line beyond sex, physical gratification, and give John emotional power over him—the ultimate power.

He'd been on his own too long, too used to fending for himself and being the one in control, calling the shots. By the time John came on the scene he had been so entrenched in the power he held over women that he barely recognized his desire and excitement when John exerted that same kind of power over *him*.

Now John was gone and he regretted every day that he had not taken the last step into a new reality and given his only real lover power over his psyche as well as his body.

John's death was on his head. Had John not been frustrated with his stubbornness and stormed off promising not to return until *he*

came around to John's way of thinking, John would be alive today instead of a vehicular death statistic.

His several months with John had not been nearly enough time to quench his thirst. The months had only intensified his hunger, so much so that he had not been with a woman since, not for sex. He wanted the dominance and punishment that a woman could not give him. Women were only good for one thing, and that was to be dominated, punished. But who did he go to when he wanted to be dominated and punished?

He used to go to John but this wasn't a possibility anymore.

But there was Russ Merrick.

He'd realized almost from their first introduction, their first handshake, that he wanted Russ. Russ was his missing link, inhabited John's strength and poise without looking a thing like him. But the physical dissimilarities didn't matter because it was Russ's spirit that he recognized, Russ's spirit that he connected with.

However, recognizing his desire, this mystical connection, was only half the problem. Russ didn't want him, at least not yet. Russ was undeniably straight.

But he had been too once, before John. Who was to say Russ's mind couldn't be changed, especially if his body was engaged? And if there was anyone who could engage Russ's body, change his mind, it was him. He knew he had something to work with already. There was something there in the way Russ looked at him, something there in how patiently Russ took the time to explain a project or teach him all the tricks of his trade.

He had never had a strong knowledgeable male, other than John, take a sincere interest in him. He had never had a man like Russ treat him like he was worth something other than scorn.

Russ treated him with kindness and respect. And even though he knew Russ was his boss and only being professional, he felt that there could much more than the professional between them. There was something beneath the surface, something dark and gritty about Russ

that pulled at him, something that he knew he could draw out if given the chance, something that was meant for *him*.

He was persuasive and persistent, but more, he too was patient. He had put up with the physical and emotional abuse from his mama for seventeen long years before making a move. He could wait for his intended to come around. He was good at waiting. He knew that good things came to those who waited. And if waiting didn't work, then he would resort to persuasion.

He vowed he would not make the same mistake with Russ that he had made with John.

He would give himself to Russ completely.

He would not let Russ get away.

* * * *

Chance pulled up to the front of Donna's brownstone in the Village, surprised that she lived in such a quaint side street with stunning rows of attractive houses from, at the latest, the nineteenth century. "Charming" and "romantic" immediately came to mind, two words Chance would never have used to describe Donna. "Determined," "driven," and "passionate" were more her speed.

His heartbeat kicked up a notch as he turned off the engine and watched her descend the stone steps outside, a vision of sexy tomboy in snug jeans and a blue-and-white jersey worn beneath a black leather jacket, not just any jacket, but proper safety gear—exceptionally lightweight, but definitely padded and solidly stitched.

How could she have known?

Admittedly, he should have warned her, but he figured he could coax her to the wild side, and he always carried extra gear, just in case.

Chance pulled off his full-face helmet to get a better look, and seeing her so dressed-down was worth all the trouble he had gone through tonight before finally settling on his own outfit of jeans and

T-shirt. Watching the look on her face as she took in his bike, however, was worth everything he had ever sunk into the machine customizing the machine.

“You look shocked,” he said.

“No more than you.”

“I guess I’m not used to seeing you outside of your corporate gear.” Not that the jeans and motorcycle boots didn’t do her justice. Damn, did they, in a big way, the snug denim accentuating her lush female curves in a way that made his own jeans just a little snugger around his crotch, the scuffed black boots making her look just this side of untamed.

“And who knew there was the heart of a bad boy beating beneath the lab coat?”

“You expected me to pull up in a sedate sedan or something?”

“I’m not sure what I expected. I’m sure I didn’t expect an ER doctor to indulge in...”

“A donor cycle?”

Donna chuckled, closing the distance between them and running her fingers along the shiny red body of the motorcycle. “I like the skin,” she said, using motorcycle slang to refer to his vehicle’s paint job.

Her look of awe wasn’t that of an uninitiated novice either, but that of someone who knew exactly what was poised between Chance’s legs and envied his good taste.

From her jacket, boots, and language, Chance already suspected he wasn’t dealing with a neophyte, but decided to test her anyway. “Know a little something about bikes, do you?”

“Hmm, enough.”

“Is that right?”

She nodded. “For instance, you’re sitting on the new Kawasaki Versys.” She glanced at him before ogling the bike again. “649cc parallel twin, neutral handling, and light steering chassis of the Ninja

650R sportbike. I considered this one before I finally settled on the KLR 650.”

Chance’s eyebrows shot up. “So the jacket and boots aren’t just a fashion statement. You really are a biker chick.”

“Oh yeah.” Donna licked her lips and smiled. “But I do love my leather too. And the boots I collect. Kind of a hobby, or an obsession depending on your point of view.”

He really was infatuated with Superwoman! Or make that Catwoman, he corrected, picturing Donna in the requisite skintight leather jumpsuit.

Chance’s cock twitched as she circled the bike, fondling the seat first, then a sleeve of his padded leather jacket before she settled a hand on his shoulder.

Was it the bike and leather that made her flirtatious, or was she just showing him another side of the chameleon he knew lived within her, beneath all that armor and pain? Whatever the answer, he didn’t care, was only glad that she had come out to play.

“So, you’re not going to have any problems riding with me then?”
Can you give up control for one night, baby?

Donna frowned, and for a moment he wondered if he had slipped and said the last out loud until she grinned and murmured, “I think I can handle it, if you’ve got an extra skid lid.”

“Never let it be said I come unprepared.” He slipped off his backpack, unzipped it, removed an extra helmet, and handed it to her. “I can’t have a *squid* riding with me,” he teased, using the biker’s term for someone inexperienced, reckless, and who didn’t wear the proper gear.

Donna took the helmet and slid it on, strapping it under her chin. She zipped up her jacket, shrugged on the backpack he handed her as she moved behind him, and threw her leg over to straddle the bike.

“I can tell you’re not used to the bitch seat. Move closer, and hold tight.”

She laughed and playfully punched his shoulder before leaning close and sliding her arms around his waist to comply.

He gasped at the contact, the gentle press of her breasts against his back sending his dick throbbing hard inside his jeans. He almost wished she hadn't complied so readily and wondered how he was going to survive her proximity without losing control of himself or his vehicle.

"I can feel your heart pounding," she whispered.

He could feel hers too, even through all their leather, which let him know he wasn't alone in his excitement. Now whether hers was centered on the machine or the man nestled between her legs was the question.

As if in answer, Donna adjusted her weight and squeezed her thighs around his as Chance put on his helmet and keyed the bike's ignition. He felt more than heard Donna's purr against his neck as the engine roared to life beneath them.

"God, I love this power!" She tightened her arms around his waist.

And Christ did she own it, him and the bike at her mercy for the next hour and a half on their way to Long Island.

* * * *

Donna didn't know what came over her, why she had been so touchy-feely with Chance *before* she even got on the bike behind him. She made it a point to keep her distance with colleagues. It was bad enough she crossed the line with her clients, getting all touchy-feely, especially with the kids, becoming emotionally involved when she needed to be professional and coolly detached. Dedication and passion were essential in her position, but crossing the boundary and letting her clients' problems consume her and become her problems was *not* how to handle business. She knew better.

But she guessed that was what happened when she had no other outlet in which to pour her pent-up energy. Sex would have been a

nice release, but she had been on a pretty lengthy and unintentional sabbatical, not counting B-O-B of course. Without him, she'd be a raving lunatic.

Riding behind Chance on his bike now brought this fact to her in glaring clarity, making her wonder which was better to have between her legs—the power of a real, live, lustful man or that of a revved-up machine that went from zero to seventy in no time flat.

Really there was no contest. Donna decided, given the choice, she would take the man every time. As much as she loved the freedom and pleasure riding her bike afforded, the experience didn't come near riding the heated, hard flesh of a man. She realized she sublimated every time she flung one leg over the seat to straddle her bike and brought the engine to life. And B-O-B was the *ultimate* form of sublimation—quick, heated orgasms with no attachments, no commitments, no promises to make or break.

Was that what she really wanted? Was it enough? Angela would have given her a resounding *no* to both questions. And if the mere ride on the back of a motorcycle with a hot, sexy man got her juices to overflowing, then evidently B-O-B and her five fingers of pleasure weren't enough or what she really wanted.

Donna tried to distance herself from the situation, kept telling herself this was just a date and it didn't matter that Chance felt so good pressed against her, the firm muscles of his back apparent even beneath the jacket and turning her on with the thought of them uncovered and beneath her fingers.

Donna subtly squeezed her thighs against the wetness seeping from her pussy, but was sure Chance felt the maneuver, especially when his thigh muscles flexed against hers—such a delicate erotic dance they performed. She bit her bottom lip and stopped just short of moaning as she leaned into his body when he headed toward the turnoff to Wantagh.

Had they been on the road that long? She'd barely had time to entertain the idea of him and her naked and rolling around together

between the sheets. And she supposed this was a good thing, that she hadn't gotten down-and-dirty-deep into her Chance fantasy. In her position at Safe Haven, she'd eventually have to come into contact with this man at Belfiore again, and it was already difficult enough seeing him face-to-face without picturing him naked. After this little joyride to Angela's, it would be near impossible.

But oh, she couldn't help dreaming. Chance's body was a veritable wonderland of unrealized hopes and promises, hard and lean muscles in all the right places, each of which she wanted to explore in all the wrong ways.

Chance downshifted, slowed to a stop, and idled the engine when they reached a fork in the road. "Which way from here to your sister's?"

"Make the left turn, and it's several houses down on your left. You won't be able to miss it. Look for the house with the stone lions out front."

"Like the New York Library?"

"That's my sister, Patience and Fortitude." She tried to say it with as little sarcasm as she could but wasn't sure she had succeeded, especially when Chance laughed before revving the engine and shooting forward. Instead of focusing on Angela's bossy but lovable personality and matchmaking, Donna concentrated on how good Chance felt against her, how good the engine felt vibrating beneath her ass.

Too soon, the moment was over, and Chance pulled up in front of Angela and Freddie's house, parked, and cut the engine.

He took off his helmet and let Donna climb off the bike before doing the same. He stood on the sidewalk, fists on hips, and gazed at his surroundings.

"Nice house."

"This is just the outside. It's even better inside." She couldn't help boasting. As much as she and Angela butted heads, she admired her

older sister, especially the way she made her house a home, warm and welcoming to everyone, even her sourpuss sister.

Donna chuckled at the thought and wondered when her sister would give up on her and just call it a day. But that wasn't going to happen any time soon. As committed and stubborn as Donna was, Angela was ten times more so, especially when it came to hooking up her siblings.

Hell, the woman was battling a thousand with their other brothers and sisters. She probably figured she was on a roll and no way could she give up on Donna, no matter that she was a hard-boiled man-eater and protested too much.

She took a deep breath, sidled behind Chance, and grasped his hand. She knew it was a bad habit, but she liked touching him. She twined her fingers through his, drawn by the warmth of his skin like a pyromaniac to her own arson job.

Chance turned to her and smiled. "Are you nervous?"

"Why would you ask that?"

He shrugged and chucked her under the chin. "I *am* a bad boy, after all. Never know what kind of impression I'll make on the family."

For some reason she couldn't put her finger on, Donna had a feeling that Angela would approve of Chance Novak, that the two of them would connect. Maybe it was his profession and gentle nature. Maybe it was the crystal pendant he wore, a small piece of jewelry that bespoke a spirituality and faith in common with Angela that Donna could never begin to appreciate.

As for the rest of her family? Where Angela went, the others usually followed, especially in this cause, and that was to see their last sibling happily married.

Dream on, gang.

She tugged Chance's hand and led him up the walkway toward the front door. "Time to face the firing squad."

"I'm sure they're not that bad."

Donna turned to him, saw the longing in his brandy eyes, and again was struck with the feeling that she didn't know nearly enough about him.

Did he have brothers and sisters? Or did he long for siblings when others longed to be only children? What about his parents?

Whoa, slow down girl. That's personal stuff, second, maybe even third date conversation territory. We're not going there—not tonight, not ever.

But the curiosity was there. She couldn't deny it. And it instantly grew the moment a black Ford Explorer screeched to a stop behind Chance's bike and the driver shouted, "Chancellor!" through the open window before jumping out of the SUV, slamming the door, and purposely making his way toward a scowling Chance.

* * * *

What the hell was Russ doing *here*?

Shit. Chance wasn't ready for this, not in the least.

It had taken him months to build up the nerve to call his brother's house earlier as a preface to a visit. He'd planned to drop by after the barbecue, had even contemplated dragging Donna with him depending on how things went, kind of a trial by fire for both of them.

"Hey, Ru—*oomph*." Air escaped his lungs as his brother wrapped Chance in a bear hug, Russ's familiar, musky-clean scent wafting to Chance's nostrils and immediately transporting him back to their childhood.

So many times he'd been enfolded in his brother's embrace after some bigger boys had jumped Chance at school or in the neighborhood. And more times than not, Russ went after them, putting them in their place and making sure those bullies knew the score—mess with Chance Novak, and you mess with Russ Merrick.

Next came the self-defense lessons, something Chance remembered to this day with a mixture of distaste and fondness.

He didn't believe in fighting to solve an issue, except maybe as a last resort, and even then he tried to avoid it. Russ never really had to use his fists because he'd just always looked and handled himself like someone no one wanted to mess with. But this didn't stop Russ from teaching Chance what he needed to know to keep bullies off of him when Russ wasn't around, which was rare.

Russ pulled away slightly to grasp Chance's shoulders as he peered at him. "Damn, I missed you."

"I've missed you too, Russ."

"So, where have you been? What have you been up to? And what the hell are you doing back in New York without telling me you were here?"

"I called—"

"I mean before then. Where were you?"

"I was...busy." He realized how lame the excuse was before he finished the statement, but couldn't think of anything else to say. The truth—that he'd stayed away until he felt worthy of Russ's aspirations for him, until he felt worthy period—wouldn't do. Russ would say he was being an asshole, that he had nothing to live up to, but Chance knew better.

All his life he had lived in the shadow of an abusive, rolling-stone father. All his life he had come up wanting against the hopes and dreams of an overprotective older brother who wanted more for Chance than Chance had ever wanted for himself. All his life he had been running away from a gift he had never asked for. He hadn't begun to accept what he could do and actually put it to use until the last couple of years, when he realized there was no more running away from what he was and that Goddess had given him his abilities for a reason.

Chance still wasn't completely sure what those reasons were, but when he helped someone like Emanuel or one of Donna's many wounded clients, his way and purpose seemed crystal clear.

Donna! He put his arm around her and drew her close. “Russ, I want you to meet—”

Someone opened the front door at that moment, a wide grin lighting her olive-toned features as she took in the three of them standing on the sidewalk.

“Chance, Donna, Russ! You made it!”

“How do you know...?” Donna started and stopped herself, looking and sounding as dazed as Chance felt when the pretty brunette made her way down the few stone steps to saunter over to them. He had never seen the woman before in his life, but no one would ever know this from the familiar, friendly tone of her greeting.

“I thought you might find a way to chicken out.” She leaned in to hug and kiss Donna on the cheek, and Chance realized this must be the infamous Angela.

She didn’t seem too threatening, but Chance, more than anyone, knew that looks could be deceiving, and as soon as Angela laid her perceptive brown gaze on him, he knew he had a formidable ally in his corner.

She reached out her hand for a shake, and Chance immediately felt the warmth of her spirit engulf him when he put his hand in hers. She was kith, her spirit open and accessible, so totally different from her sister, her energy crackling around him loudly, whereas Donna’s was subtle and understated. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Chance. I’ve heard so much about you.”

“How could you?” Donna blurted.

“Oh, a little birdie told me.” Angela grinned. “I’m Angela Calminetti, your hostess for the evening and Donna’s oldest sister, by the way.” Angela turned her beatific expression on Russ and took his hand with her free one, effectively sandwiching herself between him and Chance. “So, you didn’t let my description of Donna scare you off. I knew you were made of tough stuff.”

“I’m not so sure,” Russ mumbled. “So, you seem to already know my brother.”

“Brother?” Donna asked.

Chance heard the surprise in her tone and said, “Technically, Russ is my half brother, but emotionally...” He shrugged and left it at that. He felt like he’d been explaining his relationship to Russ all his life. Truth was he had six older brothers and six uncles he had never met, compliments of his father, but Russ was the only brother he knew, the only brother and family that mattered to him. Except for the oft-heard legend about the untold magical powers wielded by the seventh son of a seventh son, Chance rarely acknowledged his father’s side of the family.

“Brothers,” Donna repeated, still sounding doubtful, and Chance understood her confusion. He and Russ looked nothing alike. And since their mother’s death, they hadn’t been on the same coast, much less in the same city, for more than two decades.

They weren’t like Donna and her sister who seemed close despite their differences and whose resemblance was immediately identifiable—from each woman’s coloring to her mannerisms.

Chance stared at the older sister now and, for the first time in his life, felt like someone was looking inside his soul and reading him the way he could read others. Still, he knew he was missing something.

He’d already figured out that Angela and Russ knew each other and she had fixed Donna up with Russ on some sort of blind date. But then why was she acting so thrilled to see *him*?

“Come in, and meet the rest of the family.” Angela tugged Chance and Russ’s hands and led them up to the front door into the house, Donna trailing close behind.

If the rest of the family was anything like Angela, then it promised to be an interesting evening, Chance thought.

Chapter 5

“And are we driving, sister dear?”

“Can it, and fix me a Long Island Iced Tea, brother dear.”

Freddie, playing bartender for the evening, chuckled as Donna took a seat at one of the two leather barstools. “Coming right up!” He got busy mixing her drink.

Donna used the respite to glance around and admire the work that Russ’s company had done to the patio and backyard.

Angela had earlier given Chance a quick grand tour of the downstairs—cozy, earth-toned living room, kitchen, and dining area—before dragging him and Donna out to see the work that had been done to the outside of the house.

Donna was impressed with the elegant sleekness of the design. She acknowledged that Russ’s company had completely transformed the outside of Angela’s already quaint house. It was hard not to appreciate the obvious quality of the work, not to mention all the personal touches for which she knew her sister was responsible.

She could just see Angela and Freddie sitting out here in the washed-out wicker loveseat among the rock formations, shrubs, and plants. The citronella candles arranged in clusters added a touch of style and whimsy that perfectly reflected Angela’s romantic nature.

Angela had been in her glory, eagerly pointing out highlights—the lighted fountain and Jacuzzi being her obvious favorites—like a model indicating an extravagant Showcase on *The Price is Right*, and explaining how Russ had created an oasis that invited family get-togethers.

It took everything in Donna to make small talk and *ooh* and *ah* in all the right places before her other siblings and their spouses all swooped in on Chance and Russ like vultures on carrion and dragged the two men off to join the volleyball game that was already in progress on the grass.

When Freddie slid her drink toward her, Donna blinked. “That was fast. I see someone’s been brushing up on his skills.”

“The Internet is a wonderful thing.”

Donna laughed and leaned an elbow on the leather-topped bar. “So, whose idea was it to hook me up with the landscaper? As if I don’t already know.”

“You’re going to have to speak to the general about that. She does all the strategizing. I’m just a lowly private in this woman’s army.”

“Uh-huh.”

Freddie smiled just as Angela sidled over, as if she knew she was the subject of discussion.

She nudged Donna’s arm with her own and leaned her elbows back against the bar.

“Real proud of yourself, aren’t you?” Donna asked.

“Not yet. But I’m getting there.”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but it’s not going to work.”

“Okay, that’s my cue to leave and start flinging this old body around on the volleyball court. See ya!” Freddie saluted before leaving the two of them alone.

Angela turned to face Donna. Her eyes were wide with innocence. “What’s not going to work?”

“A better question would be, how did you know about Chance?”

“Like I said, a little birdie told me.”

“One of your visions?”

“Something like that.”

Donna fought down the need to shudder. She loved her sister, she really did, but Angela and her gifts gave her the creeps sometimes, especially when they were focused on her. The creeps she got,

however, were mitigated by the knowledge that her sister's innate conscience and nature, as well as the Wiccan Rede that guided her every action—*And it harm none, do what you will*—would never allow her to do anything to hurt anyone.

“Don't be afraid, Don. You know I only want what's best for you.”

“Stop doing that.” She hated that the woman could read her so easily and often wondered if it was compliments of her abilities or just plain old-fashioned intuition. “I know you do, Angie, but what were you thinking? If you knew about Chance, why would you set me up with this Russ Merrick, *his brother*, the same night, or at all?”

“I have my reasons.”

The cryptic tone didn't help Donna's already suspicious nature. She knew her sister too well, and something besides her regular matchmaking schemes was afoot.

“So, what do you think of our strapping Mr. Merrick?”

Donna's pussy spasmed at the description, and she crossed her thighs to staunch the instant flow of moisture.

What was happening to her when a simple word could turn her juices on like this? Or maybe it wasn't just the word but her memory of the tall, broad-shouldered stranger marching up the walkway to fling his arms around Chance in greeting.

She was still recovering from that little scene, she realized, still hadn't come down from the shock of that embrace and that Angela knew both men.

Donna hadn't met two brothers, even half brothers who looked more unlike, *felt* more unlike, yet each was gorgeous in his own way, and each turned her on.

It was the last that concerned her the most and now had her fidgeting against the rising need heating her center from the inside out.

Don't think about how gorgeous he is. You came here with Chance. It's bad enough nursing a love jones for one man you can't have. Don't add another you barely know to the mix!

She glared at her sister and wondered how in the world the woman had set this up. Sure, Donna would allow that Angela had arranged for Russ to be at the party. But Chance? Donna had approached him of her own accord. Angela hadn't had anything to do with that. But how did her sister know his name before Donna had introduced them?

Oh yeah, how could she forget about the visions?

Damn, she really hated the idea that her life wasn't her own, or that she had no free will, and no matter what she thought, her life—and her soul mate—had already been mapped and picked out for her.

“Or should I have asked what you think of *them*?” Angela prompted.

“You're the psychic. You should know.”

“It doesn't matter what *I* know, if you don't admit the truth to yourself.”

“And what truth is that, Angie? That one man isn't enough for Donna the Man-eater? That your lonely spinster sister needs *two* men to tame her and put her in her place?”

“Donna...” Angela put the palm of one hand over her own chest, looking genuinely distressed. “I never called you a lonely spinster. And I certainly never thought you needed to be tamed or put in your place by *any* man.”

No, Angela hadn't said any of those things. Donna's ex-boyfriend Bo had. And her ex-husband Peter had.

Donna didn't know which was worse—being told she needed to be tamed or trained like some animal or pet or being told she was going to grow old alone if she didn't start acting like a proper wife and trusting her husband. What she did know was that she couldn't trust any man not to hurt her, and the best way to do that was to not need them, or at least not need them too much or too long. She had to

get hers and get out before a man had a chance to hurt her with useless platitudes and empty promises if not more or worse.

She'd be the first to admit she liked sex, often needed and wanted it, but she wasn't going into any relationship expecting more or forever. She definitely wasn't expecting honesty, so a man didn't have to step out of his comfort zone with the idea of placating and satisfying some nonexistent Cinderella fantasies or her ego, just needed to satisfy her in the bedroom and leave.

"Donna, Chance and Russ are not Bo and Peter."

She had to keep her jaw from dropping when Angela slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

All of her family knew about Peter, how her milquetoast husband had gone back to his pregnant ex just nine months into his and Donna's marriage. And he had wanted her to *trust* him? Yeah, right.

She turned to face her sister and rasped, "You know about Bo?"

"More than you'd like me to, but not as much as *I'd* like to."

Donna had been so careful too, keeping her dirty little secret, and with two psychic siblings and a close-knit family, it hadn't been easy. Until now she thought she had succeeded. The only reason keeping things under wraps had been doable at all was because she had gone upstate to college, wanting to get as far away from home as possible without leaving the state, to spread her wings. Next to her younger brother Nick, she'd always been the most rebellious non-conformist among her siblings, and it had always served her well.

Rebellious and non-conformist were one thing, but this scenario Angela seemed to be proposing was a little beyond anything Donna had ever considered.

She gazed across the backyard to where her two brothers, sister, and three in-laws were playing volleyball and zeroed in on the two men who had been dragged into their ranks and, for the moment, accepted.

Each man looked as if he belonged, completely comfortable in his surroundings, falling into the good-humored mood of the group and

pursuing the game with gusto. She wasn't surprised since both Chance and Russ looked athletic, like they each regularly engaged in sports or other types of physical activity.

Donna swallowed at the thought of what other physical activities they engaged in and whether or not they would be interested in engaging in them with her and together.

"Now you're getting the idea," Angela said.

Donna turned to her. "You can't be serious!"

"Why can't I?"

"Okay, what's in those candles and potpourri you like burning? Or better yet, what have you done with my sister?"

Angela chuckled and squeezed Donna's shoulder. "I'm not on anything, and I'm still your same bossy but lovable sister who wants to see you happy."

"You sound like Angela, but when did you become a polygamist?"

"I think polyamorist would be the more accurate term. And I'm just keeping a lookout for the souls you were meant to be with."

"I understand that you're real big on the soul mate thing, Sis, but I never thought I'd see the day you advocated anything but monogamy."

Angela shrugged as if the situation confounded her as much as it confounded Donna.

How could she be so sure about something and doubtful about it at the same time?

"Because love isn't all black or white but glorious shades of gray, Donna, and I can't stand in the way of love."

"Putting the cart before the horse, aren't we? Or should I say horses?"

"More like stallions."

Donna burst out laughing, couldn't help herself, and covered her mouth as she glanced toward the volleyball court again.

Freddie had abandoned the field to tend the grill, and Chance and Russ had followed to grab some eats.

Her stomach grumbled as the smell of char-grilled food wafted to her, and Donna remembered that she hadn't eaten since lunch. The meal had been a hurried affair between rushing from Safe Haven to court, where she had gone to lend moral support to one of her clients who was getting an Order of Protection against her abusive husband.

The afternoon seemed so far away from this idyllic setting of good food, drinks, family, and friends that Donna tried to erase the distasteful memory from her mind and get back to the fantasy of two men catering to her every need, at least in bed. She wasn't ready to think about anything beyond that—not with one man *or* two—just wanted, *needed*, bed-rattling, swinging-from-the-rafters, hot-and-sweaty, good sex, something she hadn't had in a while. She hated to admit it, but she needed release, an escape from Safe Haven, and wasn't that too ironic?

Angela rubbed and squeezed her shoulder, then smiled. "There's nothing wrong with indulging your physical needs, Don. You're human. I just don't want you to discount your romantic needs as well."

I don't have any romantic needs. But instead of voicing this sacrilegious thought, Donna sighed. "Angie..."

"And if you have two willing subjects at your disposal, what's wrong with taking advantage of the physical and letting the romantic take care of itself?"

"Does Freddie know you've taken up pimping in addition to your matchmaking duties?"

Angela laughed and gave Donna one last rub and pat on the back. She left to join Freddie, Chance, and Russ at the grill as their other siblings and in-laws followed her lead.

Donna sipped her drink, immediately feeling light-headed and knowing she should get something to eat like everyone else. But she was too busy going over Angela's parting words and thinking there

was a definite problem with her theory, as there was only one willing subject at her disposal that Donna knew of, and that was Chance. She hadn't pegged Russ yet, hadn't had enough exposure to him. The brief time she had spent in his company, however, gave her the feeling she and he wouldn't be a good fit.

First, like her brothers, he was almost an entire foot taller than her and, as Angela had said, *strapping*. She didn't like big men, though she didn't usually allow herself to be intimidated by them either, couldn't in her job. It was difficult, however, to underestimate a man when she had to crane her neck just to look in his eyes. Not to mention she was sure he outweighed her one-thirty by at least sixty pounds.

Unlike Chance, who was about half a foot taller than her five-six, which was bad enough.

Second, she got a definite alpha vibe from Russ, the type of domineering man she tried to steer clear of, not that it had done her much good in the past. She'd specifically settled on Peter because he was as far away from the domineering type, like Bo, as any man could be, and look what that had gotten her. Who knew a beta metrosexual could hurt a woman as badly as an alpha, maybe even worse since she hadn't seen the hurt coming?

"I didn't know I would be expected to participate in team sports when Angela invited me to this little shindig. Otherwise I would have dressed for the occasion."

Donna blinked and turned to see Russ. He was busy pulling the front of his white T-shirt away from his chest in a fanning motion, had taken the barstool beside her.

He smelled delicious, a musky-tangy mixture of deodorant soap, cologne, and perspiration that made Donna lick her lips with yearning as she realized what made him as appealing as Chance, just in a different way.

Where Chance gave off an air of debonair urbanity and gentle diplomat, even in his bad-boy jeans and T-shirt, Russ was his polar

opposite, a hard package of primitive rawness in pressed khakis and the white Oxford button-down shirt that he had taken off since arriving.

One man was an aggressive caveman, one was a tender healer. Hmm, what's a girl to do? Who should I chose? Who said I have to? This is Angela's party, not mine.

Donna turned to Russ with a smile, tried not to show how much his presence affected her—right to her overheated, tingling skin. “That’s the Vega and Calminetti households for you. You come for a visit and you’re bound to get dragged into some sort of contest if it’s nothing but a heated game of Monopoly or Spades.”

“Competitive, are you?”

“Oh, very.”

“So am I.”

Donna swallowed hard at his firm, butter-melting baritone and wondered if there was some kind of double-meaning behind the words. Was he throwing down a gauntlet? Telling her he would fight his brother for her? Or that he was just ready to do battle, period?

A little early in the game for that, don't you think? You don't even know the man. Who says he thinks you're worth fighting for? For that matter, who says he'd even be willing to fight his brother over you? You've let Angela and her little scheme go right to your head.

Thinking about his relationship to Chance, Donna gave in to her earlier curiosity and said, “I got the impression that you and your brother haven’t been in contact with each other in a long time. Why is that?”

Russ laughed. “I can definitely see a family resemblance between you and Angela.”

Donna chuckled, glad she hadn’t insulted him. “I’ve been told I can be a little forward.”

“Same here.”

“I hear that.”

He put his half-eaten plate down on the bar. “My ex accused me of being a bull in a china shop more than once during our marriage, but she also said she knows I mean well.”

“You’re also good at evasive tactics.”

“Ah, your question about my brother and I.”

Donna nodded, her heart stuttering at his smile. She couldn’t help thinking she should have been having this conversation with Chance, but didn’t think he would be half as forthcoming. As evasive as Russ had so far been, he also seemed more approachable than his brother.

“It’s a long story.”

“Give me the short version.”

“I can’t imagine that would satisfy someone as close to her siblings as you seem to be to yours.”

“True, but it’s not your job to vet the story before you tell it. Tell me. I can take it. Besides, every family has skeletons in the closet.”

“You can say that again,” he mumbled.

Donna laughed, then suddenly turned serious as a thought occurred to her. “If it’s too painful...”

“It’s more complicated than anything.” He took a deep breath and shook his head. “I guess I feel a little guilty because I might have had a hand in running Chance away.” He peered across the patio to where his brother was getting a plate of food and took a sip of his water. “I’m eight years older than Chance, but even then, we were still close until he reached eighteen and joined the Peace Corps.”

“A noble undertaking.”

“That was part of it. But I think he left to get away from me.”

“No.”

He looked at her faux-aghast expression and laughed. “I know. Little old me. What would he have to run away from? But the truth is, I can be a little demanding and pushy. And I wanted him to be a doctor.”

“And he became one.”

“I’m sure he did it in spite of me, not because of me.”

“He doesn’t seem to be any the worse for wear. And I’ll bet he loves you more for pushing him.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Donna thought of how pushy Angela was, how she wanted the best for everyone in her family and only acted out of that concern. No matter how much she and Angela or the rest of her brothers and sisters butt heads, in the end they all still loved each other, and that’s what it usually boiled down to for her. “Siblings are always going to have their differences. As long as you don’t let those differences keep you apart—”

“I’m determined they won’t.” His gray eyes widened as if he was shocked he had just divulged his intentions to her. He grinned and leaned his elbows back on the bar like Angela had earlier. The whiskers on his face did little to hide the deep dimples in his cheeks, dimples that lit up his entire face, softening his grizzled look to downright boyish beneath the sexy stubble.

She’d always been a sucker for the Sonny Crocket types, not to mention dimples, but warned herself not to be fooled by the sweet smile. By his own admission, he was bossy, and she just bet he was an overbearing cuss if someone got on his wrong side.

And why did the thought of getting on his wrong side make her nipples harden and swell? Did she want him to dominate her? Did she want that from any man?

The easy and fast answer was an absolute no, but the thought back to her childhood, of how she used to insist on being the farm settler’s kidnapped wife when she and her brothers played cowboys and Indians, gave her pause.

She closed her eyes at the idea of being tied to the boys’ makeshift stake, how she’d enjoyed tugging against the light bonds and fantasized about firmer restraints and something more that she couldn’t even put a name to.

Donna snapped her eyes open to see Russ staring at her and realized she was fidgeting in her seat again.

He frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Just a little light-headed. I really should get something to eat."

He turned to his left to retrieve a Styrofoam plate piled with brown rice, grilled peppers, onions, shrimp shish kebab, a dollop of potato salad, and green salad. "Here you go."

"Thank you." She took the offering and knew Angela had something to do with it before he added, "Your sister said these were your favorites. I'm sorry I didn't hand it to you earlier. I got distracted by our conversation."

She stopped herself from fidgeting, the snug jeans she was wearing suddenly too restrictive. Her moistened pussy throbbed, aching to be free and caressed.

She wondered fleetingly if her sister had put some sort of spell on her but knew the only spell she was under was that of deprivation, one she had cast on herself.

Donna turned to the bar to dig into her plate just as Russ dug into his own plate. She was surprised her sister had included onions in her meal since it would deter any kissing between her and Russ or Chance, except Russ was eating onions too. Great, so they would have stinky breath together. Didn't mean they had to swap spit, though.

She realized she didn't have a fork at the same instant Russ offered her one. "Thanks," she murmured, feeling unusually shy. It wasn't like she was on a date with him, despite Angela's setting them up.

"So, how well do you know my brother?"

I don't know him as well as I'd like.

Donna almost said it out loud, barely missed choking on the bite of shrimp she had taken before swallowing to say, "We met several months ago at a seminar I conducted. We've seen each other in a business capacity at the hospital regularly ever since."

She watched Russ cut into his steak, bring the medium-rare piece of meat to his mouth, and pause as he watched her watching him. He

plucked the meat off the fork with straight white teeth that Donna could just imagine nibbling the tender skin of her throat or inner thighs. She didn't stop here, rudely watching him chew, admiring his full lips and strong jaw, the way his Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed.

He and Chance may not have looked much alike, or shared the same taste in food, but they had the same full, kissable lips.

“What kind of seminar?”

“Huh?” She snapped her gaze back to his, caught in the act of following a trail of perspiration as it slid down his strong, olive-toned throat. She saw his smile and realized that he knew she had been watching him and that he enjoyed being the cynosure.

Oh yeah, this one was arrogant, had all the makings of a domineering leader. She knew the type, had been dealing with his kind for years.

“The seminar?” Russ prompted.

“It was on domestic abuse—how to spot the signs and what actions to take once you do.”

“You work at the hospital then?”

His gray gaze never left her face. His expression was attentive and intense, as if he was interested in what she had to say. Maybe that was why she opened up to say, “Actually, no. I'm a social worker by trade and the CEO at Safe Haven. It's a domestic abuse shelter.”

“I've heard of it.”

“Really? How?” It's not like it was common knowledge to the average Joe or Jane. Unless someone was intimately affected by the effects of domestic abuse, there was no reason for someone to know about a place like Safe Haven. And most men, other than social workers or police, would never have a reason to seek it out unless they were a determined stalker.

“My ex-wife referred a girlfriend to the place when we found out her boyfriend was hitting her. Then I went over to talk to the guy, let

him know that Jennifer wasn't alone in the world and had someone looking out for her."

"You do know that kind of behavior might have exacerbated the situation?"

"I read the material from the Web site, so, yes, I had an idea. But I couldn't just sit on my hands and do nothing, and I figured I'd take a chance that the guy could be reasoned with."

No, he wouldn't sit on his hands since she could see he was a man of action.

Donna wondered how much reasoning Russ had done with the guy, and when she looked at the hard-muscled biceps contrasting against the sleeves of his white T-shirt, she bet not much that didn't involve his knuckles connecting with said guy's face.

She didn't know why the thought of Russ's possible brutish behavior turned her on, but it did. Or maybe it was the idea of him coming to the defense of a woman in need that did the trick. Either way, she felt her face, as well as other strategic areas of her body, heat, and she shifted in her seat for, like, the umpteenth time since he had sat down beside her and they had been talking.

"So what happened to your ex-wife's friend and the guy?"

He shrugged and raised a glass of water to his lips before saying, "He left town."

Russ must have really scared the guy. "And your wife's girlfriend?"

"She's still in New York, single and flourishing in her career."

Probably afraid to get with any man after her experience, Donna thought.

After Bo she'd sworn off the male species for a long time and gone out to take some self-defense courses, determined not to let another man put his hands on her again without making him think twice.

Donna decided it was time to change the subject to something lighter. Usually she was too wary to give and take the way she and

Russ had been doing the last half hour, to drift into waters even remotely personal and heavy. That Russ had the capacity to knock down her guard so easily indicated her initial impressions about him were on point. He was used to being in charge and just as, if not bossier than, Angela.

“So, what about you, Russ? How long have you been in the architectural landscaping business?”

“It feels like all my life, but it’s been about fifteen years.”

“My father was a landscaper. He just sold his business several years ago.”

“Angela mentioned that to me.”

Donna just bet and wondered what other coincidental facts about the family Angela had shared with him.

She knew she was being unfairly judgmental. The man had spent months working on the exterior of her sister’s house. It would be natural for them to get friendly—especially considering Angela’s outgoing personality—and share personal information with each other. But how personal? And had it been more personal than what she and Russ had just exchanged?

“Listen, Donna, I realize this is an awkward situation for you, coming here with my brother and not knowing anything about me or your sister’s plans. So don’t feel obligated to sit here and let me monopolize your time.”

She would have argued with him until she saw the proud tilt of his chin. He didn’t want her to take pity on him. Not that she thought anyone would ever make that mistake. He was not one to be pitied. In fact, she pitied the fool who tried to pity him. And she was not a fool.

Donna caught Chance’s approach out the corner of her eye just as she was about to respond. He looked upset, and that upset her, like she had some kind of intimate bond with him already, one that allowed her to feel his feelings.

God, she was hanging around Angela way too much!

“What’s up?” Russ asked, evidently picking up on Chance’s state too.

“An emergency at the hospital. They need some extra hands. I’m sorry I have to cut this short, but...” He turned to Donna, genuine regret in his eyes. “You don’t mind catching a ride home with my brother, do you?”

What was she going to say? No? And make it seem like she feared Russ? No way would she reveal that weakness. “Of course not. Duty calls, after all.” She understood all too well. And fully expected most men to understand when *she* got called away on an emergency with a client, though most didn’t understand and didn’t want to hear how her clients needed her support at a moment’s notice.

When she was with a man, he expected her time to be exclusively his time, and he didn’t want to hear any arguments about it. Even the ones who had no claims on her time and were only mere fuck buddies felt the compulsion to dictate.

What was it with men? *Okay*, she unconsciously deferred to the voice of Angela, *not all men, but definitely some*.

“You don’t mind, do you, Russ?” Chance grasped his shoulder.

“Not at all.”

Donna watched him, trying to gauge his mood and see if he really did mind, but concluded that he could win the Grand Prix of Texas Hold ’Em with that poker face. It was all chiseled angles and dramatic lines, as hard and powerful as his body.

Could God have made two more perfect men?

That was *the* question, and Donna’s answer was no. No one was that perfect, despite Angela believing each of these men was perfect for *Donna*.

Chance leaned in to give his brother a firm hug, pulling away several seconds later to hand Russ a business card. “Call me when you get a chance. Otherwise, I’ll be in touch.” Then he turned to her with an apologetic frown, taking both of her hands in his. “I really

hate doing this. I was looking forward to spending more time with you.”

“I was looking forward to spending time with you t—” Donna sucked in a breath when Chance leaned forward and touched his lips to hers. His mouth was at once tender and forceful, his tongue slipping inside her mouth and taking no prisoners. He was staking a claim.

Donna didn't know if he was doing it for her sake or his brother's and didn't care. She just went with the flow, pushing her tongue out to meet his, tangling with it in an age-old dance of give-and-take until the lines blurred so much she didn't know who was giving and who was taking, only that all cylinders of her pleasure center were being engaged as they never had been before.

Her clit tingled as if Chance's lips had a direct line to her growing kernel of flesh, and something hot and alive fluttered in her stomach and spread up and out until her nipples sang for mercy. Donna thought she had never been so close to climaxing from a mere kiss. If he could do this to her with his lips, she didn't want to think what he could do to her with the rest of his body.

When Chance pulled away, Donna opened eyes she hadn't realized she'd closed and lowered hands she hadn't realized she'd slid up around his strong back.

“I'll call you.”

Breathless, she nodded and licked her lips.

If he'd wanted to leave an impression, he had certainly succeeded, and not just on her. Donna caught Russ's hungry gaze as she pulled away from Chance.

It seemed there *was* something that could break his stony countenance after all.

Chapter 6

Watching Chance kiss Donna had done something to Russ, tapped a part of his libido he hadn't known existed, but more, it had turned him on.

He had wanted to be in Chance's place. He had wanted to feel Donna's lips against his, but at the same time, he got off watching Donna and his brother together. He imagined what it would be like to see them do more and with less on. He imagined what it would be like to have Donna sandwiched between him and his brother as they each worked to pleasure her, thrust inside her.

It wasn't enough that he was into Domination and submission, but now he was adding voyeurism and multiple partners to his sexual scenarios? How sick was that?

"You've been quiet since we left the barbecue. Everything okay?"

Russ glanced at Donna briefly before turning his gaze back to the road ahead, shrugging and feeling like he'd been caught in the act of masturbating, feeling as if Donna knew exactly what he was thinking and fantasizing about.

Would she judge him?

"You really didn't have to drive me. I could have called a ca—"

"I don't have a problem with driving you."

"Your tone says you do. So does your body language."

"And you're an expert on that?"

"No, but my brother EJ is a body language expert. He's very generous with his knowledge too, and I'm a good listener."

Russ chuckled and shook his head remembering the youngest, blue-eyed brother she referred to. He had gotten a definite vibe from

EJ, something that reminded him of Angela and his brother Chance—something mystical and otherworldly, as if Russ was in the presence of beings more than human.

He shook his head at the idea, tried to concentrate on driving, but it was sorely difficult when he thought about the sexy woman in the truck beside him. The scent of her, a subtle mix of vanilla and musk, tickled his nostrils and made him fidget in his seat as much as being in the driver's seat allowed.

Russ had tried his damndest not to see Donna as a sexual being, someone he wanted to bind, blindfold, lick, and nibble all over and take forty different ways to Sunday. He kept reminding himself that she belonged to his brother—and after that kiss, this hadn't been hard to do. But alone with Donna now, all he could think about was getting closer to her, feeling her soft skin next to his, giving her those whisker burns his daughter had mentioned on her face and on the insides of her thighs—on every inch of skin on her body, in fact.

Shit, this was impossible. He barely knew her, had only spent a half hour, if that, speaking with her at the barbecue. But those thirty minutes had been enough to show him hints of her vulnerability and strength, hints of a simmering sensuality that he wanted to see ignited to a full-blown blaze beneath his guidance and direction.

He shouldn't be feeling this way about her. She was taken. Except that, according to her, she and Chance were just colleagues, hardly knew each other except in passing at the hospital. He knew he was trying to convince himself that there was no connection deeper than this. It helped with the guilt, guilt he was feeling over wanting something that he shouldn't, wanting *someone* he shouldn't.

“So, you don't care to share?”

“Now I can see the social worker in you.”

“Occupational hazard. The professional persona comes out when I least expect it.”

He caught her grin, his heart stuttering in time to his cock pulsing in his pants, fingers tingling with the need to encircle her wrists and

hold her down on a bed beneath him, make her beg him to take her, make her beg him to fuck her. He hadn't felt this possessive or primal around a woman in a long time, not even Suzie, especially not Suzie. Suzie, sweet and innocent, brought out the protective instincts in him. And although he sensed an inner vulnerability about Donna, her core independence, strength, and don't-fuck-with-me attitude far outweighed it, leaving no doubt that she could and would always be able to take care of herself.

The only thing that kept him from further pursuing his caveman fantasies was the memory of his brother's lips on hers and her seething reaction to the kiss. He wanted her to release that heat with him. But would she? Or would what he was scare her away?

"I have a feeling you don't know any other way. It's a part of who you are." He sensed the truth in his words as he spoke them and saw her frown.

"As much as I'd like to deny it, you're right."

"Why would you want to deny it?"

She shrugged. "Some men aren't very tolerant of my career, especially when it interferes with the time I spend with them."

"I take it your career interferes a lot?" It wasn't just an idle question. He wanted to know what he was getting into, what kind of competition he was up against.

This isn't a competition. You're not in the running. She's not yours!

"It interferes enough to make a difference."

He knew the answer to his next question without asking. The mere fact that her sister saw the need to fix her up on a blind date with him told Russ Donna dated about as much as he did. But he asked anyway.

"I take it you don't date a lot?"

"Not much, no."

She didn't sound as remorseful as she sounded resigned, and he wondered what had caused that resignation. Who had caused it?

"What made you go out with my brother?"

“The truth?”

“Always.”

She shrugged, peaches-and-cream complexion flushing seductively. His mouth watered to lick her all over, see if she blushed everywhere as attractively, and taste her heated skin. “I was trying to beat my sister to the punch.”

“I take it she makes a habit of trying to hook you up.”

“The three in-laws you met tonight? All her handiwork.”

“No way.” He wondered how many blind dates Angela had masterminded before she’d hit pay dirt with her brothers and sisters. Were her siblings all test projects, or had she perfected her matchmaking skills with friends before moving to her family? Was she anywhere near as determined as Suzie and her friends?

Donna nodded, smiling. “I have a sister in Colorado married to a cowboy thanks to Angie too. She’s relentless.”

“So what does that say about you and me?”

“What do you mean?”

“She fixed us up tonight.”

“Oh...I...I’m not...”

Russ drew to a stop at the red light ahead and turned to her with a reassuring grin. “I wasn’t trying to put you on the spot. I was just curious about what you thought of your sister’s latest efforts.”

Donna didn’t say anything, and Russ got the feeling it was one of the rare times she was speechless or at a loss about anything.

“Was trying to beat Angela to the punch your only reason for coming with my brother?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I asked Chance to come as a favor. But the fact is, I think he’s a nice guy.”

“I’m sure he’d be thrilled to hear that kiss of death.”

Donna chuckled. “I didn’t mean it like that. I find him attractive too.”

“What about me?”

“Now you are putting me on the spot.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“I’m beginning to see what your ex-wife meant.”

“The bull in a china shop thing?”

“Yes.” She grinned.

Russ didn’t say anything for several seconds as he pulled forward, searching for Donna’s block when the light changed. He found her building several minutes later and silently parked at the curb before turning off the engine, disengaging his seatbelt, and turning in his seat to face her. When she just looked at him and didn’t say anything or make a move to leave the truck, he sidled incrementally closer, placing one arm on the back of her headrest and invading her personal space as much as he could without being too obvious. If she really did pay attention to her brother, he knew she’d understand his intentions.

He hadn’t gotten to this point in a date in a long time, not to the point where he wanted things to continue after the evening was over. He was determined to wait her out, at the very least garner an invitation upstairs.

After a long moment, Donna finally disengaged her seatbelt, turned to him, and took a deep breath. “You have to understand something about my sister, Russ...” She paused and mumbled her next words, “I can’t believe I’m going to say this out loud.”

“Say what out loud?”

“You’ve got good hearing.”

“I’m a good listener, like you.”

“That’s good because I don’t know if Angela covered this subject in any of your conversations, but she’s psychic.” She stared at him, folding her arms across her breasts in a defensive so-make-something-of-it gesture, as if she expected him to dispute her statement.

He felt her waiting for his shock, knew she expected it, but the truth was he wasn’t shocked, not after growing up with a younger brother who could heal and practically bring things back from the brink of death with a touch.

Russ remembered the first time he'd seen his brother exercise his gift. It was a couple of months after he had pulled Chance's lifeless body out of a neighbor's pool and resuscitated him. He'd recovered without incident, according to the doctors who'd later examined him in more detail at the hospital, but Russ knew better, sensed the little differences in his brother from the moment the little boy coughed up a mouthful of water, opened his eyes, and threw his arms around Russ and thanked him for saving his life. He sensed it in the way his brother looked at him when he asked a question and wasn't satisfied with the answer, the sensation of something, or *someone* sifting through Russ's mind always following. He knew his brother was different for sure when, three years after his near-death experience, a six-year-old Chance cradled his badly injured dog after a hit-and-run, passing his hands over the puppy's ribs and legs until the dog got up under his own steam, panting and licking Chance's face, fit as a fiddle.

Russ had wondered how many other animals, big and small, Chance had brought back from the brink without Russ's knowing.

He wondered now how Donna would handle these little newsflashes, or did growing up with psychics in the family make her more accepting of the supernatural?

"So..." Donna cleared her throat and looked at him. "Nothing to say?"

"What's her area of expertise?"

"Clairvoyance, visions and telepathy."

"Hmm, that's interesting."

Donna threw up her hands. "Is that all you have to say?"

He wanted to reassure her, let her know that she wasn't alone in the world, but he wasn't as ready as she was to share his sibling's gifts and secrets. He didn't think it was his place and decided if Chance wanted Donna to know, he would tell her when the time came. "I take it you brought up your sister's gifts for a reason?"

"She had a vision about us—me, you, and—"

“My brother?” Now he *was* surprised. Angela wasn’t really expecting him and Chance to share her sister, was she?

“I see that shocks you more than my sister being a psychic.”

“Don’t tell me you’re all right with all this.”

“I’m not sure. I just...” She shook her head, sighing as she fixed him with her bewildered, soulful mink gaze. “You have to understand my sister’s real big on soul mates, and she’s got it in her head that you and your brother are my soul mates.”

In all their discussions on spirituality and religion, he and Angela had never discussed anything close to polyamory. As interesting and unconventional as he found Angela and her beliefs, he would have remembered something *that* unconventional.

“I suppose you find the whole soul mates thing interesting too.” Donna arched a brow. She seemed to be daring him to make light of the situation with his patented composure.

Russ stared at her, her expressive face a living work of art to watch, her full, pursed lips a poetic invitation that he was finding hard to resist. He had to get his mind off this track before he did something he would regret, like steal his brother’s woman, but what came out of his mouth next only added oil to the fire.

“You never did answer *my* question, Donna.”

She frowned. “What question?”

“When you said you find Chance attractive, I asked you what about me. You never answered. Unless bringing up your sister and her soul mates plan *was* your answer?”

“I suppose in a roundabout way it was.”

“Not falling for it, though.”

“You’re not going to make this easy on me, are you?”

At her harried look, he wanted to make it easy on her. He wanted to tease and please her any way he could, any way she would let him. Except they needed to get this whole *ménage* business straight, and one of their party wasn’t even present.

Was it fair of them to even have this discussion without Chance? They'd have to go over this ground all over again, wouldn't they? Hell, he wasn't even sure what the ground was or what *his* take was on all this. He wouldn't even try to guess what his brother's take would be or how he'd take it.

To say they were almost as much strangers to each other as he was to Donna would be putting things mildly. He and his brother hadn't seen each other in years, and brief conversations on the phone just didn't cut it, coming nowhere near understanding the sort of values and ideas that he and Donna danced around right now.

"I think you're attractive too," Donna whispered, and Russ watched as she demurely lowered her eyes. The act seemed out of character, yet perfectly natural.

Russ reached across the small space between them to put his index finger under her chin and lift her head. He waited for her to meet his gaze before he said, "I think you're gorgeous." Gorgeous didn't come anywhere close to describing what he thought of her. What he really wanted to say was that her ass was so juicy and magnetic he couldn't keep his eyes off of it, and her voluptuous breasts made him want to be an infant again so he could cuddle next to them endlessly without a care or consequence. What came out of his mouth was, "I'm sure Chance thinks you're gorgeous too."

"So where exactly does that leave us?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"No, my guess is as good as Angela's." Donna clenched her teeth and muttered, this time low enough so that Russ couldn't make out what she said, but he had a feeling if Angela were there, she would have gotten an earful.

"Would you like to come up?"

That he heard loud and clear. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter 7

What was she doing?

It was bad enough listening to Angela's soul mate theories, but to entertain her sister's latest scheme, encouraging Russ's attention and inviting him up was just plain irresponsible, leading him on when she had no intentions on taking their relationship to the next level.

She didn't, did she? And what, exactly, was the next level? Damn, was she that much out of practice that she didn't *know*?

She didn't know her own mind anymore, hadn't since turning up at the barbecue to discover that her sister knew Chance and had set her up with his brother Russ.

It should have been simple to get out of his SUV and just go upstairs alone, but there was something there between them, something she couldn't quite put her finger on, something that made her heart flutter and her pussy moist. She couldn't ignore a feeling like that, not when she felt it so rarely, and not when the man who'd triggered it was someone she'd entrusted with personal information she hadn't shared with anyone before, not even her ex-husband.

Donna held trust in high regard, right up there with honesty. They were commodities she rarely encountered in people, so she valued whenever she did encounter them.

She closed her eyes now as she put the coffee on, shifting her weight from one leg to the other at the thought of Russ's younger brother as her center heated like the percolator on the kitchen counter and her pussy moistened.

Her psyche and body had been under constant attack since Chance had picked her up on his bike earlier in the evening. And despite her

conversation with Angela, she was still undecided how to proceed or how to reconcile her intellect with what her body craved—both men, on some level, and in some capacity, in her life.

Was she really thinking of going through with this, whatever this was, especially with how she felt about men with an obvious dominant nature like Russ? Not to mention Chance being a little more than a decade younger than her.

There was no question she was attracted to him, to each man, her hormones on overload and body experiencing an instant pull toward them when everything logical in her told her to follow down this avenue Angela had pointed her toward was a bad idea.

What were her own ideas? How did she feel about this?

As free and uninhibited as she had been in her youth—and she had been pretty wild as a teen alone—there was just something intrinsic in her that said being with two men at the same time was wrong.

But what if the two men were okay with it? Would Chance be okay with it? Was Russ?

“Everything okay in here?”

Donna nearly leaped out of her skin when she felt Russ standing behind her. She took a deep breath, put a hand over her chest, and slowly turned to him. The space between them was so minute as to be almost nonexistent. It didn't seem to bother Russ a bit. In fact, the grin on his face said he was getting off on invading her personal space.

“Didn't mean to scare you.”

“You didn't.” It wasn't a complete lie. He'd startled her more than anything, right before bringing to dazzling light the fact that she hadn't had sex in two years and she desperately missed and wanted it. Russ's taboo presence only added to that desperation.

How had she let so much time go by without exploring the pleasures of her sexuality?

The idea that she had allowed a few bad experiences, most notably Bo and Peter, to color her need and desire for a man appalled her. She wasn't a coward in any other areas of her life, certainly not at her job, where she stood beside her clients to face down violent boyfriends and husbands daily. But it was always easier to help and advise someone else about their affairs. Admitting that *her* personal life was seriously screwed up wasn't as easy. But she was admitting it now, at least to herself.

Donna tilted her head back to look into Russ's eyes, falling more and more for his intense gray gaze the more she looked into it and not feeling as threatened as she thought she should when his broad-shouldered frame dwarfed her five-six by almost an entire foot.

If it was just his physical presence that dwarfed her, it wouldn't have been so bad, but it wasn't just the physical, which she easily found mouthwatering under any circumstances. It was his spiritual presence, his aura—subtle yet powerful—that drew her.

Damn, had she just thought that? She really, *really* needed to stop hanging around with Angela. The woman was a seriously bad influence.

“You've got a lot to entertain a body with all the family photos, books, and exotic fish, but I was still feeling lonely out there.”

Donna chuckled when he pouted, could imagine him laying that line and sad-puppy-dog expression on any number of unsuspecting females, and felt the unfamiliar stirrings of her green-eyed monster yawning and stretching out of hibernation.

If she was feeling even remotely possessive this early in the game, how were Russ and Chance supposed to handle this scene? And was that really her concern?

What concerned her now was Russ's proximity, his obvious availability—just him, here and now. There was no Chance, and there was no Angela egging her on, just her own starved libido, just her own stifled recklessness and sense of adventure begging for recognition.

She hadn't indulged either in so long, not since her rowdy and experimental college years. Her mind rebelled against everything for which her body now hummed. She knew what happened when she indulged and went down that rowdy road. She had spent the better part of her post-college years rectifying the aftermath and becoming a *responsible* and mature member of society after Bo. And after Peter, she had done nothing but try to rebuild her crushed self-esteem, burying herself in work and her cause.

Was she willing to throw all those years and hard work out the window for a steamy but ill-advised dalliance?

"Are you thinking about Chance?" Russ asked.

He didn't sound angry or jealous, just curious, which made her answer his question with one of her own. "And if I am?"

"Then it might be my duty to take your mind off of him." He bent his head, and Donna planted a palm in his chest to stop his forward motion and push him back a step.

"What's your take on this?"

"A ménage?"

When he said it out loud, it just put everything into kinky perspective and highlighted that one member of their potential little *a trois* was glaringly absent.

"Yes."

"I'm not sure how I feel about sharing you when I haven't even had you to myself yet."

He stepped closer, pinning her against the kitchen counter with his big body in such an aggressive manner that made it obvious to her just how turned on he was.

"But I'm willing to rectify that if you are." He firmly cupped her face with both hands, bent his head to cover her mouth with his, and Donna didn't stop him this time, just held her breath as his lips made contact with hers, lighting fires of confusion and pleasure in her chest and already sizzling core.

Giving in further, she stood on tiptoe, curved one leg up around Russ's hip, aligned her slit with the bulge behind his zipper, and pressed herself snug against his hard heat. Shame or self-reproach were nowhere in the equation, Chance's kiss an evocative and inspiring memory when Russ thrust his tongue into her mouth and slid his hands back to cup her skull and draw her closer as if he was trying to eradicate that very memory.

There was no comparison, no competition, as far as Donna was concerned. Each man held an erotic appeal for her, each bringing to the table his own interpretation of rugged sensuality that complemented and ignited things in Donna she hadn't even known she'd been missing the last two years—namely her femininity and carnal self.

Russ moved one hand down from her head to her jeans, skillfully unbuttoning and unzipping them. He slid his hand inside her pants, down and around to grasp a bare cheek, and hissed through his teeth as if he was in pain.

“Damn.”

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong. I just wasn't expecting a thong.” He pulled back to smile at her. “You're full of surprises, aren't you?”

Donna shrugged. She thought she was certainly surprising herself tonight. “What, an old lady can't wear a thong?” she teased.

“You're only as old as you feel, and *you* feel like heaven to me.” He emphasized his words and skimmed his fingers over her ass, firmly squeezing each cheek before moving his hand to the front of her underwear and cupping her heated crotch.

She could have sworn she heard a sizzle from the contact, and when he slid his hand into her thong, brushing his fingers over the moist curls covering her pussy, Donna gasped and caught him around the biceps to keep herself from falling her legs felt so weak. One would think she'd never had a man's hand in her underwear before!

But God, it had been so long since she'd been fondled, so long since she'd felt this way—desired and wanted.

Russ bent his head again to kiss her and slid a finger inside her slow and easy as he stroked his tongue against hers.

Donna moaned low in her throat when he made gentle circles against her inner walls and thrust deeper. She bore down and clutched at his finger with her vaginal muscles when he stimulated long-unused nerves before curving his finger up, expertly caressing her G-spot.

She shuddered in his grasp, searing heat bursting and spreading up and out from her core like a fast-moving blaze, until she felt like her entire body was engulfed in flames.

Her eyes rolled up into her head as Russ fisted her hair with his free hand. She loved the rough exhibition of control. She wouldn't have tolerated the same treatment from anyone else, but here and now with Russ, she couldn't think of anything else that made her feel more alive, more powerful and acutely aware of her existence.

Just when she was really getting into the kiss, however, Russ groaned and brought an abrupt end to it. "Shit, that wasn't supposed to happen." He reluctantly pulled his hand out of her jeans and pressed his forehead to hers.

Earlier, she might have agreed with him, but now? She felt like what had happened was the *only* thing that could have happened, the only thing that *should* have happened. And she wanted more—from him, for him.

He pulled away, and Donna gasped, bracing herself with both hands against his chest as he firmly held her shoulders like he was trying to gain control. Whether it was over himself or her, she couldn't be sure, just that he looked like he was in pain when he took a step away from her, eyes closed tight as he gritted his teeth.

"Fuck," he muttered.

"Not to be crass, but I thought that's where we were heading."

"I can't do this to him."

“Chance?”

He nodded, panting as he took another step back and slid his grasp down her arms in a tender fondling motion before zipping and buttoning up her jeans.

Donna took comfort in his heavy breathing and flushed complexion. At least she wasn't alone in her yearning, but then his erection that was still prominent between them told her this.

She reached for the front of his slacks, caressing, then cupping the hard bulge.

He closed his eyes and rotated his hips, rubbing his hard-on against her palm before slowly moving away and taking both her hands in his. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes to stare at her.

“I know you said you met my brother several months ago and have only been dealing with him as a colleague at the hospital, but from what I saw earlier, it's obvious there's more between you and him than just a professional relationship.”

Donna didn't know whether to be relieved and touched that he kept bringing up his brother, or annoyed. “I see someone else has been hanging around and listening to my sister too much.” She grinned to cover up the sexual frustration that was rolling through her, making her pussy tremble with unrequited lust despite the fact that she had just come from being finger-fucked. At least she had gotten off. Russ was the one who should have been complaining, and he wasn't, at least not that she could hear.

Embarrassed, she shifted her weight as subtly as she could, her swollen and throbbing clitoris rubbing against the damp crotch of her thong. It took everything in her not to draw closer to Russ and slide her center across his erection for just a little relief. “Angela's romantic soul mates notions have contaminated you too?”

“Maybe a little. But I think it's more my conscience.”

She could take that several ways but decided not to address it. Instead she addressed her own burgeoning relationship with Chance.

“I won’t lie to you, Russ. I’d like there to *be* more between your brother and I than a professional relationship.” *As unwise as that is.* “But we’ve just begun to explore a more personal relationship tonight.”

“That’s surprising.”

“You think so?”

“My brother’s always been a little impulsive.”

“Are you trying to say he thinks with his dick?”

Russ laughed. “I plead the Fifth.”

She wanted to be annoyed with his evasive tactic but couldn’t, not when she had been thinking with her own genitalia only moments ago. Her vaginal muscles were still clenching with hunger, anticipating all the ways that Russ could sate her, all the ways his cock could fill her.

“What I should have said was that once Chance sets his sights on something, he doesn’t waste time going after it. And it’s obvious he’s set his sights on you.”

On some level she supposed she’d always known the truth of what Russ said. From the first time she’d seen Chance, she’d felt an irrevocable attraction. She had spent the last several months trying to ignore it, however. But why else would she invite him, of all the males that she knew, to go to Angela’s barbecue unless she knew, deep down, that he found her attractive and would accept on the strength of that?

“What about you, Russ? What have you set your sights on?”

He shook his head. “That’s irrelevant.”

“Not to me. What do *you* want?”

He frowned at her as if taking his wishes into consideration was an alien concept and this entire issue was all about what she and Chance wanted. She got the feeling that Russ made it a habit of putting his brother’s needs and feelings before his own, and his next words confirmed it.

“Admittedly, *I* was thinking with my dick a few moments ago.”

“But you’re not anymore.”

“I’d be buried deep in you right now if I hadn’t come to my senses.”

Donna bit back a groan at his words. She thought that keeping her senses was extremely overrated, especially when all she wanted to do was *have* Russ buried deep in her. In fact she could already feel his cock throbbing against her heated moist walls, making her more moist.

She wondered if his self-sacrificing mien translated to everyone in his life and not just Chance. What would the ex-wife have to say about his impulsiveness or lack thereof?

She couldn’t see Russ rushing into anything without thinking it through, weighing all the pros and cons. He seemed the very deliberate type, one who, once he committed himself, was in it for the long haul, one who would take and keep control of a situation—or person.

What that meant for her and this situation, Donna couldn’t say, just that the possibility of being at the mercy of Russ’s dedication and command turned her on to no end.

“I think I’d better hit the road before I do something I’ll regret.”

“What about the coffee?” Donna had to fight not to sulk. She wanted him to do something they’d both regret.

“I’ll take a rain check.” He gave her hands a squeeze before he leaned in to give her a brief, teasing kiss on the lips. Donna licked out her tongue for a quick taste, and Russ jumped back with a growl. “You’re playing with fire.”

That gave her pause until he grinned and said, “I’d love to stay and stoke it, but I’ve got a couple of hot-headed kids to get home to. I’d like to make it home while my house is still standing.”

“Kids?”

“The worst kind. Two teens.”

Hmm, a family man. Despite his mention of an ex-wife, this vision of him definitely didn’t go with the one she had of him

straddling her writhing, perspiring body and restraining her by the wrists as he plunged into her balls-deep.

God, she had never had such vivid fantasies before! It had definitely been too long.

“Not afraid, are you?”

Donna shook her head and focused on him, saw the frown and knew that he had misread her silence and what must have been a pensive expression.

“You’re kidding, surely. With my big family? Two teens would be a piece of cake for me.”

“We’ll see if you’re so confident once you meet them.”

“Will I?”

“You’ll probably be meeting them at Angela’s next barbecue on Memorial Day, if not before then. It’s up to you.”

“Is that an invitation?”

He nodded. “I think we’ll be safe from my dick making any decisions at a family outing.”

“Don’t be too sure.” Nothing had ever stopped any of her sibs from getting down and dirty when the feeling struck. She remembered several heart-pounding stories of heated encounters against a tree outside a brownstone, in a boutique dressing room, behind closed doors at the office in the middle of the day, and this was just her brother EJ and his wife Tabitha. She didn’t even want to think about all the illicit indoor and outdoor sexcapades her other brother and sisters had engaged in with their significant others. She was overheated as it was and with no relief in sight, at least not from Russ.

B-O-B will be getting a workout tonight, no question.

Russ groaned at her taunt and leaned in for another kiss, this time adding a nip and a suck to her bottom lip before retreating. “You’re not going to make this easy on me, are you?”

She laughed at him using her words against her and couldn’t believe that they had only met earlier that evening. She felt like she had known him for years.

Maybe Angela knew what she was talking about and there was something to be said for soul mates, after all. And maybe instead of ignoring her sisters-in-law and denigrating most of the male population when the girls all got together and expounded on the joys of the male form and married life, she needed to pay more attention to the gabfests and take some notes.

“Angela is really bucking to make you a member of the clan giving you an invite to her annual Memorial Day Blowout,” Donna teased.

“I got one for the Fourth too.”

Geesh, she’d actually been joking, but it seemed Angela was serious about keeping Russ in the picture, specifically in Donna’s face, since all of their sibs had standing invites to all Angela’s big shindigs and rarely turned them down.

“I’m assuming you’ll be there for both?” Russ asked.

“Wild horses and all that.”

“You’re so sentimental.”

“You have no idea.” He really didn’t. No one did. She’d spent too long burying that side of herself, shielding herself.

Russ put an arm around her in a protective gesture as if in response to her thoughts and led her out of the kitchen. She felt the tenderness, but there was an underlying authority and strength in his manner, and it was that strength that she was drawn to, like a plant to the sun, like she knew he could fulfill the dark needs she’d been denying since Bo because surely she shouldn’t want rough sex or to be dominated in any way after Bo’s treatment. What kind of sick chick would that make her?

The entire trip from the kitchen, dining room, and living room to the foyer went by in a blur of sensual energy as Donna settled into Russ’s embrace, imagined him pressed against her naked, how his hard cock would feel when he sank into her, hot and heavy, stretching and filling her until she cried out beneath him.

Russ leaned in to kiss her as he unlocked and opened the door behind him. The touch of his lips was brief but firm, a promise of more to come if she wanted it, an invitation and a demand. He pulled back an inch, cupped her chin, and lifted her head before saying, “We’ll talk.”

It almost sounded like a threat, Donna thought.

She followed him as far as the outside door and watched him descend the stairs outside her brownstone, her heart pounding so hard in her chest she barely heard him beep his horn as he pulled away from the curb. She touched her fingers to her lips where Russ had left his mark, and she didn’t know whether to feel reassured and pleased or embarrassed and insulted by his high-handed tone.

She for damn sure knew she couldn’t see him again, not when he threw her equilibrium and logic so totally off-kilter. Come to that, she needed to keep her distance from his brother too.

Yep, that was the way to go—avoidance and denial—and Angela’s plan be damned.

Chapter 8

The children were alone.

He watched them in the house, going about their business, doing the things teenagers did when their parents weren't around—playing their music at hog-calling levels, feet up on the furniture as if they'd been raised in a barn, as his mama would say, sitting a foot in front of the television to watch it, running through the house like screaming banshees, and playing ball—never once realizing they were being watched.

They were Russ Merrick's children.

They had a connection to the man that he would never have, a connection that he had always wanted, a connection to a strong man, a supportive father, a father who acknowledged and cared about them, a father who loved them tender and disciplined them hard when they needed it.

The two spoiled brats probably didn't even appreciate what they had—all the creature comforts and technological bells and whistles to keep them occupied and in touch, vacations with their mama and daddy, all the latest rags—choices. All the things *he* had never had.

He had never had choices. He'd never had many, had always felt trapped—in shitty circumstances, in a shitty life, with shitty parents.

He'd had to rise up and take what was his, make things happen, and until he gave his mama the ending she so richly deserved, choices had eluded him.

He'd thought once he got out from under his mama's thumb his life would be set, that he would be free. But there was but so much freedom a body could have at seventeen as a high school dropout with

no money and no prospects. He'd learned on the fly, though—had always been a fast learner and picked up what he needed to do to survive. If nothing else, he was a survivor. This meant not staying still or in one place too long, not getting tied down to too many people, if any at all.

Without his mama's constant nagging playing his conscience, he was at last free to come and go as he wanted, fuck who he wanted, kill who he felt the need to, and this usually meant any woman that was in his life.

All of them were useless baggage. They weren't always so useless, of course. He picked them carefully, at least tried to, so in the beginning they were all perfect—perfect to look at, perfect to listen to, perfect to fuck. It wasn't until later that the complaining started. He was too rough. Why didn't he kiss them anymore? Why did he only like to fuck them from the back? Yadda, yadda, yadda, yack, yack, yack. It was just a few steps from wedded bliss and a woman who did as she was told, to a complaining shrew who reminded him of his mama. In the end, even the timid ones turned mouthy, and that was when he knew he had to end it and move on.

When he got right down to the heart of the matter, women were at the root of all his difficulties in life, his unhappiness. He really preferred not dealing with them if he didn't have to. The less he had to do with them, the better. Sometimes, though, they had their uses, not for fucking (the very idea made him so sick to the point he didn't know what he had *ever* liked in a pussy) but they were good to get information from.

Women were such soft touches, such easy marks. Just a smile here, a low sexy murmur of appreciation there, and he had them in the palm of his hand. He knew how to turn on the charm when he needed to, and rather than sneaking around and stealing the information he needed and wanted, risk losing his job, he just politely asked Amy at the office for what he wanted to know—Russ Merrick's home address. Hide in plain sight. This was his motto.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel of his truck as he watched the kids now, especially the girl, playing some board game. They were doing everything they could to keep from going to bed, waiting up for their daddy more than likely. To grill him? They acted like Russ had to answer to them and not the other way around.

Damn, kids had it easy today, not like when he was coming up. Adults' business was no business of a child. Children were to be seen and not heard, and even then, the less seen the better. Kids nowadays had a sense of entitlement that he couldn't have entertained for one minute, not with his harridan of a mama there to knock him down every step of the way.

He wondered what Russ's kids would have done with a mama like his, how they would have turned out. Would they have been so scrubbed and innocent? Would they have been nearly as happy?

Did they despise their mother as much as he had despised his? Did they want to get away from their parents at all? He couldn't see it, not with everything they had, not with the way their father doted on them. The mother he couldn't speak on, but he had his suspicions. Russ must have divorced her for a reason, after all, maybe several. He'd like to think the woman wasn't good enough, couldn't satisfy Russ's needs. Yeah, that was it.

He would be different, he decided. He would treat Russ right, and in turn, Russ would treat him the way he needed. He just had to get the man to *see* him, to feel for him and dote on him the way he doted on his kids. He wanted Russ's strong hand, needed what he witnessed on the job where the man balanced his interpersonal and business relationships with a mixture of compassion and sternness, treating his employees with just the right amount of each to gain him the affection and respect of a good manager.

Russ was the perfect balance of light and dark, where *he* was just dark, seeking Russ's light to balance him out, to stave off the shadows of his past and the insanity of his present. He *needed* Russ's light.

He saw the headlights of an approaching vehicle and quickly slid down in the driver's seat of his pickup. He sat up a little to peek over the dashboard once the vehicle turned into the driveway at the side of Russ's house. He willed Russ not to notice or recognize his truck.

He sat up as inconspicuously as possible, watching Russ as he headed around to the front of his house, never once glancing back over his shoulder at the truck that didn't belong, probably preoccupied with thoughts of getting back to his kids.

For once, he was glad of the brats' existence.

He started his pickup as soon as Russ was inside and slowly pulled out of the parking space across the street from the Merrick house and counted his blessings that he hadn't been seen. It wouldn't do for the hunter to become the hunted.

Shit, he hadn't meant to get caught off guard like that! He was slipping, the lure of Russ, the looming consummation of their relationship, making him slack off his game.

He would make sure not to be caught unaware again.

* * * *

Russ steeled himself as soon as he entered the house and heard the TV blasting from the living room, indicating either someone was awake long past their bedtime or someone had fallen asleep in front of the television, both definite no-no's in the parental handbook for raising children. At least they were definite no-no's in Suzie's handbook. He, the part-time father trying to bond with his kids when and how he could, occasionally suffered from sparing-the-rod-spoiling-the-child syndrome.

He had a feeling which of his offspring was waiting up for him and had his suspicions confirmed when he rounded the corner to see his daughter lounging on the ecru overstuffed sofa in her pj's, remote in hand, wide-eyed and bushy-tailed.

"Hey, Daddy!"

“What are you still doing up?”

“Oh, Daddy.” Kim giggled, and this alone sent shivers down Russ’s spine as he sat down on the sofa beside her and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“So, what have you been up to while I’ve been out?”

She shrugged. “Just chilling.”

“And your brother?”

“Wes went up to his room a few minutes ago. Couldn’t hang.”

Russ laughed and slid an arm around Kim’s shoulders. “Unlike my little vampire girl.”

“So how’d your date go?”

Hmm, that was a good question, one he didn’t have a straight answer to. The best he could come up with was, “It was interesting.”

His daughter arched a brow and turned to him. “Just interesting?” He was *not* going into the details of how his latest client had masterminded a possible threesome between her sister and his own brother. That was a fact of life he didn’t think his daughter would ever be ready for, at least not while he was still alive and breathing and had something to say about it.

Changing the subject, he asked, “Did Chance happen to call back?”

“Nope.”

Russ fingered the card that his brother had given him, caressing the cardboard as if he could psychically summon his brother through it. He’d have to call him sooner or later and see what his take was on Donna.

“So you’re really not going to go into detail about your date?” Kim asked.

“Not something for little girls to hear about.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not a little girl. I’m a teenager, Dad.”

Don’t remind me. “Nevertheless...”

“But I waited up to make sure everything went all right.”

Were his daughter and Angela in cahoots or something?

Russ shook his head and chuckled at the thought as he stood and tweaked his daughter's nose before heading to the kitchen. "You guys leave me any pizza?" he threw over a shoulder.

"Just barely. You know how Wes is."

Russ laughed as he opened the fridge and retrieved the leftover pizza from the freezer, where his daughter had thoughtfully placed several slices in a big baggie. He took out two slices, retrieved a paper plate from the stack on the island, and popped it into the microwave.

"Didn't you eat at the barbecue?" Kim asked as she took a seat at the island.

"I had a plate. But I worked up a sweat playing volleyball."

"Volleyball? Not really my idea of romantic."

"We had our moments." Russ realized his mistake when his daughter leaned her elbows on the island top and her chin in her palms as she stared at him with a big grin on her face and waggled her eyebrows.

"What kind of moments?"

"Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"*Dad*, it's spring break."

He sighed just as the microwave beeped. Russ took the plate out and blew on the pizza slices before pulling a string of mozzarella cheese off the top of one and popping it into his mouth. He sat at the island opposite his daughter. He was determined not to lose this argument.

"Bedtime, vamp girl."

"Ah, Dad."

"Now."

Kim mimicked her dad's earlier sigh, sliding off her chair and walking around the island to give Russ a peck on the cheek. "Night, grouch," she grumbled before leaving the kitchen and heading upstairs to her room.

"Night." He'd be a grouch. He just wanted to share as little as possible of his love life with his thirteen-year-old daughter.

Where had the time gone? It seemed like just yesterday when he was reading his six-year-old girl bedtime stories and tucking her under her Dora the Explorer comforter in her pink princess-themed bedroom. Back then her only interest had been having tea parties and playing with dolls. Now, every time he turned around, she was bombarding him with sexually allusive questions and conversations. He supposed he should count his blessings that she was interested in his life and not out trying to foster a sexual relationship of her own with some boy, or even a girl, which would be the least of his problems, he decided, with the way things were in the world nowadays. She could be like him, and the idea of his little girl engaging in sex was bad enough.

The idea of her engaging in kink? Just get a shovel and bury him now.

Thankfully Wes didn't show much interest in Russ's love life, probably because he was too busy nurturing his own, which was just as scary as the idea of Kim having a love life of her own, kinky or otherwise.

Russ remembered a time when the boy thought all girls were lame and not worth of the energy it would take away from his video games and basketball. Now he seemed to be preoccupied with anything walking on two legs that had breasts—just like his father when he had been that age.

Russ finished the second pizza slice and dumped his plate in the trash can before washing his hands in the kitchen sink with dish liquid and warm water. He realized he was taking his time with things, putting off going upstairs to his room, where he knew he would spend the rest of the night tossing and turning and thinking about the evening and everything he could have said or done but hadn't, thinking about his greed and how he'd barely reined it in.

What would Donna have done had he unleashed his true nature? Would he have shocked and completely turned her off and scared her away? Something told him he wouldn't have, that she had a few

surprises of her own up her sleeves, number one being that her nature was the perfect complement to his. He didn't know how he knew it, but there was something in the way she looked at him, something in the way she let him touch and kiss her, that told him she was seeking another's control, seeking *his* control.

Granted, it had been a long time since he'd been in the Life, when he'd indulged his kink since discovering what it was, but the lapse didn't stop him from recognizing someone who wanted what he had to offer, a woman who needed and wanted to be dominated.

Russ knew that it was possible he was projecting, that it had been so long since he'd fed his hunger he was seeing possible sustenance in any available woman, that he was letting all of Angela's and Donna's talk of soul mates get to him.

He shut off the downstairs lights and headed up the carpeted steps, checking each kid's room to make sure they were asleep—or at least convincingly playing at sleep—before he went to the master bedroom and stripped out of his T-shirt. He'd never put back on his button-down once he'd taken it off at the barbecue. He had left it in his truck before going up to Donna's.

The thought of her fingers caressing his bare biceps was like an electrical jolt that made the surface of his skin warm and tingly, and an organ far lower hard and pulsating.

Russ unbuckled his belt, undid and slid out of his pants, and freed the mammoth erection he had been sporting almost from the first moment of catching Donna's arousing vanilla musk scent earlier in the evening. He peeled off his boxers on the way to the bathroom and left them on the floor in his wake as he turned on the cold water in the shower, closed his eyes, and stepped into the tub. The shock of the chill didn't squelch his desire. At that point, he didn't think anything would. Just the memory of Donna's full mouth—lips so pliable and accommodating when his tongue delved inside the hot moist cavern—had him near coming.

He wrapped his fingers around his hard shaft and squeezed the base to curtail a fast-approaching climax. Slowly he eased his fist up to the bulbous head of his penis, thumbed the pre-cum, and used the additional lubrication as he tightened his grip and slid it back down to the base. He gradually gained a rhythm, fingers stimulating the sensitive bundle of nerves on the underside of his cock as he moved his fist up and down and teased the slit at the head of his cock with his thumb.

Russ braced his free hand against the slippery tile wall in front of him, curling his fingers into a fist as he imagined them threading through Donna's soft feathered bob. Her mink eyes stared up at him while she wrapped her plump lips around his arousal. He pressed his forehead against the tile next to his fist and groaned at the fantasy, water pounding the overheated skin of his back and shoulders as he pumped his hips and worked himself to the edge. His balls became full and tight, icy heat riding the base of his spine like a bullet train before he toppled into the overwhelming precipice of five-fingered ecstasy.

He ground out Donna's name through gritted teeth, hating himself for his weakness, for wanting the same woman as his brother but more, hating himself for needing her.

What kind of selfish, sneaky bastard did that make him? And how was he supposed to fix the rift between him and his brother on the one hand, while on the other hand he yearned for the woman Chance so obviously wanted?

Chapter 9

Chance knew his brother was attracted to Donna, knew that Russ wanted her, and he didn't need to be a telepath or use his other psychic abilities to know this. He'd seen it in the blush of color on Russ's face. He'd felt it in the sexual tension surrounding him and Donna when he'd gone over to break the news to Donna that he had to leave early.

He could have fought harder for his freedom and dug in with the powers that be at the hospital. It had been his hard-earned day off, after all, but he hadn't been able to turn down a chance to assist in the treatment of numerous victims of a multiple vehicle pileup on the highway. Just another day of being chief resident of emergency services at Belfiore for him, his personal and sex life be damned.

Chance tried to console himself with the idea that there would be other opportunities to spend time with Donna, that he would surely see her again at the hospital. Never mind that the barbecue had been a fluke and not a little desperation on Donna's part. He'd sensed her ambivalence at inviting him, at spending more time with him than necessary and proper outside of Belfiore. He told himself he'd left enough of an impression before his departure, however, to keep her on her toes, keep her thinking about him and the things he could do for her, the things they could do together if she gave them a chance.

His heartbeat kicked up a notch as he walked up the cobblestone path, toward the front door of Russ's house, and not just from anxiety at the upcoming visit.

He wondered what had happened between his brother and Donna after he'd left. Had they gotten along on the ride home as well as it

looked like they were getting along at the barbecue? Had Donna fallen for Russ's raw power the way many a grade- and high-school-girl had during their childhood?

Chance couldn't remember a time in his youth when Russ didn't have some female fawning over his looks and athleticism, how they'd call the house for him and drive their mother crazy fending off all the boy-crazy girls starving for Russ's attention. But Russ had never let the popularity go to his head. He took it in stride, modest in his appetites and dating habits, and never lorded it over the guys less fortunate than him. It was one of the main reasons he was so well liked by all the different school factions, from the math geeks and chess team nerds to the debate team and star athletes and everyone in between, unlike him, the loner and outsider, even among other outsiders. It was so much easier to be alone than to risk letting people in and having to eventually explain his differences from them, his gifts.

It had been a long time since Chance had seen his brother, but he didn't think Russ's basic personality had changed. He still seemed like the same overprotective and bossy older brother that Chance had always known and looked up to. But how did these traits translate to Russ's love life? Did he have a woman in his life since his divorce and Chance had nothing to worry about as far as Donna was concerned? Or was Russ available and looking?

A man would have to be blind or dead not to notice Donna's beauty and strength, and he certainly didn't have to be free to appreciate both. Unless Donna wasn't Russ's type, Chance couldn't see his brother not being as affected by her as he was.

He took a deep breath, tuning into his heart rate and consciously slowing it down to an acceptable beat, determined not to jump to conclusions and assume the worst scenario. If Russ and Donna had hit it off, Chance decided by no means did this mean *he* was going to back off. He had spent too long admiring Donna from afar, giving her

space and playing it safe. He was not going to let another opportunity to pursue a relationship with her slip through his fingers.

He rang the doorbell, determined to fight for her if he had to.

And then his brother opened the door, welcoming Chance into his house with a warm, dimples-revealing smile that lit up the vestibule and almost drained all of Chance's assertive competitive juices away—almost..

“I was beginning to wonder if I was going to have to go out and track you down or not.”

“I'm not going anywhere.”

Russ arched a brow. “You're sure about that?”

The pang of guilt the gesture and question shot to his heart was unmistakable, but Chance shrugged it off with a grin.

He couldn't change the past, only try to rectify the wrong he had done his brother by leaving home all those years ago without any real explanations.

He wasn't running anymore. He had too much at stake, too much to lose. After almost twenty years, he knew this now. Twenty years ago, when he was a teen with so much to prove and too many reminders of his failure glaring at him every day from his brother's long-suffering, gray-eyed gaze alone, no one could have told him that leaving wasn't for the best. Chance wasn't the only one who saw reminders. He was sure he was a constant reminder to Russ of how their mother had died.

“I'm sure, Russ,” Chance responded.

“Good.” Russ clamped him on a shoulder and led him farther into the house, pausing on the threshold of the living room, which was cozy with its rich-textured furnishings and flourishing earth tones, the surroundings solid and practical like their owner.

Russ jutted his chin at the six-pack of Corona Chance carried in one hand. “Nice touch.”

“I wasn't sure how you were fixed and figured we could knock back a few and watch a game or two on TV. Hope the brand's okay.”

“I like your thinking. And beer’s beer to me.” Russ relieved him of the six-pack and headed for the kitchen. “Have a seat while I put these in the fridge,” he threw over a shoulder.

Chance took off his leather jacket and hung it on the maple coat tree across the room before settling into a corner of the sofa, crossing one ankle over the opposite knee and asking, “Where are the kids?”

“They went out bike riding earlier and were going to stop at a friend’s house for a visit. They should be back any minute, though, so you should get a chance to finally meet them.”

Chance used the moment of solitude to look around a little and saw the open sketch pad sitting on the maple wood table before the sofa. He leaned forward and pulled the pad towards him, admiring the sleek lines and design of the depicted building. He remembered how talented Russ had been as a teen, how much he’d loved playing with Erector Sets, drawing structures, and working construction during summers off from school. He’d known then that his brother would go into a field that had to do with building and bringing things to life.

Russ had constantly downplayed his talent compared to Chance’s, pushing his younger brother to make good on his natural gifts and go to medical school.

“I know my limitations, Chance. I’m going to be a laborer. But that’s me. It’s what I love, working with my hands. You, you can be so much more.”

He respected Russ for knowing himself so well, for knowing what he wanted to do with his life at an early age. But at the time, Chance hadn’t had as much faith in his own *gifts* as Russ had. It took years and a girlfriend’s fall off an obscure mountain on the other side of the world and her resultant, near-fatal injury to show Chance what Russ had been trying to show him all along—that Chance was meant to heal and help people with or without his gifts.

Russ came back into the room with a bowl of chips and two of the Corona bottles open. He handed one to Chance as he took a seat in the

recliner adjacent the sofa and placed the bowl of chips on top of the sketch pad.

Chance nodded at it. “New project?”

“Not really. Just doodling and throwing around some ideas. They’re always kicking around up here.” Russ tapped his temple with a finger. “I was really into it. Probably why I didn’t hear you ride up on your bike.”

“I caught you at a bad time?”

“Nah. I’m glad you came by. Otherwise, like I said, I’d have had to track you down.”

Chance chuckled, feeling comfortable and more at ease than he thought he would and despite the curiosity plaguing him.

The question was on the tip of his tongue, but Chance bit it back, not wanting to tip his hand too soon. He figured Russ would soon enough get around to what had happened after he’d asked him to drive Donna home. And if he didn’t, Chance would just have to give in and ask, except that Russ leaned forward in his seat, an intense look in his eyes when he broke the pregnant silence and beat Chance to the punch with a question of his own.

“How exactly do you feel about Donna Vega?”

“Wow, you just get right to the point, don’t you?”

“I’ve never been one to beat around the bush, Chancellor. You know that.”

Just as he knew his brother purposely used the insufferable name to throw him off-balance and get the upper hand. Chance refused to fall into the trap but couldn’t help saying, “You know how much I hate that name, *Russell*.”

“Okay look, here’s the thing,” Russ said as if his brother hadn’t spoken, “Angela seems to think that we’d both be a good match for her sister.”

He knew all about the infamous Angela’s soul mate theories. He had gotten an earful from her siblings and the woman herself during his short time at the barbecue. The jury was still out on whether he

believed in them, though, despite his own spiritual experiences and epiphanies over the years.

“And what do you think?” Chance asked, watching as his brother sat back in his seat, sighed, and raked his free hand through his wavy hair. It disconcerted him more than he wanted to admit, imagining what Donna saw when she looked at Russ.

Chance wasn’t blind or stupid enough to believe that his brother didn’t possess some charms. With his grizzled good looks and tall, chiseled figure, he was the type of alpha, macho man that any number of women would find appealing.

Was Donna among them?

“I think the three of us—Donna, you, and I—need to get together and talk to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

Chance blinked. He wasn’t sure he was in the same *book*, much less on the same page. “What happened between you and Donna last night after I left?”

“I drove her home.”

“And?”

“And we talked.”

Man, to have been a fly on *that* wall. “Is that all you did?”

“Chance, you should know I’m attracted to Donna.”

“Big newsflash.”

“But I don’t want to horn in on your turf.”

At least Russ acknowledged Chance’s territoriality. “Despite what Angela says?”

“I like Angela. She’s a sweetheart, and I know she means well. But I don’t believe in fate and soul mates. I believe in making my own luck.”

Usually Chance did too, but he had seen and done some astonishing things in his life, too many things not to believe that there were factors at work beyond his comprehension or control. “You didn’t answer my question, Russ. What else happened between you and Donna besides talking?”

“Do you really want to know?”

Chance gritted his teeth in frustration, fighting the temptation to do what came naturally to him and read Russ.

He didn't think anyone could keep a secret better than his brother. But then Russ had always been tight-lipped in the name of protecting Chance. For instance, when Chance had been seven and curious about why he and Russ looked so different from each other, he'd asked his older brother about their father. Russ hedged, wouldn't tell Chance that they were half brothers and Chance's father was an unreliable womanizer and abuser who regularly hurt their mother before turning his anger on a young Russ for three years before finally cutting out when Russ was eight. Chance had found all this out on his own when he scanned his unwilling brother's thoughts. It was around then that he made the promise to himself to never violate another's privacy again. Aside from it being wrong, he ran the risk of finding out things he was not ready to handle or just better off not knowing.

Sometimes, especially in the beginning when he'd had little control over his gifts, Chance received others' images and thoughts unbidden. It had happened early in his affiliation with Donna when he had let his guard down and received a picture of her crying in the dark. He'd wondered what or who had caused her pain and whether or not she had had someone in her life like Russ to protect her the way Russ had tried to protect their mom.

Russ caught one of Chance's hands and gave it a hard squeeze. “Now that you're back and here to stay, I don't want anything to come between us.”

Chance returned the squeeze and smiled. “I don't either.”

“But I can't help the way I feel either.”

“About Donna.”

Russ nodded. “I know you've known her longer and I've only just met her, but there's something between us that I'd like to explore.”

“You tell Donna that?”

“Like I said, we all need to get together and talk about this. Otherwise, we’re just grinding gears and going nowhere.”

Chance wondered how much grinding had gone on between his brother and Donna last night, then berated himself for the obnoxious thought. Pettiness and jealousy weren’t going to solve anything. He knew it, but it didn’t make it any easier for him to slow his heart rate and keep the idea of Russ and Donna together out of his mind.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes to center himself but was assailed with a vision of Donna naked, hands bound behind her slender back as she knelt before Russ’s hard, jutting cock. Her eyes gleamed with desire when she licked her lips and glanced up at Russ with reverence. Curious, Chance didn’t open his eyes, but mentally panned back to see himself barefoot, shirtless, and standing behind Donna with his hands in her hair as she placed her now-moistened, full lips around the swollen head of his brother’s penis.

The vision was so real, so lucid, he felt the silken strands of Donna’s bob when he caressed her hair. He saw his brother’s shaft glistening beneath the light of the room as Donna licked pre-cum from his slit, then went down on him with enthusiastic sucking noises.

Panting, Chance jerked up in his seat, eyes flying open to gape at his brother.

Russ frowned. “Chance, are you all right?”

Chance just stared at him, his mouth working, but no sound coming out. He didn’t know what to say and wondered how Russ hadn’t been able to see the vision too—it was that clear—especially since he was still holding Chance’s hand.

He’d experienced rare incidents in the past when he’d unwittingly transmitted his thoughts to another during physical contact. It was just one such incident that led to the end of his relationship with the aforementioned girlfriend. She wasn’t able to handle his uniqueness, and soon after leaving the hospital, she broke up with him. He was hurt and confused, and Julie’s parting words did nothing to help either or salve his twenty-two-year-old ego.

“I love you, Chance. You saved my life, and I can never thank you enough for that, but I just can’t be with you. I can’t deal with what you are.”

She hadn’t said she couldn’t deal with what he could do, but that she couldn’t deal with what he was—a freak.

He wondered if anyone could deal with what he was any better than Julie had. Could Donna? Granted she was a strong woman and had a gifted sister. But did these make her more receptive to psychic phenomena than the average person? And was he kidding himself wanting to pursue a relationship with Donna when he wasn’t sure of the answer?

Hell, sometimes Chance found it difficult dealing with it all himself, especially when his gifts took a turn and evolved and changed as they had just now.

What had just happened? What had he just seen? Wishful thinking at play? A premonition? Or had lust finally short-circuited his brain and tipped him into the realms of sexual depravity? He’d been accused of the latter enough by nonbelievers who thought Wicca and Wiccan equaled wickedness and a person who needed to be saved. Logic told him that these were the ideas of small minds. But it didn’t make him feel any better or fear discovery any less, not when the fear had been instilled in him at such a young age by a brother afraid of having Chance snatched away by the system if it found out what he could do.

He wondered now what would have happened had he kept his eyes closed for just a moment longer. What would he have done? What orgasmic delights would he have witnessed?

“Chance?” Russ caught him around the shoulders and shook him.

Chance focused his gaze on his brother’s face, Russ’s brows knitted together in genuine alarm, the color of his eyes gone dark and intense like an approaching storm. Still, he could say nothing.

“Talk to me, damn it! Are you all right?”

“Jesus, Russ. I haven’t been all right in a long time. Not since I turned my back on you and went away.”

Wordlessly, Russ wrapped his arms around Chance like he used to do when they were young and pulled him close, holding him in a firm hug that Chance naturally returned.

For the first time in a long time, he felt like he had come home.

Chapter 10

He watched the two men embrace, felt the intimacy between them—intimacy he wanted to experience and share with Russ—like a hot poker rammed through his chest.

He wanted to scream, shout at Russ for his blindness at daily ignoring what was right under his nose and instead going out to find this exotic-looking man with the glowing bronze skin, whiskey-colored eyes, and long hair like a female's. But the best he could do was growl deep in his throat at the injustice of being relegated to voyeur, bile rising to his throat with every touch and soft word the men exchanged.

What made the pretty boy so special? Why the pretty boy when *he* had known Russ for the last year, dutifully and patiently waiting to be noticed for what he was?

He wanted to make someone hurt, but was torn by the idea of who deserved it the most and wondered if he would have felt as betrayed had Russ been cuddled up with a woman instead of a man.

He should be glad that Russ was so close to and comfortable with a man. It should have given him hope of one day replacing the pretty boy for Russ's affections. But he had a feeling there was something special about Pretty Boy, that he was important to Russ, close to his heart in a different way than a lover.

He moved in closer, squat-walking beneath the windows of the living room before pausing to peek over the sill and get a better look, maybe catch some of what they were saying to each other. It was possible that he had gotten things all wrong, that issues weren't what they seemed between the two men. He *needed* to know what was

going on before he could move forward with his plans to make Russ notice him and remove any and all competition for what belonged to *him*.

Careful not to be noticed, he hunkered down beneath the opened window and was able to catch some of what the two men were saying. Some of the conversation relieved him—the part where he realized that the pretty boy was actually Russ’s brother. Then there was the rest of the conversation that really caught his attention, the part about the two brothers planning to hook up with some woman they evidently both knew.

What in the hell?

Here he was worried about competing against one man. Instead he had to worry about competing with the younger brother and some strange woman to be named later.

He plopped back on his butt and exhaled air as if he had been punched in the gut, a sucker punch that knocked the wind out of him. He took a few deep breaths, trying to get his bearings and see the bright side of the situation.

One of the major factors that had been holding him back from approaching Russ with his proposition, from coming out and telling the man exactly how he felt and what he wanted from him, was his certainty that Russ Merrick was a clean-cut straight shooter—in his personal and professional lives. He was convinced that a family man like Russ wouldn’t be into any sort of sexual kink or engage in anything outside the realm of vanilla hetero sex.

To hear him discussing the mechanics and possibilities of a threesome, with his brother, no less, left him both hopeful and disappointed, as if he had just found out that his favorite sports hero was a drug addict and was going into rehab.

As much as he wanted Russ all to himself, he closed his eyes and imagined himself in the place of Russ’s brother, sharing this mystery woman with Russ, being pleased by the same man as this woman while pleasing her too.

His fantasy was so vivid he could feel the contact from the head of Russ's cock as he entered the woman from the back and Russ entered her from the front. He could hear the other man's moans, feel the skin and hair of his leg as he threw it over the woman to draw her closer, drive his cock deeper.

He bit his bottom lip to keep from crying out at the sensations. He just barely avoided unzipping his jeans and dipping his hand inside to wrap around his shaft and jack off when he remembered where he was. He was on a suburban street in broad daylight, the only things shielding him from the closest house a fence and some shrubbery. As it stood, he dropped his palm to his lap and fondled his pulsing erection in a soothing gesture, like a mama gently bouncing and patting a colicky baby's back to get it to stop crying.

As kinky and open as he was when it came to sex, he'd never once engaged in public sex or been a part of a threesome. He tried to picture this troublesome woman sandwiched between Russ and his brother and wondered what sort of woman would share her body with two men at the same time. He couldn't come up with an image of anyone except a whore and Jezebel, a woman his mama would surely have branded just bad enough for *his* miserable hide.

Fleetingly, he wondered if the woman was aware of the brothers' operation, or were they planning for this tryst behind her back, ready to spring their *ménage a trois* idea on her in the moment, jointly seducing her into submission?

A shudder ran through him at the idea of submission—his submission to Russ—envy for the brother and woman growing and heating his chest so much until he thought he would burst into flames right there in the front yard.

He opened his eyes when he heard a commotion at the back of the house and realized the kids had returned from their bike ride. He listened to them giggling as they stowed their bikes in the garage, then tramped into the house.

Surreptitiously, he retraced his steps from the house back to his truck, his mind clicking a country mile a minute as he mentally mapped out his concerns and goals.

The woman and the brother were just incidentals, detours on his road to Russ, he decided. He knew what he needed to do to get back on track and have Russ all to himself. He had done it before to get what he needed and wanted. He wasn't beyond eliminating the competition. He wanted to avoid doing anything too drastic, however. He didn't want to bring unnecessary attention to himself or the company. It wasn't as if this Chance and the woman were some unknown quantities without ties, people he could easily dispose of, after all. He would have to be careful how he handled them and knew that his first order of business after he left Russ's was to follow his brother Chance and dig up some information. Then he would find out who was the mysterious Jezebel who had two brothers ready to get into her bloomers.

He would be doing Russ a favor ridding him of a woman who was so obviously beneath him, less than he deserved. He didn't blame Russ for taking what was offered. The man was human, after all, and spent most of his time tending to the needs of his family from what he could see. Russ had no doubt earned a little diversion. He just wanted that diversion to be him.

As for the brother? He didn't want to bring pain to Russ, and from the looks of it, he knew that losing his brother would hurt Russ very much. He would just have to make sure that *he* was in the picture to help soothe Russ's grief once he took Pretty Boy out of the picture.

* * * *

"I'm going to kill you, you bitch!"

These were the last words Donna heard before Luther Bryant, the husband of her latest client, Dehlia, went on a rampage, breaking

away from the court officer who had been escorting him from the courtroom to go after Donna.

No one should have been surprised, least of all Donna, by Luther's sudden attack, but he had managed to catch the court officer and her off guard nonetheless. Before anyone knew what his intentions were, Luther had his cuffed hands around Donna's neck, squeezing tight for several endless moments before headbutting her into unconsciousness.

Donna wouldn't use the fact that she had been preoccupied with Dehlia, hammering out the details of her client's approaching stay at Safe Haven. She should have been prepared for an outburst, especially since Luther had seemed so cowed and subdued in the courtroom when the judge refused to set bail, barking orders at the court officers to take the defendant out of his sight as he'd banged his gavel.

Donna had been heartened by the motion, glad that at least this part of the system was working for Dehlia. But the victory was short-lived because Donna knew all that pent-up aggression that Luther usually let out on his wife had to be directed at someone. She was just glad it was her and not Dehlia. She didn't think her client could take another beatdown or stay in the hospital away from her kids.

It wasn't like Donna was so eager for a visit to the hospital herself. Aside from the knock on her noggin and a pounding headache that still had her woozy and seeing double a half an hour after the incident, she felt as fit as a fiddle and tried to convince the EMTs that were summoned to the scene to tend to her that she didn't need to go to the hospital.

Just the thought of going to the nearest emergency room sent her internal organs pumping in a frenzy of confusion and lust, the insides of her thighs becoming slick at the mere idea of seeing Chance again, even briefly.

She had been successful at avoiding him only because, like a gift from the gods, she had had a slow couple of weeks, at least two weeks

that didn't necessitate her accompanying any new charges on a trip to her favorite hospital. Of course this didn't mean the two weeks had been uneventful. Trips to court never came without their own set of obstacles and difficulties, though they were a totally different set of obstacles and difficulties than involved running into one irresistible doctor.

Right now Donna didn't know which was worse—having to face down furious boyfriends, husbands, and their court-appointed attorneys in court before a judge she hoped was sympathetic enough to her clients to give them the tools they needed to keep the violent bastards off their doorstep, or having to face one sexy doctor in the emergency room when an Order of Protection failed to do its job and said boyfriends and husbands injured one of her clients.

She would have been more than happy facing down another Luther if it meant she didn't have to risk seeing Chance. She had been ignoring his calls the last couple of weeks, trying to keep her distance and get some perspective on what had happened two Saturdays ago at her sister's and later at her own house with Chance's brother.

So far, staying away from the brothers had been easy, but she wasn't fool enough to think that either of them would be giving up the ship any time soon. She remembered that incendiary kiss Chance had laid on her before leaving the barbecue. She remembered the hot, dark expression in Russ's eyes before he left her house and realized how close she had come to jumping into the sack with someone she was nowhere near capable of handling.

The last should have been a good thing. She didn't want a man she could *handle*, did she? Was she even sure what kind of man she wanted, if she wanted a man at all?

In her position daily guiding women through the legal system and sheltering others when it failed to protect them from the men who had sworn to, at the very least, care about them, she got an up-close-and-personal look at relationships gone horribly wrong. She'd like to think she was intelligent enough not to let the underbelly of life, the dark

part of her job, influence her view of men, but it was difficult not to lump all of them under one negative category when she was surrounded by constant reminders of how cruel and uncaring some of them could be.

Reminding herself that it was only *some* men didn't help. In fact, the only thing that did help was thinking of Chance and Russ and how different they were from all the other men she knew, how unique they were even from each other. Of course, this kind of defeated the purpose of keeping her distance if she was only going to pine for them in the long run anyway, holding them up as the standard of positive male role models and manhood.

"I know you're nervous, but it's just a precaution. Head injuries can be tricky. We just want to make sure you're okay."

Donna gave the EMT riding in back with her a weak smile. If he only knew the real reason her heart was playing hopscotch in her chest—the noise all but obliterating the sound of the ambulance's sirens as it pulled into the back entrance of Belfiore Hospital—he'd be cautioning her about the drawbacks of putting her heart on the line rather than worrying about her head injury.

Donna took a deep breath as the back door opened and the driver helped his partner move the stretcher she was strapped to from the back of the ambulance, onto the pavement. They were all immediately met by two doctors from the hospital who accompanied them toward the pneumatic doors as one of the EMTs filled them in on her physical state.

Neither of the doctors was Chance, and Donna breathed a sigh of relief, temporary though it was since she was sure he was on duty and it was only a matter of time before they crossed paths. Unless she got this examination wrapped up as quickly as possible and managed to get discharged before seeing him.

The EMTs helped transfer her from their stretcher to a stretcher in one of the treatment rooms, and the doctors went to work looking into her eyes with a penlight, taking her blood pressure, listening to her

heart, and performing a neurological exam to ascertain her motor skills and mental status. The mental part she passed with flying colors, remembering exactly what had happened to her, where she was, her name, and the day and date. Her coordination was a little off, however. This and the bruises on her head and around her neck had the doctors most concerned, so they ordered a CT scan to discern what kind of damage they were dealing with. She had lost consciousness, after all, and subdural hematoma was a possibility, however remote.

Donna lay in the bed now, counting ceiling tiles as the doctors went off to contact radiology and schedule the scan. She was tempted to get up and leave, but after the little staggering incident she'd had while walking across the floor for the doctors a few minutes ago, she thought better of it.

Damn it, she hated being vulnerable like this. She was trapped. Chance could walk in any minute. He was the chief resident, and unless he was elbow- and knee-deep in an emergency or treating someone, it wouldn't be beyond the realm of possibility for him to walk by the treatment room and spot her before they took her away to get the CT scan. It was only a miracle that he hadn't seen her already.

The thought struck her suddenly that maybe he knew she was in his emergency room and was avoiding her, tit for tat. Not that she thought he was petty, but maybe, just maybe, he had gotten the message from her dodging his calls and decided to leave her alone.

Fat chance he'd gotten the message.

Something told Donna Chance wasn't the type of man to give up that easily. Either he was busy in another area of the emergency room, or he was—

“What the hell happened to you?”

—on his way to see her now.

“Nice to see you too.” Donna tried to sound cool and unfazed, but at the sight of Chance, her salivary glands went into overdrive, and she got a watery sensation in her mouth. She put it down to the

automatic drooling reaction she usually had when Chance was in the vicinity, but then she tasted bile in her throat and suddenly felt nauseous, and all thoughts of lust and romantic reunions flew right out of her traumatized head as she surged to a sitting position, and frantically looked around the room for the nearest receptacle in which to throw up.

Chance was either a mind reader or her face just looked that green because no sooner had she had the thought than he was across the room and magically wielding a shiny bed pan.

He gently collared the back of her neck with one hand and shoved the pan in front of her like a sacrificial offering with the other.

Donna didn't think twice about heaving into it, didn't think about all the tails under which it had been or the waste that had been bestowed upon it in another life. She just knew Chance wouldn't put her in jeopardy and would take care of her, and nothing but a spic-and-span pan would do.

When she thought she had emptied pretty much everything she had ingested for breakfast and lunch earlier in the day, which wasn't much, she leaned back on the inclined head of the bed..

Chance proffered a cup of cold water, and she took a few sips before he patted her perspiring face with a cool, damp cloth.

His hands were so tender against her face and totally belied his earlier angry tone. She wondered if he *had* been angry, or had it just been her imagination?

"I'm sorry I didn't return any of your calls. It wasn't you. It was me," she blurted, and he grinned at her cliché.

"Don't worry about it."

"But you deserve an explanation."

"We can talk about it later. Right now I want to know how you're feeling."

"I've been better."

“I’ll bet.” He gently guided her back against the hospital bed and lowered it to a reclining position. “Just lie back and relax. You need to rest.”

She thought to argue with him. How could she relax when she felt so lousy? How could she rest when she had a job to do and myriad Dehlias counting on her help and expertise?

But then Chance smoothed a hand against the bruise on her forehead, and she felt a rush of soothing heat radiating from his fingers directly to her brain cells, making her eyes so heavy she couldn’t keep them open a minute longer. She most definitely couldn’t dwell on what she thought was happening to her, what supernatural powers Chance seemed to be using on her.

Finally, she gave into blessed unconsciousness.

Chapter 11

Chance winced at the discoloration around Donna's throat and wondered at the pressure that had to be exerted to put it there. He wondered at the monster who had exerted that pressure.

He gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath as he stood to draw the privacy curtain around her bed, still astonished that Donna had responded to his mental influence since he was so inexperienced, especially never having used it to put anyone to sleep.

He'd felt her brief struggle against his suggestion, the slight push he gave her toward slumber, his actions not unlike casting a spell with a melodious and repetitive psychic chant. Chance knew, had she been well and herself, she might have guessed what he was doing and fought a lot harder.

He went back to her side ready to work. Now that she was asleep, he could finish what he'd started when he first touched her forehead. He sat down on the bed and reached out his hands to wrap around her throat, but instead of choking and doing damage, he circled his thumbs along the front of her neck in a gentle massage. He watched as the bruises gradually faded from black and blue to green and yellow until finally they disappeared entirely.

Chance closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and automatically grasped the crystal pendant around his neck in one hand. This next undertaking would involve a lot more concentration and energy than the largely cosmetic work he had just done on her throat.

He moved his hands to Donna's face, cupping her head and psychically scanning her brain for any damage. He sighed with relief when he detected no bleeding or swelling, but there was no doubt she

had a concussion and would be hurting when she woke up if he didn't do something to heal the wound.

Not wanting her to suffer a moment longer than necessary, Chance reached out with mental fingers to lightly rub the surface of her brain, transmitting his healing energy directly to and smoothing the sore spot.

Donna frowned and moaned in her sleep. Chance felt her struggling to wake up, awed by her strength and will when she pushed against his psychic energy with her own as if testing him, or testing herself.

Chance visualized her power—a glowing red, sinuous cord that slithered toward his blue cord before pausing, then warily circling his pulsing thread. Establishing that it was okay to proceed, her red cord came closer and corkscrewed around his blue, supercoiling like a DNA double helix before melding.

He gasped at the unexpected contact, but didn't retreat, instead twined around her, vibrating within her warm clutch, inviting her to tighten her hold. Tentatively, she contracted around him, her strand sensually stroking against his before slowly sliding away, leaving a trail of seductive essence in her wake.

He had never experienced anything so erotic without physical, sexual contact and was shocked that he was hard—as a stone.

Chance popped open his eyes and snatched his hands away from Donna's head. His entire body was warm, flushed with desire and guilt. He felt dirty, as if he had molested an unconscious woman. He was felt like he was taking advantage of the defenseless, acting no better than a necrophiliac or a pedophile.

He leapt off the bed and took a couple of steps back, staring down at Donna's serene features as his heart expanded in his chest so much he thought it would explode. He reached out to her, gently brushing over her mind to ensure that she wasn't in any pain. Once he confirmed her condition, he motioned to leave, drawing open the

curtains and moving towards the exit when he heard her voice behind him.

“What did you do to me, Chance?”

Chance froze on the threshold of the treatment room, but didn't turn back to her immediately. He couldn't.

First of all, he was shocked she was awake, especially after what she'd been through and the sleep inducement he had imposed. He thought she'd be out for at least another half hour.

Second of all, he just couldn't bring his legs to move or his body to turn. He didn't know what he'd see in her eyes and didn't think he could bear the reproach or, worse, the disgust. It had been so long since he'd had to deal with either.

Damn it, he'd known he was taking a risk stretching himself and using powers he'd never used before, especially on someone as perceptive and resilient as Donna. Even unconscious, she could see right through him. What would she see when she looked at him now, while she was fully awake?

“Please don't go.”

He turned around then, something in her whispered words compelling him. He crossed the floor haltingly, felt the perspiration beading on his upper lip, and didn't know if it was from his earlier mental exertions or just plain anxiety over the coming rejection.

But then something happened. He felt her in his mind, searching as if she had left something behind during their experience—herself.

He closed his eyes and grasped that red tendril in his mind, linking with her for the briefest of seconds. When he opened his eyes, he saw her gawking at him.

“Forget my question. I don't think I'm ready to know what you did, but I still need to thank you. So, thank you, Chance.”

He sat down and took her hand in his, doing some searching of his own as he fell into her intense gaze, finding neither revulsion nor censure, just confused acceptance.

“As much as I love them, and when I wasn’t envying what they could do, I used to think my sister and brother were freaks of nature. That was when I was an immature kid and didn’t know any better.”

“But you do now.”

“I’ve learned a lot since then, yes.” She squeezed his hand and smiled like she understood his turbulent emotions—the fear and self-loathing that were constant companions during his youth, the uncertainty and mistrust that still shadowed his every move. Maybe in a way, she did understand, her past experiences in an abusive relationship giving her some insight into his emotions, especially the self-loathing and mistrust, the ideas that she was to blame for her own injuries, the idea that had she been stronger, more in control, she could have changed the course of fate and not been a victim.

“Is that why you became a Wiccan?”

His eyes widened at her question.

He’d never told her he was a Wiccan, but then they had shared a pretty intimate moment minutes ago. He expected she had siphoned perceptions and information from him the same way he had siphoned perceptions and information from her. It was a consequence of using his talents, leaving a part of himself behind with the recipient. And though the recipient wasn’t always aware of what he or she had gained, they went away feeling different, changed, just didn’t know why or how. The differences with Donna were that she knew and he had willingly opened himself up, shared himself and his innermost feelings with her.

Chance shrugged. “It was a belief system that vibed the most with my talents.” He didn’t even want to go into how the religion had saved him when he had been at his lowest, how he had finally found a reason to celebrate his gifts rather than scorn them.

“My sister says the same thing about her talents and the religion.”

“Your brother EJ isn’t a Wiccan.”

“Not a practicing one. But he believes in and respects most of the tenets.”

“And you?”

“I’ve always been curious about and drawn to the religion, probably because of Angela.”

He felt her hesitation, as if she didn’t feel worthy to wear the New Age, pagan banners herself. “Not all Wiccans are *gifted*.”

“Maybe not psychically, but it takes a lot of inner strength to buck the norm.”

She didn’t know he’d had no choice. It was either buck the norm to find his place in the world or go mad trying to fit into the place he was born. “So now that you know my dark little secret, how do you feel about...about us?”

“About that...”

He arched a brow and held his breath, waiting. He wondered if she had picked up any residual feelings from his meeting with Russ. Or worse, had she intuited the gist of what they had discussed? He realized the rudeness of discussing her behind her back but knew it was nothing that Russ and Donna hadn’t done behind his back. Like Russ said, it didn’t make sense for them to go into details and make plans when all three of them weren’t present. But he didn’t see any reason he shouldn’t foster a separate, already burgeoning relationship with Donna, could only see it enhancing the interpersonal and sexual dynamics when the three of them finally did get together. He refused to think *if*. Besides, he needed to know how she felt about him. Otherwise, this whole proposition amounted to nothing.

“Chance, I’m not sure there is an *us*.”

“There could be.”

“And what about your brother?”

He looked at the smirk on her face, and no one could tell him at the moment that she didn’t already know she and the possibility of a threesome had been discussed.

He reached for her face, caressing a cheek before brushing her bangs from her forehead and tucking a tendril of hair behind her ear. He cupped her face with both hands and leaned in to plant his lips on

hers. He teased the seam of her mouth with his tongue, hunger growing with the slight taste of her. When she opened for him on a pant, he slid in his tongue, twining it with hers as she had earlier twined her energy with his—natural, innocent and oh so very carnal.

Chance had to remind himself that he was in the hospital, canoodling with a patient in the emergency room where he was chief resident of emergency services. It was wrong on so many levels, but none of them touched the level of stimulation he felt finally holding her in his arms, her soft breasts pressed to his chest, her heated breath fanning his face between kisses and gasps.

He was so hard he ached, cock throbbing in his pants, engorged head pushing against the zipper as if with a mind of its own, definitely moved by a spirit of its own.

Chance summoned the vision of Donna sandwiched between him and Russ—the vision that had been haunting him for two weeks—thinking it would derail his desire, that the idea of sharing her would douse it, but the vision only fed his lust, fed his need.

He gave himself over to it. Maybe the more he practiced in the safety of his mind, the easier it would be once they three were all together.

Chance reached for her in the vision, stroking her arm with his fingertips as he kissed his way from her shoulders to the small of her back. He licked the little dimples in the side of each butt cheek, the musky-sweet scent of her arousal wafting up to him as she moaned and writhed beneath his ministrations.

He caught her hips, pulling her close, teasing the crack of her ass with the moistened head of his penis before sliding down to her hole. Just as he was about to drive into her from the back and Russ was about to drive into her from the front, Donna tore her mouth away from his, breasts heaving as she braced her palms against his chest.

He saw her awed look and realized she had experienced his vision!

Donna pressed her face against his chest, her fingers clutching the lapels of his lab coat with a quiet desperation that simultaneously stopped his heart and made him even harder.

“I can’t do this, Chance. I can’t...”

“Is everything all right, Dr. Novak?”

One of Chance’s residents stood in the doorway with a questioning look on his face, but respect, and probably a little surprise, kept him from coming farther into the room.

“Everything’s fine. Ms. Vega was just experiencing a little light-headedness.”

She lifted her head and mouthed “thank you” before turning a blinding, reassuring smile on the resident.

Chance wasn’t sure if she was thanking him again for healing her or thanking him for saving her embarrassment by jumping in with a viable excuse for their being pressed against each other in such an intimate hold.

Rather than ending the hold altogether, he loosened it, keeping one arm around Donna, gently rubbing her back, enjoying the nonsexual contact as much as he had enjoyed the brief psychosexual contact between them.

He wanted to try to avoid her having an unnecessary procedure like the CT scan, but didn’t know how to tell the resident that it wouldn’t be necessary without undercutting the man’s judgment or bringing attention to the situation by the attending.

Being a chief had its benefits, but he still had people to whom he had to answer. It made using his talents and healing without the benefit of acceptable medical treatment difficult. Everything he did on his own was in direct conflict with his job and medical procedures, despite it being what he knew was the best course of therapy for the patient.

“They’re ready to do Ms. Vega’s CT scan now.”

“Right, I’ll leave you to it.” He wanted to kiss her before leaving her side, but knew that wouldn’t look right and would only bring

attention to their relationship, so he settled for squeezing her shoulder before he turned and walked past the resident standing at the door.

* * * *

Not long after her CT scan, Donna was back in the treatment room, fully dressed and swinging her legs to and fro as she sat on one of the room's bed feeling a little less vulnerable after her earlier experience with Chance but no less confused.

She didn't want to dwell on what had gone on between them, but with time and solitude on her hands, she kept coming back to that moment when she felt him reading—her mind, her body—and how her body had reacted to him on a purely physical level, though only their psychic energy had connected.

She was still having problems accepting what he was able to do, what he had done to her, with her, but it didn't make her any less grateful. She just wished she hadn't been so turned on by their experience, by how their energy had twined. She'd never experienced anything like it, but was hungry to experience it again despite the danger. As if enjoying his company, liking him, and finding him extremely attractive weren't bad enough, Donna liked and was attracted to his soul. Any other time, any other person, and this would have been an ideal situation ripe with the possibility of a relationship. But Donna wasn't another person. Sometimes she wished she was—another person who hadn't been physically and emotionally abused in her past and was turned off by men, unless it was in the most aesthetic and cosmetic way. She kept telling herself she had no use for them otherwise, except for what they could do for her body, and then only on her terms.

She knew she was being totally unrealistic and selfish, and that no matter how much Chance wanted her, he wouldn't go for an arrangement like that, at least not for long. She'd felt his intensity and desire during their brief little psychic encounter, and she knew he was

the type of man who wanted all or nothing from the woman he got with. He would settle for nothing less.

Normally, Donna was the same, demanded a man's all if he wanted to be involved with her. But she had long substituted commitment and romance with her profession, too busy now pouring all of her energy into the latter rather than give her romantic life a fighting chance like Angela was always begging her to do. Romance was for fools, people who didn't know better, who hadn't been knocked down by reality time and time again.

She was tired of running, but wasn't sure anymore who or what she was running from.

"How'd everything go?"

She stopped swinging her legs, darting her gaze to the doorway where Chance was standing with a patient chart in his hands. "You tell me."

He grinned as he crossed the threshold to come stand by her bed. "I mean how are you doing officially?"

"The doctor hasn't come back yet with the results from my scan. Maybe you could speed up the process a little to get me out of here."

"So you can hurry back to your superwoman duties at Safe Haven?"

"Something like that."

He sat down on the bed beside her and put a hand on one of her thighs, and she looked at the way his tanned fingers contrasted against her nude hose and the creamy skin beneath, how it complemented the short coral skirt she was wearing and seemed so right where it was. She squeezed her legs together in response, trying to staunch the warm moisture she felt gathering between them.

"Are you sure you want to risk getting into another compromising position at your place of work so soon after the last time?"

"I'll risk it. Chance..." She took his hand from her thigh and held it in both of hers. "This isn't going to work."

"Why not? Don't you find me attractive?"

“Not that I consider myself that shallow, but I find you more than attractive.”

“Is it the age gap then?”

Try the whole threesome thing.

The words were right on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't bring herself to verbalize them, couldn't believe she was such a coward when it came to this. When it came to her job, hell, she could shield her charges and face down their crazed husbands and boyfriends without blinking an eye, but this, a question about her personal preferences, wants, and desires, she was having a problem expressing herself.

She realized she had yet to discuss an arrangement in depth with either brother and see where they all stood. Not that she wanted to stand anywhere with Chance or his brother. Before today she had made up her mind to stay away from both of them. She told herself it was the best course of action. But she couldn't stop the next words from leaving her mouth.

“You never answered my question. What about your brother?”

“How do you feel about him?”

“I like him okay.”

“Do you *prefer* him?”

“That's not a fair question, Chance.”

“I know. This isn't a fair situation to any of us, but I'm asking anyway.”

Donna took a deep breath. “I like you both for different reasons.” She still wasn't sure what those reasons were, but from just her brief exposure to Russ, she knew instinctively that there was something unusual about him—not just different from his brother, but from most men she'd ever met—something she wanted to explore. She'd initially thought it was his arrogance that got her excited, but realized it was much more than that, something much scarier, as it forced her to hold up a mirror to desires she had long buried back in her teens.

“Playing it safe. I can respect that.”

Would he respect her wishes if she asked him to stay away from her? Could she ask him to and still face him almost every day in the hospital? She'd already established that, in her line of work and with her hands-on mien, they were bound to cross paths professionally whether she wanted to see him personally or not. Did she want to deal with that type of awkwardness? How much more awkward would things be if she did decide to see him personally and still have to deal with him on a professional level?

"You're thinking about us, aren't you? Weighing all your options, the pros and cons? I can see your mind working a mile a minute."

"That may be part of the problem."

His grin fell as he stared at her, and she wanted nothing more than to wrap her arms around him and pull his head close to her bosom, even though that was her problem already, wanting to help and heal the world one bruised and battered psyche and body at a time.

"That was a low blow. I shouldn't have said that."

He shrugged. "I've heard worse."

She was sure he had, but she didn't want to be the source of one more minute of his pain. She knew better, knew how it felt to castigate herself for something beyond her control, and Chance couldn't control the fact that he had gifts any more than she could control the behavior of her exes, nor would she want to. She was sure she wouldn't be the person she was, able to sympathize and help so many victims of domestic violence, if she hadn't been through the pain of it herself. She was just as sure that Chance's patients welcomed his gifts even if he didn't always welcome them.

At the thought, she wondered how many patients had benefited from what he could do, how many lives had he saved—lives that had been beyond the boundaries of *normal* medicine and which would have been lost otherwise? Who was she to malign those invaluable gifts?

God, the idea of healing and saving a life with a touch boggled her mind, and just when she thought her mind couldn't take any more

boggling or surprises, Russ barreled into the room, a strange man cradling his right hand wrapped in a bloody, makeshift tourniquet in tow.

Chapter 12

“Chance! Great, I thought I’d never find you. We had an accident at the site we’re working on today. I need some help he—” Russ froze when he realized his brother wasn’t alone in the room and finally gaped when he noticed who Chance was sitting next to on one of the room’s bed “What are you doing here?”

“Well hello to you too.” Donna huffed.

“I didn’t mean—”

“It doesn’t matter what you meant. I was just on my way out, so you can have the room and your brother all to yourself.” Donna was up and off the bed before anyone could stop her, though Chance made a valiant effort, reaching for her quickly, receding back, and coming up with empty air before jumping off the stretcher to follow.

“Chance!”

His brother hesitated for only a moment, glancing out into the hall where Donna had disappeared, then back at Russ and Stu Roszman, Russ’s field manager. Russ heard him curse under his breath before he came back to take a look at Stu’s hand, his calling, the need to help and heal, evidently too strong to resist.

Chance quickly and thoroughly washed his hands in the room’s sink, donned a pair of gloves, and unwrapped Stu’s hand. He cleaned away the blood with a swab to get a better look at the injured finger.

After a moment he said, “It’s not as bad as the bleeding is making it look, nothing several stitches won’t handle. I’ll send someone right in to work on it.”

Russ grabbed Chance’s arm before he could leave, but didn’t know what to say, especially in front of Stu. He trusted his friend and

employee with many things, but his brother's ability wasn't one of them. And blurting out, "Do your magic!" didn't exactly seem appropriate, especially after his and Chance's little heart-to-heart over the weekend when he'd learned how hard it was for Chance to come to terms with his gifts and use them, even now.

"Russ, he'll be all right. Trust me." Chance rewrapped the hand with a fresh bandage and took off his gloves to dispose of them. Russ hadn't missed the way Chance caressed his fingers over Stu's hand, though, before he wrapped it and left the room. He hadn't missed the slight orange glow emanating from his fingers, a glow that an untrained eye might have easily missed or mistaken as a trick of the lights in the room. Russ knew better.

Stu made a fist and rotated his hand, eyebrows lifting. "Feels better already. The throbbing stopped."

"That's good," Russ said, distractedly staring out into the hallway and wondering if Chance had caught up to Donna and why she was at the hospital.

Was she okay? Did her visit have something to do with her job, or was it of a more personal nature and not a medical one? Had Chance shared any of what he and Russ discussed over the weekend?

He thought about his reaction to the sight of her, the keen and possessive sensations that had surged through him in her presence, and realized he had been beyond rude. He hadn't meant to come at her so gruffly, but seeing her in Chance's ER—in Chance's *company*—for whatever reason had just caught him off guard.

"So who's the skirt?" Stu asked, and Russ turned to him just in time to catch the leer.

Any other arena with any other woman and he might not have reacted so fiercely. But as it stood, Russ saw red at the remark, his knee-jerk response enough to undermine the false sense of security and control he'd been exerting since meeting Donna.

He thought he could handle the scenario he and Chance discussed, but catching sight of Donna in all her fiery temper made him wonder

if he could share all that feminine energy and heat with anyone, much less the brother he'd always protected and loved.

He didn't know what to say to Stu that wouldn't trigger his suspicion and didn't want to give away just how important Donna was to him when he wasn't sure how she felt about him. He knew she wanted him, but her actions in the last couple of weeks, her avoidance, told him she was willing to deny that desire. He wondered at what cost to her.

"She runs a battered woman's shelter," Russ said by way of explanation, but knew he wasn't really explaining anything at all. He didn't want to share anything about Donna with anyone unnecessarily.

"Oh. I thought she..."

Russ slowly turned to Stu, and when he saw the uncommonly flustered expression on Stu's face, he could only imagine the grimace on his own—one that he was sure plainly said Donna was off limits—because Stu didn't get easily flustered. *Russ* had been sicker at the sight of Stu's injury than Stu had been, and Russ was a vet who'd seen his share of blood and gore in the trenches.

"Thought she what?"

Stu threw up his hands. "No offense, man. I just thought she belonged to you."

Russ just wished. In his mind, he already considered her his—his to protect and his to discipline. Problem was, Donna didn't consider herself to belong to anyone except herself.

Russ wasn't sure where her relationship with Chance stood. Had she been avoiding his brother as much as she had been avoiding him? Or had they been in contact since the barbecue and taken their relationship to the next level, beyond that kiss Russ witnessed? Was that why she was at the hospital? She'd come by for a social visit with her new lover?

He couldn't blame Chance for taking advantage of any and all opportunities to get closer to Donna as they presented themselves.

Russ knew he would. And he knew neither he nor his brother had any serious claims on Donna yet, not from the way she had left the room in such a mood. Despite the conversation he and Chance had had about their little threesome, no boundaries or rules had been set, especially not with Donna absent. In Russ's eyes, this all left her affections and loyalty up for grabs.

When a young female doctor came in to take care of Stu's sliced finger, Russ took the opportunity to go track down at least one of the pair in question and find out where things stood between them all.

* * * *

He watched her leave the hospital emergency room through the pneumatic doors in some sort of tizzy and thought, *So this is the woman who had Russ walking around the office lately with the unaccustomed hangdog look on his face when he wasn't in a complete fog.*

In the time since he'd been working at Merrick Outdoor Designs, he had never known the man to bring his personal life to the job, had never known him to be so unfocused on what he was doing. He had fully expected something like the accident that had happened to Stu to have happened to Russ instead since the man's mind just hadn't been on the job the last two weeks.

Of course Stu wouldn't have had *his* accident either without a little help, he thought.

He sneered, leaning back against his truck at the sidewalk and watching the small band of people loitering outside the hospital's granite façade on their cigarette break.

He thought it was funny that a bunch of people who worked in the health industry engaged in such an unhealthy habit. He almost laughed at the hypocrisy of it, but didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than he already had, so he settled for a disapproving smirk.

Looking at the source of Russ's recent agitation and melancholy now, he couldn't figure out what the big to-do was surrounding the heifer.

So she hadn't exactly been beaten with an ugly stick. He supposed she was eye-catching, but then his dick hadn't found a female fetching in a long time, not since his epiphany five years ago. Two legs, two breasts, childbearing hips, big ass, soft curves, and skin—none of these screwed his bulb in anymore. He wondered if they ever really had, or had he just been going along with the flow, forcing a set of preferences, values, and aesthetics on himself because it was what was expected of him, because they were the acceptable and *normal* things for him to lust after and chase? Hadn't his mama and daddy proved that there was nothing remotely acceptable or normal about him, that he didn't have any redeeming qualities to qualify him as a worthy human being, much less a normal one?

He could pursue who and what he wanted now, didn't have anything to prove, no one to answer to except himself. The only person who would have stood in judgment of and punished him for his actions, punished him for the things he liked, was thankfully long dead, taken out of the equation by his own hands. Good riddance to so much trash, as his mama would say.

Well who was the trash now? he wondered, mentally spitting on her ashes as he flung down the stub of the cigarette he'd been smoking and snuffed it out under his work boot.

He pushed up off of the side of his truck, ready to follow the heifer when that pretty-boy brother of Russ's came rushing through the pneumatic doors in his fancy-schmancy, pristine white lab coat to catch up with the heifer.

Didn't they make a perfect couple? So good and pretty and smart, the exact type of people his mama had always rammed down his throat as a standard he should strive to be, knowing in her eyes he would always come up wanting no matter what he did.

But these two? They were respectable people, normal, acceptable, *good* people.

He had already given up on attaining any of these ideals for himself. He was what he was, what his mama had bred him to be, what society had deemed a degenerate and a sociopath. He just called it doing what he had to do to get what he needed and wanted out of life, and fuck all who had a problem with it.

He just wished there was a way that these two would become and stay a couple without involving Russ. If there was a way he could ensure this, he would, but he wasn't what anyone would call a matchmaker. The only match he was interested in making was a match between him and Russ. Maybe, though the idea sickened him, if he let Russ get as close to the woman as his pretty-boy brother seemed, *then* took her and the brother away, Russ might be more open to turn to someone in his time of grief.

He was determined that someone be him.

* * * *

Chance caught up with Donna outside the emergency exit, where she was standing with her arms wrapped around herself, looking simultaneously annoyed and lost. He smiled as he approached with her handbag tucked under one arm.

"I didn't think you'd get too far without this." He held it out to her, watching as she glared at him before unfolding her arms to take the bag from him.

"Thanks," she mumbled.

"You should come back inside, unless you want to leave against medical advice."

"I know I'm fine, and AMA is just a technicality. Especially in this case, isn't it?"

He bristled under the accusatory look she gave him, as if she blamed him for healing her. “A little gratitude wouldn’t be too much to ask for.”

“I said thank you.”

“I’m beginning to think you didn’t really mean it.”

Donna threw up her arms. “What do you want me to do? Get on my hands and knees and kiss your feet?” She turned her back on him and flounced back inside the hospital to the decidedly curious stares of several passersby and people gathered outside.

Chance rushed back inside too, catching up to Donna on her way back to the treatment room. He caught her arm just on the threshold and led her back toward a nearby private room on the floor. He pulled her inside, closed and locked the door behind them.

Donna whirled on him, fists on her hips, arms akimbo, feet planted apart.

She looked like Wonder Woman minus the red, white, and, blue outfit and crown and lasso.

What the hell had he gotten himself into, and why had he let her provoke him? Sure, he’d had a rough day before she’d ever shown up and a pretty rotten, rough lifetime dealing with judgmental naysayers who thought they were better than him, at least more normal. But he knew Donna wasn’t like that, that she was different and didn’t see him as a freak the way Julie had. He’d felt it when he bonded with her, knew the inherent goodness in her soul.

“You’re not God, you know,” Donna said, snapping his attention to her doe eyes.

“I never claimed to be.”

“Yeah, well, I think I’m sensing some definite qualities in you that just scream ‘God complex.’ And I’m not going to be one of your fawning groupies.”

Chance frowned. “Where the hell are you going with this?”

“Nowhere at all. I just think you’ve let your abilities go to your head to think you can push me around as you please.”

His jaw dropped when he realized what was happening, the aroma of her arousal and ambivalence wafting to him like a telltale smoke signal. “I know what you’re trying to do.”

“Really?” She smirked.

“You’re trying to alienate me to protect yourself.”

She didn’t say anything, which was more telling than words could have been. And when she folded her arms across her breasts, he knew she was trying to avoid the issue.

He closed the space between them before she could erect a more solid wall and pressed her against the wall adjacent the closed door. Her bag slipped to the floor between them.

“I don’t like being manipulated, Chance.”

“How am I manipulating you? You think I had something to do with that monster trying to strangle you earlier?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

He bent his head to nuzzle her neck. “Then tell me how.” Goddess, he was going to do this. He was going to have her if she didn’t stop him. And this wasn’t the most ideal place or time to do it. It wasn’t how he had foreseen them finally getting together, but he wanted her so bad he felt light-headed from the stimulation. All the blood had left his brain and gone straight to his cock, making it pulsate behind the zipper of his pants until the little metal teeth mercilessly bit into his shaft and head.

He kissed his way from her throat to her chin, then back again, lower, until his lips brushed the lacey top of her bra.

She moaned deep in her throat, the sexy sound shuddering through his entire body, tightening his balls. He’d never been so close to the edge before, had never allowed anyone to get close enough to push him to the edge. Closeness meant rejection down the line. And he didn’t think he could bear to see that emotion glaring out of Donna’s eyes, not when he only wanted her approval and understanding.

Chance nipped her breast, then circled his tongue around the small bite mark as he brought his arms up around Donna to pull her close.

Her hands went to his head, burrowed deep against his scalp, and shot slivers of sensation straight to his groin before her fingers found the leather tie holding his hair in a ponytail. She yanked off the leather the same instant he lifted his head to claim her lips.

Her tongue swept into his mouth, hunger clashing against hunger, her purrs merging with his growls as she curved one leg up around his hip.

Chance caught a glimpse of her with Russ, his brother pressing her against a kitchen counter and kissing her. He didn't know whether he was experiencing the past or the future and squeezed his eyes against the vision to keep from seeing double. He tuned into Donna's consciousness instead, focusing on integrating his thoughts with hers. It wasn't difficult since she was so open to him now—physically, mentally.

He slid in slowly, however, giving her a chance to adjust to his invasion, the thick blue thread of his psychic energy unfurling and searching for her red one. It wasn't long before he found her pulsing force approaching and circling his.

Chance slid his hand under her skirt, teasing the rim of her lace panties with a finger at the same instant his energy coalesced with Donna's.

She gasped as he thrust his middle finger into her tight heat, the digit instantly becoming moist with her cream, the scent of her arousal a pungent sweet aphrodisiac. He couldn't have been more turned on unless he had his head between her legs and actually tasted her essence. His mouth watered at the mere thought, his psychic energy throbbing as hot and hard as his cock with the idea of slipping his tongue where his finger now probed.

Chance had never engaged his psychic ability during a sexual encounter before, never tried to synchronize his physical activity with his psychic activity and read his partner's mind, as well as her body. But Donna invited his touch on every level, her verbal moans and mental whispers like an advanced guidance system that told him

exactly where she needed and wanted to be touched to set her off. And Chance gladly followed where her body led him.

He slid another finger inside her, pressing her swollen clit with his thumb. She bucked in his arms, imprisoning him against her with that one strong leg, urging him on.

Chance turned and wiggled his fingers, exploring and brushing sensitive tissues and nerves in his quest for her G-spot. He delved further and curved his middle finger up toward her navel while he flicked her clitoris with his thumb.

Donna suddenly stiffened in his arms, fisting his hair and nipping and sucking his mouth with a hunger and ferocity that belied her businesswoman attire and façade. She was so aggressive and intent he could easily see her in the woods, bringing down prey like the intrepid lioness that she was.

Chance moaned at the idea of being her willing prey, held her as the orgasm rocked through her, reciprocally feasting on her mouth, feeding on her pleasure.

Several moments after the storm and several aftershocks passed, Chance pulled back from her just far enough to slide her skirt down. He watched, licking his lips as she unzipped it from the side and tucked in her red silk blouse, slowly zipped up her skirt, then buttoned the three buttons he had undone on her blouse sometime during his foray.

Goddess, he had been on automatic pilot the last half hour, instincts ruling him as they never had before. And still floating on a cloud of instinctive care, Chance reached out to fold down her collar.

Donna flinched and stepped back, looking at him as if he was a stranger, like he hadn't just had his fingers in her pussy and brought her to an explosive climax.

“Donna, what is it?”

“That shouldn't have happened.”

“But it did.”

“It was a mistake.” She bent to retrieve her bag, slipped the short strap over one shoulder, and moved past him to the door.

Chance didn’t try to stop her this time, though it killed him to sense such distance between them when he had been inside her only moments ago. But now he had been deemed a *mistake*. It wasn’t quite a *freak*, but it pierced his heart just the same.

He watched her turn the knob and open the door, a dull ache where his heart used to be. He almost reached for her with his mind, wanted to know what she was thinking, but his open invitation had run out. She had closed herself off almost the minute she came, her psychic energy ebbing away from him like an elusive dream he wanted to capture and relive.

She turned back like she sensed his need to link, then shook her head as if to shake off a bad experience she wanted to forget, and went out into the corridor without another word.

When Chance heard Donna’s exclamation of surprise a few seconds later, he rushed to the door to find her pressed against his brother’s chest.

Chapter 13

“What happened to you?”

Donna didn't know if Russ was referring to earlier, when he'd walked in on her and Chance in the treatment room and Chance's hand had been on her thigh, or if he meant just now, when Chance's hand had been in far more intimate places on her body, so she remained silent, and that was the biggest mistake of her life. Russ took her silence and must have let his imagination run away with him, for she watched him scowl at something behind her and turned to find Chance standing on the threshold of the private office from where she had just fled.

She saw the dazed look in his brandy eyes and hated herself for putting it there. She was not proud of herself, not by a long shot. She'd never been one to tease and lead a man on. She was someone who meant what she said and said what she meant, and she knew that she had plainly given Chance the impression that there could be something between them when she knew there couldn't be—not when she was a wreck around him and not when she didn't trust herself around that awesome power of his.

It was so insidious and alluring, so comforting and innocent when he reached out for her like a child wanting a long overdue hug. And she'd reached for him too, because she'd needed him, needed that mental touch, the vibrating reassurance that there was nothing wrong with her for needing and wanting.

How much more would she need and want him if she let this go any further? How much more out of character would she act?

Already she'd been reckless where normally she wasn't, not since her teens. But worse, she'd lost control, let her hungers dictate her actions, and come harder than she ever had in her life from just manual stimulation, and not that of a man. *She* knew what she needed to get off, knew exactly how to make herself climax. Her methods weren't ideal as much as they were practical and did the job. And when she was stressed and horny, that's all she wanted—to get the job done, no muss no fuss. That someone else knew how to do the job better and managed to engage her emotions and ego while doing it, that scared her.

She hadn't been scared when Chance had entered her mind and found and caressed her G-spot with expert precision. She was scared now, though, feeling shaky and vulnerable, as if she had done something inherently illegal and would be punished for enjoying it so much.

It couldn't be right for one woman to be as pleased as she was. It couldn't be right for one man to be able to please her like Chance had. *That* kind of pleasure had to be wrong. And if she felt this way with just one brother, how would she survive being with both of them when one had nearly succeeded in shattering her sanity with just the flick of a few fingers and his tongue?

She tilted back her head to better take in Russ's gray eyes, immediately struck once again by the differences in the siblings, though there was one thing undeniably the same about them—an almost palpable sexual magnetism.

Did Russ have psychic powers too? She suddenly wondered and didn't know why the thought hadn't occurred to her before now with the way he invaded her personal space at her apartment and in his truck as if trying to get a fix on her. But she didn't feel anything from Russ like what she felt with Chance, no connection to her mind, no melding of their souls.

Maybe Angela was wrong, and it was just Chance with whom she was meant to be, except that her body told another story, her heart

thrumming a syncopated rhythm in her chest while she fairly panted against Russ's chest.

It was too soon after her encounter with Chance to have to deal with Russ too. She found it hard to deal with him under normal circumstances, and the circumstances definitely weren't normal.

"Donna? Is everything all right?" Russ asked.

"Everything's fine."

Russ pointed his chin at his brother. "Did Chance say something to you?"

She looked from Russ, to Chance, and back to Russ again and finally asked, "Say something like what?" before it dawned on her. Was he talking about...? "If you mean did he talk you up to prep me for our little three-way, then no, he didn't."

"That's not what I meant."

How could she have *ever* entertained the thought of being with both these men at the same time? How could she handle it when she was barely holding on to her good sense just standing between them in a busy hallway?

Not to mention she didn't like the adversarial way the two brothers were looking at each other, testosterone whirring around her head until she was dizzy from it. She felt the aggression in the air and really couldn't countenance the idea of being the one to come between the brothers when they had already been apart for so long.

Russ must have sensed her discomfort, for he released her and stepped back enough to give her room to breathe.

Donna took advantage of the small distance and pulled in a deep breath before slowly letting it out. She reached out her hands and placed a palm on each man's chest before closing her eyes. She felt the rhythm of their heartbeats speed up to match hers.

That she was so attuned to these two men when she had yet to sleep with either of them astounded her. That she was already overwhelmed by her feelings for them should have been her cue to stay as far away from them as possible, but she couldn't move, didn't

want to leave them, though she knew it was the emotionally healthy thing for her to do.

She wanted them, had never been so greedy for anything, much less two men, in her life. And she knew they wanted her too. It was a heady trip being wanted so intensely, being at the center of two men's simmering lust.

It would have been so easy to take them by the hands, lead them back into Chance's private little room and allow them to take the edge off. Except that she felt much more beneath the surface than just lust. She felt their emotional baggage like a weight pressing against her chest. She felt the pain of losing their parents. She felt their loss.

Even as she thought it, their heartbeats stuttered, and Donna fisted their shirts spread across their hard, broad chests—Russ's a soft cotton T-shirt, Chance's an expensive blend button-down—their clean, musky scents grounding her in their reality, bringing her closer to their souls, bringing her closer to their past.

Donna gasped at the mini film playing before her mind's eye. She thought she might have been suffering from remnants of her moments with Chance, sharing his consciousness before the pictures started flashing back and forth between a young Russ holding and rocking a battered and bruised woman in his arms while they sat on a sofa, to a young Chance cradling the same battered and bloodied woman in his lap as he sat outside on the pavement.

Tears sprang to her eyes, leaked from her closed lids, and warmed her cheeks when she heard the cries of each boy, begging for the life of their mother, begging for her pain to stop, begging for help that never came.

How many children had she rescued from the same scene? How many battered women like Russ and Chance's mother had she helped? How many women like their mother had she not been able to help and consequently lost?

She used to think *she* had a lot of baggage. She *knew* she did with her unrelenting negative view of men. But she didn't have any of the

family issues that Russ and Chance carried around. With a battered woman, she was more than open to lend her emotional support. Against her better judgment and professional wisdom she sometimes got personally involved in some of her charges' cases, visiting them when they were settled in their new lives, long after the upheaval of their ill-fated, violence-ridden marriages.

She didn't think she could handle the same emotional baggage and scars in her lover, didn't think she had the strength for that sort of pain and psychological damage, certainly couldn't have enough left over after dealing with her charges every day at Safe Haven.

What a sad state of affairs and how ironic when she turned her back on two people in need, two people who genuinely needed help and about whom she genuinely cared.

Donna opened her eyes to peer up at each man and remembered telling Chance earlier that she had learned a lot from her gifted sister and brother, but apparently she hadn't learned enough to deal with this situation—Chance's powers and his and Russ's tortured souls. She hadn't learned nearly enough to deal with these.

Donna released them, shaking her head as she backed away from them. "I can't do this. I'm sorry, I can't..."

* * * *

Russ followed Donna's hasty retreat, eyes wide before he grabbed Chance by an arm and dragged him back into the room he and Donna had recently vacated. He closed the door firmly behind them, stopping just short of slamming it.

"What did you do to her, Chance?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. Did you use...your abilities?" He saw the hurt in Chance's eyes as soon as the words were out of his mouth but knew, even if he wanted to, it was too late to take them back.

“They’re a part of me, Russell. It’s not as if I can bury and forget about them like they don’t exist. I can control them, but not eliminate them.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“You’re saying a lot of things today that you don’t mean, aren’t you?” Chance tried to push by him, but Russ didn’t budge. “Do you mind?”

“She’s been hurt before. Badly.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

The fact that Chance knew she had been hurt, and probably exactly *how* and by whom, stuck in Russ’s craw. Chance’s abilities as they concerned this little affair-that-wasn’t gave him a decided advantage over Russ where communication with Donna was concerned, an advantage that average men dreamed of—being able to get inside the mind of a woman. And even though he knew his brother wasn’t the type of man to use his gifts indiscriminately, the fact was he had them at his disposal.

“She’s not a one-night-stand kind of woman,” Russ mumbled.

“You think I don’t know that too? And who said anything about a one-night stand? I’m in this for the long haul.”

“You haven’t been before.”

“That’s a cheap shot, Russ, and you know it.”

Russ didn’t answer, just stared and held his ground. His brother was right, and he knew he was being unfair, using Chance’s youthful indiscretions against him. His brother also wasn’t the type of man to abandon someone in need, wasn’t the type of man to just run out on a woman without a reason.

It made him feel just a little smaller when he considered what had made *him* finally leave his wife—self-preservation.

Was that why, in all this time, he had never heard anything about a woman being in Chance’s life? Had his brother had some bad experiences and just decided he was better off without anyone, or did he just stay away from women on general principal, knowing it was

easier to keep his secret if there was no one around to tell? Was fear of discovery what had taken him so long to make a move on Donna?

As if in answer to Russ's ruminations, Chance whispered, "I've wanted Donna since long before you came into the picture."

Russ didn't need to be reminded of how far behind in the game he was or how much catching up he needed to do to become as familiar with Donna as Chance already was.

Damn it, why was he making this into a competition? Making his brother out to be the enemy now when they had been in agreement just the other day?

That was before he had seen Donna and Chance together. That was before he'd seen his brother's hand on her thigh and the attractive way her peaches-and-cream complexion pinkened beneath Chance's attention.

Russ sighed and forked a hand through his hair, angry with himself for giving into jealousy and frustrated at the situation that was forcing him to virtually make a choice between his brother and the woman he knew could assuage the fire that had been raging in his soul long before he could put a name to the twisted desires he harbored.

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I thought I could handle this."

"I think Donna thought she could too. But in addition to not being a one-night-stand kind of woman, I don't think this unconventional scenario we've all been thrust into is exactly her cup of tea either, no matter what her sister thinks."

Russ didn't want to, but he had to ask. He and his brother had been apart for a long time. He didn't know what sort of philosophies his brother had adopted in addition to the New Age religion he followed. Add this to the generational gap between them, and who knew what his brother was and wasn't into.

Could it be any more or worse than what you're into? “What about you, Chance? Is this scenario your cup of tea?”

Chance flushed, lowering his long-lashed lids like a guilty little boy. “I’m not sure, but I’m willing to do what I have to to make Donna happy.”

Russ agreed, but looking into Chance’s sculpted, smooth face reminded him of just how much younger than him Chance was— younger, more naïve, and probably a lot less jaded. Sure, he was a man and had almost certainly done and seen some things that Russ would never do and see, just as Russ had done and seen things he never wanted his brother to know. But Chance was still his baby brother, no matter how much of an adult he was now or how old he got.

He wondered if Chance still had the nightmares.

Speaking to him the other day hadn’t been as enlightening as it could have been, just the two of them catching up on what the other had been doing in recent years. Chance had glossed over most of his time spent in the Peace Corps, didn’t at all touch on what had made him come back to the States to become a doctor, but Russ had a feeling it had been something momentous, probably traumatic. And when Chance had asked him about his time in the service, Russ hadn’t mentioned his introduction to the world of BDSM by a Marine buddy, nor had he mentioned his frequent visits to a club that specialized in the fetish. He focused his conversation on his trip back, when he had settled down to make a home and a life with Suzie.

Russ had seen the admiration in Chance’s eyes then, the longing and loneliness when Russ spoke of his ex-wife and kids. What would he think if he knew that every day of his good-but-average married life, staying away from the dark side that nourished his soul, Russ had died a little inside? What would Chance say if he knew his brother was a freak?

Thinking about it now, he wondered just what he would do if Donna *was* willing to go along with this threesome. How would he

keep a rein on his hungers with Chance in the picture? How would he keep that side of his nature a secret?

Domination and submission wasn't just about the control one person exerted over another and the other's acceptance, though it was a large part of what went on between a Dom and a sub. D/s was, at its core, about honesty and trust—the trust each party relinquished to the other. At its best and most intense, the submissive put not only her pleasure and happiness in her Dom's hands, but her life. At its twisted and worst, it resembled something like what had been between Russ's mom and stepfather—a control freak man bent on violence to keep his *partner* in line and a woman and enabler too afraid to say no for fear of being deserted and left alone.

Russ didn't want Chance to see the Dominant side of him and get the wrong idea or worse, have flashbacks to a father he barely knew except through flickers from his brother's memories. But how was he supposed to avoid Chance finding out about him in an intimate setting sharing a woman they both wanted to please and protect?

The main reason he wanted to be with Donna was because he knew he could be himself with her and not be ridiculed, that he sensed something in her he needed and craved, and he had something in him that he knew she wanted and needed. They were a match.

Where did this leave Chance?

Where did it leave all of them?

Chapter 14

When Donna stepped through her apartment door, she had but one thought on her mind—a relaxing, hot bath with a scorching romance to keep her company. Paperback or one of her e-books on her Sony Reader, didn't matter as long as it was something hot.

After her encounter at the hospital, she *needed* a cold shower, but in her heated condition, it wouldn't stay cold for long or cool her off. The heat she was in wasn't something that the outside temperature could help. She was warm to her core. Warm and wanting and she needed to hold on to the sensual vibe for as long as possible since she didn't know when she'd stumble upon it again.

Donna shrugged out of her light trench, toed off her pumps, and hung her keys on the pegboard behind the front door after she locked it.

Padding through the apartment, she disrobed further until she reached her bedroom in just her panties and bra, not even bothering to check her messages or flip on the halogen lamp beside her much-loved recliner.

She needed to wind down in the worst way and didn't want to know what was going on in the outside world right now. Whoever had called could wait.

Donna trudged back into the living room to check on and feed her fish. At least they were a more calming influence than a blinking message light that she refused to acknowledge until she was good and ready. She knew it was Angela. She had been ignoring her sister's calls to her cell since she had left the hospital to go back to Safe Haven.

She could only imagine what her sister had to say, and in the mood she was in, she didn't think she would take very kindly to being told what her next move should be to secure her future with Chance and Russ, a future that was highly debatable as far as Donna was concerned.

She hated running and hiding, but she was just too tired to deal right now. If it wasn't for the fact that she really did feel perfectly fine, with no headache or nausea or other aftereffects of her earlier attack, she would have thought she was having a relapse. But Chance had taken care of her too well for that. Chance had healed her.

Donna was still a little disturbed by the ramifications of that little fact hours after the incident, still a little doubtful that she hadn't hallucinated the scene in the hospital after she had thrown up and passed out—or more accurately, after she had been put to sleep.

She shivered at the concept. The idea of being totally vulnerable and at anyone's mercy, especially a man's, was totally alarming to her. It didn't matter that the man was a trusted and skilled physician, a professional. But it did matter that it had been Chance, and she knew in her heart that he wouldn't let anything bad happen to her on his watch. But what mattered even more to her was that she was attracted to him, dangerously and irrevocably attracted to the man who'd held her consciousness in his hands and linked with her gray matter.

The phone rang, and when Donna leaped a foot in the air, she realized just how jumpy she still was after Luther's attack.

She checked the caller ID and, sure enough, Angela's number glared at her.

Donna made an about-face and headed to the kitchen, where she retrieved a glass from the cupboards and a bottle of chardonnay from her wine rack, and then carried her booty with her to the living room. She turned on her CD player, filling the apartment with the plaintive, mellow wails of David Sanborn's saxophone, drowning out whatever irate message she was sure her sister was leaving as she continued on to the bedroom.

Donna sat on the edge of her bed, poured herself a glass of wine, and took a long sip before setting the bottle on her bedside table. She went to her bathroom, peeled off her bra and panties with her free hand, and sat on the edge of the tub to run her bath. She ran it as hot as she could stand it, pouring in a liberal amount of her favorite vanilla-scented bath oil before taking another sip of her wine.

The slight buzz was pleasant, but did nothing to erase the feeling or memory of Chance in her head. Maybe if she got drunk?

She castigated herself for thinking about taking the wimpy way out. As persistent as he was, it wasn't like Chance wouldn't be up in her face tomorrow or the next day. It was bad enough she was ignoring Angela and putting off facing the music.

Once the tub was two-thirds full, Donna eased into the hot, fragrant water, reveling in the slippery feel of the bath oil against her skin. She drained the glass of wine and placed the it on the floor beside her before closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the tub.

As soon as she got comfortable, she realized she had forgotten to bring in a book from her shelf, but it was no big deal. She had another idea to make her bathing experience scorching, slowly sliding a hand down between her legs to tease her labia lips for several torturous moments before stroking her vulva. She fidgeted in the water, moaning as she spread her legs as much as she could, and her moisture sluiced onto her fingers and into the water.

Donna slid in her middle finger, wishing she were in a Jacuzzi with the jets running full blast, or that she had B-O-B with her or that...Chance and Russ were there.

"Oh God..." The image of them standing in the hallway towering over her, sandwiching her, was enough to make her vaginal muscles spasm and contract against her finger.

She delved deeper, not usually as adept with her fingers as she was with B-O-B, but she remembered the path Chance had taken earlier and instinctively followed it, curving her finger up toward her

navel. Pumping her hips against her hand, she slowly turned and wiggled her finger until she found the spot she was searching for, unmindful of the water she sloshed onto the tile floor in her efforts.

With her free hand, she cupped one breast, caressing the soft skin leading to her swollen nipple. Experimentally, she pinched and rolled it between two fingers at the same time she stroked her finger against her G-spot. Pinwheels of light immediately flashed before her eyes, and she bit down on her bottom lip to keep from screaming out when a climax tore through her.

“Chance...” She sighed as his grinning face flashed before her, only to be replaced with Russ’s in the next instant. “Russ...” She reached out to touch his jaw, half surprised, especially after her supernatural experience with him and Chance, that she couldn’t feel his whiskered cheek against her palm. He looked so real, so solid—both of them did.

She whimpered as their faces slowly disintegrated before her, cursing her sister for ever introducing her to Russ, cursing herself for asking Chance to escort her to the barbecue.

Donna didn’t need this emotional upheaval in her life. She had enough to handle dealing with her women and kids at Safe Haven. She had enough to keep her on her toes, keeping the peace between men bent on violent rages and their helpless victims.

Right now she felt a little like a helpless victim herself. At the very least, she was a victim of her out-of-control libido and imagination.

The phone rang again.

Donna sighed, knowing she couldn’t hide forever.

She hopped out of the tub and grabbed a towel, quickly wrapping it around herself and tucking it in across her breasts on her way to her bedroom. She made it to the phone right before her voice mail would have picked up, snatching off the earring in her left ear before picking up the receiver.

“Hello, Angela.”

“Why haven’t you returned my calls? And what happened to you earlier?”

“Who says anything happened to me?”

“I had a feeling.”

“You and your feelings.” Donna fidgeted with the label on the chardonnay bottle before she unscrewed the cap. She remembered she left her glass in the bathroom a moment before she tilted the bottle up to her lips and took a swig. So unladylike, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

She listened to Angela sigh on the other end and squared her shoulders in preparation of the tirade, but her sister completely took the wind out of her sails when she whispered, “Are you okay, Donna?”

“I’m...I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“I had a premonition earlier. And when I didn’t hear back from you...I just got worried.”

“I, uh...I had a little incident at the courthouse earlier,” Donna said, mentally biting her tongue but wondering if what had happened had been what Angela had intuited.

“What kind of incident?”

“It’s nothing to worry about.”

“You wouldn’t have mentioned it if it wasn’t. Talk, Donna.”

She blew air past her lips in annoyance, sorry she had mentioned anything at all. “A client’s husband went on a little rampage, and he came at me in the hallway after a bail hearing.”

“Came at you? In what way?”

“He attacked me, okay? But it’s nothing.”

“Were you hurt? Did you go to the hospital?”

Resigned, she said, “Yes and yes. And you’ll be happy to know I saw one of my, according to you, soul mates during my visit.”

“What I’d be happy to know is that you’re okay.”

“I am. I told you that.”

“How is Chance?”

“He and his brother are fine.”

“Russ was there?”

Donna took another swig of wine and felt totally out of control and hopeless when she realized she’d finished it. Damn, she’d never done that before. It was just a hop, skip, and a jump to Betty Ford from here. She knew some social workers who’d gone to rehab—if they hadn’t quit the profession altogether—for much less than what had happened to her today. She guessed she should count her blessings she was still holding on to some semblance of sanity after the day she’d had.

“He was there with a coworker who I’m assuming had been injured on a job.”

“Oh. Did everything turn out okay?”

“As far as I know.” She didn’t want to tell Angela she’d been too busy getting diddled in a private office of the hospital by Chance to know *what* had happened to Russ’s coworker.

“Who was this coworker with Russ anyway?”

“How would I know?”

“Just describe him.”

Donna did, as best she could from the brief glance she’d gotten of him on her way out of the treatment room, and heard her sister sigh, as if in relief, on the other end of the line. “Angela, what’s this all about?”

“Just being cautious, I guess. As you should be.”

“I am. Today caught us all off guard.”

“You need to watch yourself on that job, Donna, be more careful.”

At least she wasn’t giving Donna her usual lecture about being such a workaholic. But she wasn’t so sure that the warning about her safety was any less bothersome.

She had already been a wreck getting home, jumping at every shadow on her way to her car, worried if there were any more angry husbands or boyfriends lurking around, just waiting for their chance to hurt her. Even once she got to her neighborhood she didn’t feel

safe, felt like she was being followed. Not until she had arrived outside her apartment building and soon after gotten behind the relative security of her double-locked door did she feel a modicum of security.

Wanting to change the subject and lighten the mood a little, Donna asked, “When were you going to tell me that Russ was coming to your Memorial Day barbecue?”

“Who did tell you?”

“Russ did, the night he drove me home.”

“Then there was no need for me to tell you.”

Donna gritted her teeth. “Angie...”

“So, did Chance treat you during your visit?”

Boy did he. Gave me some serious sexual healing. Marvin Gaye’s got nothing on me! “He consulted. I think it would have been a conflict of interest for him to do anything more.” She wouldn’t dare tell Angela about that little sleeping spell he’d put on her before he’d healed her. She didn’t feel the need to share what Chance could do despite her sister’s background. She didn’t think Chance would appreciate her spilling his secrets, not even to a kindred soul like Angela.

“So, did anything...happen while you were at the hospital?” Angela asked.

Donna heard the hope in her sister’s voice and wondered exactly to what she was referring—Chance and Donna’s sexual antics or their psychic bonding. Either way, she was sure she didn’t want to talk about it, but knew Angela wasn’t going to let things go that easily.

Stalling, she asked, “Anything like what?”

“Don’t make me spell it out.”

She almost laughed at her sister’s huffy tone, but didn’t want to rile her any more than she already had. Besides, she could probably use the opportunity to pick Angela’s brain, she decided. It wasn’t like she could really hide anything from the woman. Why try? But she still hesitated, unsure how to broach what she had experienced at the

hospital with Chance without giving anything away, unsure exactly what had happened.

Was she going mad, or did she have some sort of powers too now? What else could explain the melding of her and Chance's souls that she had experienced? Had all that energy been from him? Or had being exposed to his psychic talents awakened psychic abilities that had been dormant in Donna all along, dormant and waiting for the right provocation, the right person?

"Donna, if there's something bothering you, tell me. Maybe I can help."

"There is something, but I'm not sure how to—" Donna didn't get any further before she heard a loud crash in her living room.

"Donna, don't step on the glass!"

She was inches away from doing just this when she came up short right in front of a mound of shattered pane. Already panting, she rushed around it to go to her living room window and pull back the curtains to glance through the remaining glass. She didn't see anything untoward except a nondescript truck across the street, speeding away from in front of her building.

Remembering she still had her sister on the line, she asked, "Was this the premonition you were talking about earlier?"

"Never mind that, Don. Hang up now, and call the police." Angela didn't give her a chance to discuss it before she hung up herself.

Chapter 15

Chance jerked awake and almost rolled off the cot he had fallen asleep on in one of the spare offices in the ER.

He checked the illuminated dial of his watch, shocked he had slept past the end of his shift. He was shocked he had been allowed to. It was totally unheard of for a weekend in the concrete jungle. Maybe someone had decided to give him a break and let him get some shut-eye for the first time in twenty-seven hours. Or maybe it was just plain slow.

Either way, he needed to get up and get out of here now before someone decided they needed him to stay past his shift, and since he was still here...He needed to find Donna.

Chance closed his eyes as snatches of the dream came back to him—Donna struggling with an unseen stranger, brutally beaten, beaten bloody and rushed to the emergency room, his emergency room, where he hadn't been able to help her. He'd been left to watch her die—like he had watched his mother slowly slip away, in his arms, on the skid-marked pavement.

He swallowed hard at the thought that he'd been able to, at a younger age, save his dog, but years later couldn't save his mother under almost identical circumstances. He had never really gotten over that. He'd loved that dog, but if given the choice, he certainly would have taken his mother over the dog every time.

Seeing and treating Donna earlier in the day after she was attacked, the memory of the cruelty that had been visited upon her must have carried over into his sleep. But that was too simple an

explanation, and something told him Donna was in for more danger and mayhem at that job of hers and needed to watch her back.

He had much respect for her passion and the job she did and wished his mother and Russ had had someone with half her passion to champion them when his dad, Hank, had been in the picture. But he couldn't deny that he would rather see her in a job that didn't put her at as much risk as her current position.

But was it the job that put her at risk, or like him, her passion and personality that put her in the line of vengeful husbands and boyfriends' fire? Her passion was such to put her in the line of fire no matter what job she had.

Chance got up to leave the room. He avoided the assignment board as he searched through the treatment rooms to see if Donna had been brought in. Remnants of the nightmare clung to his consciousness, but the nightmare grew weaker the longer he looked and didn't find her.

Maybe it had just been a dream and not a premonition of things to come. Maybe she was all right.

A cloud of darkness and foreboding remained with him, however, a cloud that he didn't think would lift until he saw Donna in the flesh, touched her, smelled her. Talking to her on the phone would do nothing to alleviate the ache he felt at the idea of her being hurt and alone with no one to comfort or heal her.

Chance made it to the locker room unharassed, retrieved his backpack and helmet, then quickly shrugged out of his lab coat and replaced it with his leather jacket.

He checked in with his staff one last time before he left and headed for the parking garage where he kept his bike, a sense of urgency powering his steps.

Something told him the danger to Donna was real and not just a dream. Something told him he needed to get to her because she wasn't out of danger—not yet.

* * * *

Surprisingly, the police had come and taken down her statement long before the glass repair people had arrived to start doing their thing. Not that she had much to say to the police. She didn't get a license plate of the truck, the only and best description she could give them a general dark color and a late model.

Good luck with that.

The large rock that had been thrown through her window was another story and had been confiscated in an evidence bag by CSI. Hopefully it would yield more than just the open threat that had been scrawled across its surface in Day-Glo green block letters.

Mind your business, and let the men handle their women the way God intended...or else.

What a meticulous, holier-than-thou bastard to search for and find a smooth and large enough rock on which he could write out his complete-sentence threat. Why was it violent nutjobs always quoted the big man to give credence to their wacked-out beliefs and causes? At least his English teacher must be proud of his clarity, coherence, and concision. It certainly was a step up from the usual harassment and names that men flung her way—"interfering bitch" and "nosey slut" chief among them.

At least the authorities were taking the threat seriously. She suppose they had to after the incident at the courthouse earlier and considering her high profile in the community and standing on the hit list of numerous bitter boyfriends and husbands citywide.

She'd even been assured by one of the original officers on the scene that he would have someone pay Luther a visit in his cell for a little confab to see if Luther had reached out to any of his friends on the outside who might have done the deed.

Alcohol buzz long forgotten as she sat in a corner of her sofa watching the glass repairmen do their work and the police clear out of

her apartment, Donna took a deep breath for the first time in the last few hours.

The phone rang, and Donna didn't even have to look at the caller ID to know who it was before she picked up. "Hey, Angela."

"How're things going?"

"Okay."

"Are the police still there?"

"They're clearing out now. The glass repairmen will be done soon, hopefully, and then I can be alone."

"Is that what you really want?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Donna arched a brow as if her sister could see her, wondering what Angela was up to now. But before she could even open her mouth to ask, she saw the most delicious vision crossing her threshold that she could have ever hoped to see—and dreaded.

"Angie, what have you done?" she asked stupidly when it was so plainly obvious what her meddling sister had gone and done, unless she was hallucinating.

"Is Russ there?"

"I'm hanging up." Donna took the receiver from her ear to press the off button to the decidedly tickled-pink giggling of her sister.

She stood on suddenly unsteady legs to cross the room and met Russ halfway in the middle of her living room.

He paused in front of her, all broad-shouldered, six feet three inches

of him, scanning the terrain around himself as the last of the police and CSI unit left her apartment. "Angela called me."

"Don't you live nearby her in Wantagh?"

"I do, but I was on a job in Manhattan when she reached me on my cell. And I'm glad I was close by." He searched her face, frowning. "Did you speak to your sister?"

"I just got off the phone with her."

Russ chuckled and shook his head. “Must have been fun growing up with someone who always knew what was good for you.”

“Well, counting my parents, I had three of those.”

“Lucky you weren’t any lower on the totem pole of siblings or you would have had even more.” Russ reached out to rub her arm, obviously restraining himself since the glass repairmen were still there. She could feel the tension in his body, feel the coiled energy beneath his fingertips, and she knew he wanted to do more than rub her arm, just as she wanted him to do more than rub her arm—much more.

She looked up into his gray eyes, her nipples tightening, responding to the heated expression in his look. She wanted him to rake her with more than just his gaze.

“I was low enough. But then you wouldn’t understand, being the big, bossy older brother and all.”

He just grinned, neither denying nor admitting. He didn’t have to because Donna knew the deal. She knew he was just as arrogant and pushy as Bo had been, with the potential to be just as violent as the men she shielded her women from every day.

So what made him different? Why did her body trust him?

Because your body doesn’t know any better and is running on pure hunger and lust.

But there was something behind that smile, a regret and sadness that made her remember the glimpse she had gotten of a young Russ comforting his mother on the sofa, a young Russ who had been angry at his stepfather and felt helpless because he could not stop the man from hurting his mother.

How many kids like that had Donna comforted in her time as a social worker? How many women like Russ’s mother had she sheltered and steered from the clutches of their abusive spouses toward freedom?

How many abusive men like Bo and Luther had an abusive childhood like Russ's? How many had witnessed violence in the household to make it to adulthood unscarred?

Donna swallowed at the thought. She knew the statistics were not in her or Russ's favor since a good amount of children who were abused or witnessed their mother being abused became abusers themselves.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Donna shook her head as if to shake off the bad memories and focused on Russ's face. "Looking at you like what?"

"Like you've seen a ghost."

She had seen a ghost, a ghost from her past.

She kept trying to tell herself that Russ was not like Bo, but she hadn't known how Bo was until it was almost too late and she was well into a several-month-long relationship with him—a relationship she kept secret from her family, especially once the violence started.

Maybe deep down she had known what a bad seed Bo was, but drunk on her first taste of independence away from her family, she had been willing to do anything and everything to keep it and prove that she could handle things on her own, that she was in charge of her own life.

Coming from her large family, especially with her bossy, controlling older sister and two overprotective younger brothers who thought it was their God-given right to tell the females in their family what to do and how to live, being in control of her own life had been important to Donna. She recognized, too late, that this craving had led to the bad decisions she had made with Bo, had led to her staying in a bad relationship much too long.

Decades later, with a seemingly unassuming Peter, she hadn't been given a chance to rectify her bad decisions, as Peter took the reins and did it for her when he asked for a divorce after just nine months of marriage.

Looking back now to the way she had been and the choices she had made in a mate, she wondered how intact her bullshit radar was, if she was even capable of making a good decision where men were concerned.

She looked up at Russ, thinking how her decision had been taken out of her hand in choosing him when Angela proclaimed he was her soul mate. Since Angela obviously had much better decision-making processes than Donna where relationships and romance were concerned, Donna thought she should feel completely safe around Russ.

But she didn't—not completely. Even without the little connection she had made with him at the hospital, she felt the rough-edge darkness inside him. It was a darkness she recognized and understood so well because it was inside her.

She didn't know if these similarities were a healthy thing or not, or if this was why Angela thought they made such a good match. If this was the case, what did this say about Chance? She didn't feel the same darkness in him. What made him her soul mate?

“Ms. Vega?”

Donna turned to see one of the repairmen standing at the door with his tools packed and at his feet and the other at her side with the bill for her to sign.

Her heart stuttered in her chest at the idea that she would soon be left alone with Russ, but she reached out to take the clipboard and affix her John Hancock to the bottom of the page. She thanked the repairman on automatic pilot then watched him follow his partner out the door as if everything were normal and hunky-dory in her life when it was far from it.

Russ squeezed her arm and headed past her toward the kitchen. “How about I make you some tea to help you relax,” he threw over his shoulder in a tone that didn't allow room for argument despite him wording it as a request, a tone that plainly said she shouldn't get any ideas about teasing him for his willingness to act the domestic diva.

Nothing about Russ's body language or pitch indicated request or appeal. He had taken charge of the situation, and he had only just arrived, what, a couple of minutes ago?

Donna didn't have a chance to think about how she had gone through so many changes in the last twenty-four hours—from miserable, to paranoid, to orgasmic, to frightened, to tumultuous, to damsel in distress, and back—before matters went to surprising when Chance stepped through the open door, out of breath and fixing her with a stare that could melt steel.

“Are you okay?”

Wordlessly, she nodded, too dazed to form a coherent sentence and wondering when Angela had had an opportunity to call Chance too.

Damn, the woman was in rare form with her meddling this evening!

Chance took several steps into her apartment, stopping just in front of her with his hands jammed in his jeans pockets as if he was afraid to touch her.

Her skin tingled in anticipation of his touch that didn't come. She closed her eyes, concentrating and reaching out to him with her mind to see if she could persuade him as he had done with her, just a little shocked when she made contact and visualized his blue thread of energy pulsing with life.

Was this what it was like for Angela when she saw people's auras, when she read their future, or had premonitions? Did she see things so clearly, so solidly?

“I'm okay,” she whispered, trying to reassure him. She sensed he needed it more than her. She sensed the nightmare he'd had earlier and wanted to ease his fear and tension. She didn't know how often he used his gift, but wondered how he kept his sanity with the ability to get into another's mind. Her own mind was a veritable minefield of unpredictability. She didn't think she could handle the constant doubt and anxiety of another's thoughts and feelings, much less her own.

“It was just a dream.”

“It wasn’t just a dream. You’re in danger.”

“From who?”

Donna turned at Russ’s deep baritone as he came into the room from the kitchen, balancing a cup and saucer in his hands when he made his way over to the sofa, the ceramic gear looking like a child’s tea set in his big hands.

She smiled at the thought, the scent of honey and cinnamon wafting across the room to her, and Donna wondered how Russ knew it was her favorite flavor among the several different ones in her cupboards.

“I’m not sure yet. But I saw her, beaten and bloody.”

“Hello!” Donna held up her hands and made a time-out sign. “I’m right here, guys. No need to talk about me in third person.”

“Sorry,” they chorused.

If she thought Russ had taken charge, Chance wasn’t too far behind him, going back across the room to close and lock the door in a definitive manner that plainly said he didn’t plan on going anywhere until he was satisfied she was okay.

How he planned to get that satisfaction was beyond her.

Shakily, she went to the sofa and reached for the teacup. She inhaled the aroma as she lifted it to her mouth and took a sip. The touch of cinnamon exploded on her tongue, infusing her senses with a taste of spice as the honey cut a smooth, sweetened path across her tongue.

Sugar and spice, like the two men in my life.

Giggling, Donna sat back on her sofa, sure Russ and Chance thought she was mad, but not caring. She took another sip of tea before replacing her cup on its saucer and gazing up at the two men towering over her, the force of their excitement a palpable thing, making her damp.

She closed her eyes again, imagined being engulfed by these two men, even more than she was now. She wanted to experience them

fully, experience their power and masculinity unleashed as they invaded her, rocked inside of her, and made her scream.

Her eyes flew open to stare at each of them in turn. She'd already decided what she was going to do, the only thing holding her back the same thing that had been holding her back from most romantic relationships all her life, the one thing that lurked just beneath her duty.

Donna opened her mouth, knowing there would be no turning back once she admitted this one thing to them that she had never admitted to another soul in her life. "I'm afraid."

Chapter 16

Russ and Chance took a seat on either side of her, both silent—watching and waiting, giving her room to breathe and decide what her next move should be.

She silently thanked them for giving her space, each of them keeping their distance without leaving her alone.

Alone was bad, especially after what had happened to her, and the very last thing she wanted right then, though, like her fear, she would never have owned up to it before a minute ago, at least not out loud.

She thought about what Chance had said, about having seen her beaten and bloody. In her line of work, with the enemies she was sure she had made, it wasn't a far-off possibility and probably nothing Angela hadn't had nightmares about at least a dozen times since Donna had become a social worker and finally taken over Safe Haven. The difference with Chance was the fear Donna had seen in his eyes when he'd looked at her, like he was seeing a ghost or had expected her to be dead, or at the very least near death. The difference was that Chance's fear seemed a sure sign of imminent danger whereas Angela's feelings had always been an amorphous thing hanging over Donna's head, more a side effect of what Donna did for a living.

She decided not to try to read Chance again, didn't want to open herself up to that kind of pain and uncertainty. She had enough of her own to deal with. But how could she avoid it if they got intimate? Would being with him and his brother together muffle Chance's telepathy or intensify it? Could Russ's presence act as a buffer?

Donna turned to look at him and wondered what he would think of the designation. Would he be flattered or insulted? Would he feel used, or would he make the situation work in his favor?

“Whenever you’re ready to talk about this, Donna, let her rip,” Russ said.

“We’re here for you,” Chance put in.

Both of them were here for her—not one man coming to her rescue, but two. She had two pairs of shoulders to cry on, two sets of shoulders to give her comfort.

After so many years of providing comfort and support to others, never asking for any for herself, in fact, insisting that she didn’t need any help or want it, this situation was alien to her—alien and pleasant.

“Will you both stay with me if I ask you to?”

“Just say the word,” Russ murmured.

“You don’t even have to ask,” Chance said.

“I’m saying it, and I’m asking.” Donna licked her lips and turned toward Chance before she flung her feet up to gently rest on his lap.

He just barely released a gasp, and she withdrew her feet and pulled her knees toward her chest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He reached to stretch her legs back across his lap. “You didn’t. You just surprised me.”

“I surprised myself,” she admitted, smiling. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard after all. She thought it right before she glanced over her shoulder to take in Russ’s heated expression. If Chance’s gaze could have melted steel, then Russ’s could have powered a nuclear plant.

Her heart stuttered in her chest before she turned back to Chance. She was breathless.

He had taken off her flip-flops and put them on the floor, kneading the bottoms of her feet with his thumbs.

Donna closed her eyes and moaned. She couldn’t remember the last time she had had her feet massaged, couldn’t remember the last time she had had the time or company for the luxury.

“That feels so good,” she whispered.

“Good,” Chance said.

She leaned her head back and felt Russ’s hands in her hair, lowered her head farther until it rested in his lap. His arousal was a potent scent in the air, the brush of his erection against her cheek making her pant with the idea of tasting him.

Donna licked her lips again. She had never been so hungry for a man before. Had never been so hungry for two men, she corrected herself when she felt Chance’s fingers whispering across the skin of her calf, his hands climbing incrementally until he reached the crotch of her Daisy Dukes.

He cupped her, pressing his thumb against where he obviously thought her wanting clit was. He was accurate, of course, the shockwave of sensation from his touch causing the bud to instantly swell and rub against her thong in a painfully enjoyable way.

The sensation of Russ’s hands in her hair and Chance’s fingers rubbing up and down her slit had Donna writhing on the sofa.

When Chance reached for the button and zipper of her cutoffs, undoing them in record time, his actions catapulted Donna from a state of controlled anxiety straight to desperate need, her conventional behavior and ideas momentarily skewed by her desire.

She lifted her hips up to help Chance divest her of her shorts. He took them and her thong off in one fell swoop. Russ took that moment to cup her face with both hands and lean in for a kiss. His tongue dipped into her mouth at the same instant Chance’s finger dipped into her pussy.

Donna thrust her tongue against Russ’s with greedy force. He swallowed and echoed the moan she released when Chance put his mouth on her pussy and pressed his tongue against her vulva in one long, voluptuous stroke.

She whimpered, shuddering beneath the dual onslaught. The blitz on her senses was too much—too much and not enough to make her forget all about the Luthers and Dehlias of the world. She wanted to

forget them, forget about her trip to the hospital and all the pain and angst, and enjoy herself for just this once, enjoy what she had been given, what had been provided.

Chance buried his face in her cunt, voraciously licking and sucking as if he couldn't get enough of her, coming up for air only long enough to nibble on and thumb her clit, doing his damndest to launch her into oblivion.

When Russ slid one hand down her Henley top to cup and fondle her bare breasts before gently pinching one taut nipple, Donna pitched her hips into Chance's mouth, burying her hands in his silky hair and holding on for dear life. She sunk her teeth into Russ's full bottom lip, anchoring herself in each man's reality right before she came on a violent rush of sensations.

But they weren't through with her yet, and Donna wasn't nearly through with them.

Russ reached for the hem of her top and pulled it up and over her head before discarding the shirt across the room, leaving her completely naked while he and Chance were still fully clothed. Rather than feel vulnerable, she felt empowered—slightly chilled but empowered.

She moved to her knees, straddling Russ as she went for his belt with single-minded purpose and hunger. She had the belt and button undone before he picked her up, sat her back on the sofa, and stood to unbutton and shrug out of his shirt.

With a sharp intake of breath, Donna admired his hard-muscled torso, mesmerized by the tribal tattoo covering his left arm from shoulder to elbow. She followed the light brown hair dusting the area between his pectorals, a thin trail arrowing down beyond his navel, beneath the top of his boxers.

He toed off his cross-trainers as she watched him, then slid his pants and underwear down to the floor before stepping out of them and his socks, finally standing before her as naked as she, his hard cock jutting at her like a weapon.

Donna almost forgot she wasn't alone with him before she heard Chance's heavy breathing behind her. She turned to look at him and saw that he was as mesmerized by Russ's nakedness as she was. Or maybe it was the situation that had him flushed and perspiring. She knew it had her excited and scared and hypnotized all at once.

"Come here."

At Russ's low growl, Donna dragged her eyes away from Chance as he started to undress and turned back to his brother who had moved back to the sofa. She was standing between them again, each on opposite ends of her couch, staring at her like hungry predators.

She should have been afraid of being ripped apart beneath the force of their lust, but instead looked forward to doing some ripping of her own.

Russ extended his hand, and, summoned, Donna closed the distance between them until she was standing a hairsbreadth away from him.

She wrapped her hand around his hot, throbbing shaft, her fingertips just barely meeting around the width of him.

Russ arched his neck, hissing at her grip, the sound just barely masking the noise of a wrapper being opened behind her.

She glanced over a shoulder just in time to see Chance donning a condom before he stepped to her, his arms coming up to encircle her waist.

Donna leaned back into his sinewy, smooth chest, the moist head of his penis teasing the crack of her ass as Chance cupped and fondled her breasts and bent his head to kiss her nape.

Russ advanced until she was pressed between them, finally, just like in her fantasies.

Her breath quickened, blood rushing through and heating her entire body until she felt like she had been thrust into a furnace.

Russ produced a condom from Donna-didn't-know-where, but when he put it in her hand, she didn't care where, just that he had one, had thought ahead. "Put it on me."

Donna nodded at the command, ripped into the foil with her teeth and fingers, her hands shaking as she reached for Russ. He stepped back to give her room to work. She slowly slid the latex down over his erection, caressing and squeezing his tight balls and watching him shudder.

Chance pressed closer, sliding a hand between her thighs to tease her soaking cunt with his fingers, to make Donna join his brother in trembling.

“You taste so good, Donna.”

She closed her eyes at the sound of his voice so close to her ear and squeezed her legs together, imprisoning Chance’s fingers just after he slid two of them inside her.

“My turn,” Russ growled as he went to his knees before her, spreading her pussy lips wide with his thumbs as Chance removed his fingers and slid his hands back up to her breasts. He manipulated her nipples with gentle flicks and tweaks until Donna cried out.

Russ lapped at her vulva, plunging his tongue inside her like a man who’d been starved of a craving for far too long, alternately stroking and sucking, working in tandem with Chance as if they had done this a thousand times before.

Had they?

Donna barely had a moment to consider the question before she felt another orgasm barreling down on her. She felt the cold heat of it riding her spine, but Russ surged to his feet just as her vaginal muscles contracted.

“I want inside you when you come.”

And the forceful timbre of his voice said that he always got what he wanted.

A ridiculous argument formed on the tip of her tongue at his arrogance, an argument she couldn’t even put a voice to when he lifted her up against him, an argument that she knew she could never win.

Donna automatically wrapped her legs around his waist, rocking against his pelvis, rubbing her slit against the inviting, ridged hardness of his shaft before he lifted her further.

She stared down into his intense gaze as he lowered her onto the tip of his penis and was awed by his strength right before he thrust into her. Donna gasped, curling her body around him.

He held her like this for a long time, not moving, just effortlessly supporting her weight, and groaning when she squeezed her inner muscles around him.

After an endless moment, he slowly rolled his hips, grasping the globes of her ass tightly and spreading her cheeks wide, opening her for Chance's access, again working in tandem as Chance stepped closer.

She felt the blunt head of his cock gently nudging against the tight ring of muscles at her back hole before he slowly penetrated her.

Donna's breath hitched in her chest at the flash of pain, the shock of being impaled in the front and the back. She held on to Russ's neck tight, buried her face against the skin between his shoulder and neck, and sunk her teeth in.

Russ held her against him firm, thrusting into her and simultaneously lowering her onto Chance's cock. Chance pushed further until he was seated to the hilt.

"Oh God..." Donna held on to Russ, panting, totally stuffed and imprisoned between them. She couldn't have moved if she wanted to, and damn, she didn't want to, couldn't imagine the emptiness of not feeling these two men against her, around her, inside her. It was as if this was always where she was meant to be, *how* she was meant to be, claimed by two men, claimed by these two men.

"Are you okay?" Chance asked, slowly rocking against her, kissing his way across her back and inhaling the scent her skin as if she was nourishment.

"I'm fine." She was more than fine. She was great considering the way the day had started out.

Donna looked into Russ's gaze. She was consumed by the power of his gray eyes. "Are you?"

He grinned and thrust against her. "What do you think?"

She moaned and cradled her mouth against his throat again, sucking and licking the sore spot she had bitten.

"Are you ready to come?" Russ asked.

"What do you think?" Donna chuckled, but Russ immediately replaced her amusement with a flare of lust as he picked up his pace and drove into her from the front while Chance thrust up into her from the back, matching Russ's rhythm.

Donna had nothing to do except let them take her, please her, and whimper at the ecstasy of it as they filled her.

The sound of thunder built in her ears as her body reached and reached and reached until it grasped its well-earned crescendo. Donna hurtled over the edge, welcoming it, keening and squeezing her legs tight around Russ while bearing down on Chance.

Like everything else, Russ and Chance convulsed in unison, each releasing hoarse shouts until Donna wondered if they were twins—two halves of the same whole.

And they each belonged to her, if Angela was to be believed.

For the first time since her sister had been making predictions about and interfering in all her siblings' love lives, Donna thought she might finally be a believer.

Chapter 17

Chance reluctantly slid out of Donna, bracing himself, holding her waist as he leaned in to kiss her smooth, delicate back. “I’m going to get rid of this,” he whispered, referring to the condom, but he didn’t think she or Russ had heard him. It was just as well.

He needed to get away, be by himself for a moment, too overwhelmed by the emotions and thoughts buzzing in the air.

He hadn’t been so vulnerable and open since he was a teen and had started to learn how to control his abilities and put a lid on what he received. But once he had immersed himself in the circumstances, he hadn’t been able to turn back, shut the valve, Russ’s and Donna’s desire and hunger an emotional and physical banquet, drawing him in and firing his own lust.

Chance stumbled to the bathroom, his head light and legs wobbly as he leaned against the door jamb for support. He turned on the light and took several deep breaths before peeling off the condom and dropping it into a nearby wastebasket. He went to the sink, turned on the cold tap, and splashed a few handfuls of water on his face.

He took one of the fancy paper towels from the wire mesh basket perched on the carpeted toilet tank to pat dry his face, taking a few minutes to enjoy his plush, vibrant surroundings, from the sparkly burgundy tub to the burgundy-and-tangerine underwater motif shower curtains and matching shag rug before the toilet.

He put the burgundy toilet lid down and sat on the seashell image, his eyes closed and head between his legs like someone preparing for a crash landing on a plane, which was appropriate since no good could possibly come of this relationship despite Donna’s current state

of satisfaction and serenity. Crash-landing was about the only outcome for all of them.

Chance could feel Russ's possessiveness all the way from the living room, saw the things his brother wanted to do to Donna—how he wanted to bind and blindfold her, spank her, make her submit and come at his command—and wondered how Russ had ever allowed Chance close enough to breach Donna, *helped* his brother take her from behind, without ripping Chance's face off. That's how strong Russ's psychic brand was, the fierceness of it flaring from his aura like a neon hands-off-my-property sign.

The really wild thing about all this was that Chance was turned on by the bondage and submission fantasy. He'd never been turned on by the idea of either before, but seeing it from Russ's perspective, *feeling* it, made him hot.

Was it hereditary, this sickness, this need to dominate a woman?

Chance trembled at the thought, didn't like comparing Russ to his father, didn't like thinking that *he* was like his father, a man he barely knew except through the violent images he had foolishly purloined from Russ.

Was what Russ enjoyed a sickness? Or was it just his way of expressing love, the only way he knew how?

Chance used to think that he was a bad person and a coward to shy away from relationships, especially long-term relationships that involved too many questions and too much intimacy. But seeing how Russ dealt with intimacy just put a whole new spin on the relationship game for Chance, let him know he wasn't alone in his dysfunction.

Someone knocked on the doorframe, and Chance jerked up his head to see Russ standing on the threshold of the large bathroom, clad in his jeans and cross-trainers and holding his shirt and Chance's boxer briefs in one hand.

He tossed the underwear to Chance, stepped into the room, and closed the door behind him before he put on and started to button up his shirt. "We need to talk."

Chance stood to put on his underwear, feeling a little less exposed and glad for his brother's thoughtfulness.

Russ took up a spot several steps away, sitting on the edge of the tub. "You know."

Chance took his seat back on the closed toilet lid, looked at Russ, but didn't respond, couldn't.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think."

"You know what to think. You just don't want to hurt my feelings."

That and he couldn't countenance the idea of standing in judgment over anyone, especially Russ, especially not when his own backyard was far from in order.

Nonetheless he asked, "How can you want to treat a woman like that after the way my father treated our mother?"

"It's not the same thing, Chancellor."

He gritted his teeth at Russ's familiar ploy to throw him off-balance. "How is it different?"

"It's complicated."

"I'm not a kid you have to protect from the real world, *Russell*."

"It's different because I would never do anything to Donna that she didn't want me to do. I would never hurt her."

"Don't you mean you would never hurt her the same way my father hurt our mother?" Even if Chance hadn't had the ability to read his brother's mind, the tic in Russ's jaw beneath the five o'clock shadow told him that he had hit a nerve.

"Let me ask you this, Chance." Russ stood and took a few steps closer. "You've been in her mind. I know you have. What do you think Donna wants? What do you think she craves?"

Chance didn't want to think about what he felt when he was in Donna's mind, the bizarre and unfathomable urges that drove her.

What woman wanted that? What woman derived pleasure from being treated the way Russ wanted to treat Donna? What man derived pleasure from *treating* a woman like that?

You do, Chance! You and Russ do.

“Let me put it in terms you can relate to. Like you and Angela being Wiccans, the fetish that Donna and I engage in is a way of life guided by a set of definite principles and rules. And the same way your faith has its followers who engage in the black arts to hurt people and get what they want is the same way BDSM has its followers who don’t always employ safe, sane, and consensual practices. And SSC are the guiding principles I subscribe to, the principles of a healthy BDSM relationship.”

Russ paused here and stared at Chance as if to make sure he was getting everything before he continued. “I would do anything to make sure no harm came to Donna. I would do anything to please her, Chance. That’s what being a good Dom is about—protecting what’s yours. But in order for me to do that and satisfy my urges, as dark as you think they are, Donna has to trust me. Nothing less will do. And she doesn’t. Not yet.”

“You want me to leave you alone with her. Is that it?”

“No. I’m going to leave you alone with her because she does trust *you*.”

“How can you say she doesn’t trust you?”

“Believe me. I know what I’m talking about. Donna only thinks she trusts me because she wants me. But I don’t think she would have let what happened here tonight happen if you weren’t here too. And I’m pretty damn sure I would have handled things a lot differently and probably scared her off if you weren’t here, as subtlety isn’t my forte, and it’s been a long time since I’ve been in the Life. I’m out of practice.”

Great. His brother was out of practice, and *he* was totally without a clue.

Chance almost laughed when he remembered how Donna had considered Russ a buffer against Chance's abilities while the reverse was reality—he was Russ's buffer, his brother's in with Donna.

Chance stopped short of shaking his head, his brain and emotions overwhelmed by all the information Russ had just fed him. He wasn't sure he was any more ready to deal with this and trust Donna and Russ as much as Russ evidently trusted him.

He stood to face his brother, didn't know whether to expect a hug or a punch, so when Russ thrust out his hand for a shake, Chance gratefully took it.

Russ jerked him forward and pulled him into a half hug, holding him as he whispered in Chance's ear, "Take care of her, Bro. She needs you."

* * * *

Russ leaned his forehead against the bathroom door and took several deep breaths to prepare himself to leave Donna and Chance in the apartment alone and to their own devices.

It was eating him up inside, took every ounce of self-restraint in him, to walk down the hall back to the living room to say good night to her. And when he saw the anxious expression shining out of her mink-brown eyes, his lungs and heart constricted, making it hard to breathe.

She was back in her Daisy Dukes and Henley shirt, and the fact that she wasn't naked should have mitigated his hunger, but the outfit only intensified it, especially when he remembered exactly what was beneath the hip-hugging, sexy-ass shorts and the form-fitting top—pert, luscious breasts; round, voluptuous derriere, and the tightest sultry-hot pussy he had ever had the pleasure of sinking his cock into.

As short as she was, at least to his six-three, her shapely, creamy legs went on forever, and when she walked across the room to stand

in front of him, Russ's dick swelled at the sight of them eating up the distance between them.

She stared at him for a long time before speaking, as if searching for evidence of a fistfight or other physical confrontation that had happened between him and his brother.

"Everything okay?"

"Of course."

She arched a brow as if she didn't believe him.

Russ didn't blame her. He wouldn't believe him either because things were far from okay between him and Chance, and he was beginning to wonder if they ever would be okay again.

For the better part of his teens and early adulthood, he had worked to be the best mentor and guardian his brother could ever have, at eighteen taking on the responsibility of mother and father with the same dedication and intensity that he took on everything. The idea that the gifted little boy whose nose he'd wiped and whose diapers he'd changed more than three decades ago saw him as anything less than honorable and a man to emulate and admire hurt him more than he could have ever thought possible, more than he wanted to admit.

He lived his life not worrying too much what people thought about him, except those closest to him, the ones who counted. And he didn't realize until now how much he wanted his brother's approval, how much he needed it.

It made him wonder how Donna would deal with his kink. If Chance was having such a hard time dealing with it, what would she think about it despite her desires? How far would she go to deny her true self, maintain her regular status quo, and act like fucking two men at the same time was the standard? How far would she go to act like she had not been changed by what they had done here tonight?

True, he sensed in her a natural submissive, but despite her years, she was also inexperienced. He'd wager to guess she'd never been in a BDSM relationship, probably didn't understand half of the desires she had, how to get what she wanted, or what to do once she got it. He

would be literally starting from scratch with her, which was probably well and good, since he was so out of practice himself. They'd learn the ropes together as he trained her.

Working up his resolve and reaffirming his intentions centered him, made him see this situation a little clearer. They both needed time and space to deal with what had happened tonight. And he needed to start mapping out exactly how he wanted to pursue Donna and not alienate his brother.

The most important thing he needed to do was keep the lines of communication open—between himself and Chance and Donna. Sounded simple, but he knew from fourteen years of marriage that it was anything but.

Suzie had not been a happy camper when he finally revealed his kink, and how important it was to him, to her. She especially hadn't appreciated that he had been hiding such a basic part of his nature from her for so long and in the name of protecting her. Never mind the fact that she *hadn't* been able to handle his hungers and didn't want to engage in anything outside of non-kinky sex, which proved his point.

But the thing that had hurt her the most was the idea that their more-than-decade-long marriage had been a farce. For a long while after the divorce, she'd had a little complex about her ability to please any man, not just Russ. Russ made it his duty to let her know it wasn't her, it was him, his kink, and his displeasure with their sex life had not been a failure on her part, but his.

He realized he would have to do some of the same ego stroking with Donna and, to a lesser degree, Chance, to make them see things his way. That was another side to the Dom nature, the ability to persuade and lead.

Donna stepped closer, wrapping her arms around his waist as she rested her head against his chest. "You have to go."

It was simultaneously a statement and a question and let him know exactly how confused she was by all that had happened, not just

tonight, but the entire day. Yep. Time and space was what they all needed.

Shit. Being the understanding, self-sacrificing good guy seriously sucked sometimes. He thought he had gotten over this little weakness after he'd made his confession to Suzie and gotten divorced. But that ever-present need to care for another at the expense of his own happiness was ingrained, probably going back to his trying to make up to Chance all that he had lost as a kid.

Russ nodded in response and gently squeezed Donna to him, relishing the vanilla scent wafting up from her hair and skin. He trailed his hands down her back to her ass, cupped the full, firm cheeks, and lifted her off the floor, into his arms to whisper in her ear.

"I have to get back to my kids. I don't want them to wake up in the morning and I'm not there. Otherwise..." He let the sentence hang, not sure himself what he would do if he stayed, just assuming that she'd let him.

Donna nodded. "Duty calls."

"Chance will take care of you. And you should let him."

"Is that an order?"

He pulled back to look at her, remembering a couple of instances during their limited scene when she had paused with a look on her face that said she took umbrage with his tone, instances where he had doubted she'd do his bidding.

He had been so turned on at the idea of her defiance, had hoped that she would push his limits so that he could begin to push hers. But Chance had been present.

What would have happened had his brother not been there? How far would he and Donna have gone? Might they still be at it, Russ properly initiating her into the world of Dominance and submission and teaching her about the woman, the sexual being, she could be?

Russ shook his head, trying to erase the vision of her facedown and spread-eagle on the bed, her beautiful, round ass, flushed and

warm from his spanking, pointing to the sky, totally inviting and open to his control and touch.

“It’s an order,” he said, keeping all lightness and teasing out of his voice, purposefully using his commanding Dom voice.

She looked at him but didn’t say anything, and in that silent moment, Russ wished like hell that he had Chance’s gifts and could read her.

What must that be like? How did his brother handle it without totally losing himself in other people’s thoughts, in other people’s lives? How did he not exploit it as often as he could?

“I can take care of myself,” Donna finally said.

“We’re going to have to talk about that in more depth the next time we’re together.”

“My feelings aren’t going to change on the subject.”

“Maybe they will once we discuss it.”

“You think you’re going to convince me to be a sniveling, weak female?”

“There’s nothing weak about needing someone to lean on.”

“Who said I want you to be that someone?”

Russ smiled, his cock hardening the more she challenged him.

Damn, he had missed this—the give and take, the negotiation process, the role-playing, the final submission of a bottom when she realized that she had met her match and Dominant and was meant to obey him no matter how much it went against her liberal upbringing.

Russ slowly loosened his hold and let her slide down the front of his body until her feet touched the parquet floor. His glance didn’t leave her face, and he liked that she didn’t take her gaze off of him as he slid his hand down the front of her snug shorts, even though her eyes widened and she gasped as he brushed the back of his fingers against her.

She was wet, sopping, and he leered as he turned her around, pulled her back against him, and bent his knees to cradle his erection against the giving solidity of her ass without removing his hand from

her shorts. He slipped two fingers inside her to the second knuckle, rubbed her clitoris with his thumb, and closed his eyes when she whimpered.

“*That* says you want me to be that someone.”

“*That* is just a physiological reaction.” She panted.

“It’s just sex, huh?”

She nodded, evidently too busy groaning as he stroked her to articulate further.

“Believe that if you want to, Donna. We both know the truth.” He didn’t give her a chance to respond before he removed his hand, spun her back around to facing him, and claimed her mouth with a punishing kiss—all tongue and teeth and invasion—a lesson and a reprimand.

When he released her, they were both breathless, though he hid his state a lot better than she did, if he did say so himself.

He backed towards the front door, never taking his gaze off hers as he lifted his fingers to his mouth, blatantly licked his fingers, and caught sight of her saucer-wide eyes and unhinged jaw right before opening the door to leave.

Let the training begin.

Chapter 18

Whore. Slut. Bitch!

He watched Russ leave the building, looking undone and frazzled, and knew that he, and his brother, had fucked that heifer.

Where was the pretty boy now? Had Russ left him to bat cleanup, or had there been some kind of altercation to drive Russ away?

He gripped the steering wheel with such force he could see the veins popping out on the back of his hands. He wished that the steering wheel was that bitch's neck.

Russ didn't even look twice in his direction as he crossed the street to get into his own SUV. It went to show just how preoccupied he was by that woman and the situation, just how stressed.

He didn't like it, knew he could do better for Russ, would treat him much better than that liberated woman with her loose morals.

If he was smart, he'd just go in there and pummel her and the pretty boy into bloody pulps, but that was too sloppy, too spontaneous. He didn't want to deal with them when he was in this frame of mind. He wanted to be clearheaded, confront them after he'd planned exactly what he wanted to do to them, so that they'd know it wasn't anything personal. It really wasn't. They were in the way of him getting what he wanted, and they needed to be eliminated—simple as that.

He watched Russ get into and start his vehicle, pulling the seatbelt across himself and buckling it with one hand as he pulled away from the curb. Heart lodged in his throat, he saw Russ drive away until his SUV became a mere speck on the horizon.

He decided not to follow, though it took everything in him to stay put and see what his rivals were up to.

He knew he was taking a chance hanging around after the rock-throwing incident, but he was compelled, couldn't pull away from what he had wrought.

Damn it! This was not how things were supposed to turn out tonight. He hadn't intended to draw Russ closer to the woman, much less for them to fuck. And he certainly hadn't planned for the brother to show up, a happenstance that still had him befuddled.

He'd only wanted to introduce discord in the heifer's life, make it look like one of her clients' husbands or boyfriends was out to get her, thereby driving away any prospective romantic interests. But he should have known the reverse would happen, that Russ would never turn away from a woman in need, would never leave someone of the weaker sex to fend for her herself. And this was why he loved Russ, why he wanted him for himself—the man's unerring sense of loyalty and responsibility to those he cared about.

He wanted to be in that circle of people Russ cared about. He wanted to be the *only* one in that circle—the center of Russ's universe.

* * * *

Donna stood in the middle of her living room stunned, fingers touching her lips that Russ had scorched, squeezing her vaginal muscles to stave off the tingling emptiness that beset her pussy after watching him lick her juices from his fingers with too much delight.

Bastard!

She wanted to kick something, and since his ass wasn't readily available and everything within reach was relatively solid and immovable and would probably result in a broken toe or two, she balled her hands at her sides, growled through gritted teeth, and stomped her feet like a two-year-old throwing a temper tantrum.

Chance walked into the room at the height of her pissed-ivity, and she stopped mid-stomp to give him a sheepish look as her face flushed with heat.

He merely looked at her with an arched brow, grinning as he retrieved his pants from the sofa and commenced to put them on.

Donna watched him zip and button up his pants thinking it was such a waste of time since she fully intended to get them off of him as soon as possible. And before she lost her nerve, she walked over to him as he was buckling his belt. She ran a palm up his smooth, bare chest, his skin so warm and inviting, the smoothness so different from the curly hairs that dotted Russ's chest—different but not necessarily bad, not at all.

“Going somewhere?”

“I didn't want to just walk around your place in my underwear.”

“So you plan to stay for a while.”

“As long as I'm welcome.”

Not like his brother who would probably force himself where he wasn't welcome, just because he thought he was right to do it, and who cared what anyone else thought?

“You're welcome.”

He nodded, glancing at her from beneath those gorgeous long lashes. “What happened with you and Russ?”

“I might ask you the same thing.” Now it was her turn to arch a brow. She waited, and when he didn't say anything, she asked, “Going over strategies for your next seduction scene?”

He chuckled, slipping his arms around her waist in such a comfortable way she couldn't begrudge him the maneuver. “Did it seem like we were ganging up on you?”

“I wouldn't exactly call it that.” Ganging up would imply some sort of violent grudge match, and she certainly hadn't been the victim of any gang-banger Bloods or Crips.

No, she didn't feel ganged up on at all. She had been catered to and sated in every way possible, fantasies she hadn't even known she

possessed had been fulfilled, and she was looking forward to more, *wanted* more—with both men.

She held in a sigh at the idea of their missing third. She didn't want Chance to think he was a consolation prize. She didn't think of sex with him that way at all, just wanted more, wanted the complete package she had earlier received and didn't think she could settle for less ever again.

But even with all that she had done with Russ and Chance, as much as they had done *to* her, she still sensed a missing part, something more that they could have done to her, something more that her body and psyche wanted from them.

"Three's a magic number," Chance murmured, pulling her closer and angling his body so that his knee rubbed against her clit.

Donna moaned and glanced up at him in a daze.

"*School House Rock* on Saturday morning. 'Three Is A Magic Number' was one of my favorite songs from that show."

"I keep forgetting you can do that," she said.

"I'm sorry. It was just hanging out there, and I couldn't help but grab on to it. I'm not usually so reckless with it."

"That you can control it at all is a miracle." She squeezed his trim middle, meaning it. "*You're* a miracle."

"We try."

She giggled as she reached for his belt and unbuckled it. He was reaching for her shorts a second after she had already undone his pants and was pulling them down over his hips.

From here it was a race to see who could undress whom the fastest, and Donna was not disappointed when she won, stepping back to take her first good look at Chance naked.

His bronze skin glimmered beneath the light of the room, and she knew he would tan beautifully in the summer sun. She put her hands on his chest again, all the velvety soft skin stretched across the broad expanse of his chest and shoulders so tempting she couldn't resist.

He was built like an Indian warrior, hard and cut in all the right places, a long, lean body ready for battle in any arena—whether it was fighting for someone’s life in a hospital emergency room or coming to her rescue after the attack of an unknown assailant—he was there.

Donna’s hands moved down his body, over the sectioned ridges of his abs, down to the impressive erection already leaking pre-cum and protruding from a curly nest of hair at his groin.

She licked her lips, wanting to taste him the way he had tasted her, the musky scent of him making her mouth water.

Donna slowly slid to her knees, wrapped one hand around his hot shaft, and noticed that he was slightly slimmer around than Russ, but he more than made up for it in length, maybe about an inch longer and enough to satisfy her.

Then why are you thinking about Russ?

She took a deep breath, inhaling the intoxicating aroma that was uniquely Chance, and leaned forward to tongue his slit. She scooped out the pearl of liquid as she squeezed his shaft.

Chance groaned and closed his eyes, his hands instantly going to her head and burying in and fisting her hair. He didn’t move any further, stood frozen as if waiting for her next move, her next form of torture.

Donna didn’t disappoint, dipping her head toward his groin and swallowing him to the base, his downy hair tickling her lips as she sucked him. She reached for his balls, seizing them in a soft but firm grip, fondling them while she milked him with her mouth.

Chance panted, arching into her but stopping just short of pulling her head forward and holding her in place. She knew he wanted to. She didn’t have to be a mind reader to know what she was doing to him, not when she felt his legs quivering beneath her, not when she had him hovering just beyond a climax.

Donna picked up her rhythm, moving her head up and down the pulsating length of him, alternately sucking and licking as she

pumped his shaft with a fist. Her *pièce de résistance*—slowly easing her middle finger inside him searching for his prostate—sent Chance orbiting before she found and massaged the spongy gland, and he shot into her mouth with such force Donna thought she would drown.

“Donna...Goddess!”

The pressure of his fingers in her hair increased suddenly, just for a moment before his grip softened, and he caressed her hair, sliding his hands down to gently cup her face.

Donna looked up at him from her kneeling position and noticed the expression of adoration shining out of his brandy eyes. She wanted to live up to that look. She knew that if she told him what she needed from him, what she wanted him to do to her—what she knew Russ would and could do—he’d see her differently, think less of her.

And she couldn’t bear that.

* * * *

Chance lay in the bed spooning against Donna’s back as the morning sun spilled through the opened blinds and curtains to warm his bare back.

He sighed and squeezed her closer, cradling a rampant first light hard-on against the inviting cushion of her ass. Wanting her even closer, he flung one leg over her hip, imprisoning her against him and wishing he could stay this way—in the bed with her in his arms—forever.

He didn’t want to look at the clock and know how close it was before he had to rush off in order to make it to the hospital in time. He needed to go home first, of course, and grab a shower and a change of clothes before he took his bike uptown to the Bronx.

“What time is it?” Donna mumbled into the pillow she was hugging.

“Don’t know.”

She released her pillow and turned in his arms to hug him instead.
“Aren’t you even interested?”

“I should be.”

“But your not.”

“Not in the least.”

She chuckled and pulled out of his arms to slide from bed.

Chance held on to the bedcovers that she tried to drag with her and use as a toga, and when she turned and huffed at his thwarting her efforts, he laughed and hopped from the bed to circle her. “What are you trying to cover up? I’ve seen you naked.”

“A moment of weakness.”

“The sex or your letting me see you naked?”

“The naked part.”

He wrapped his arms around her from behind. “You don’t need to be self-conscious about your body around me.”

“You have to say nice things like that if you want to fuck me again.”

He tried not to wince at her use of the F-bomb, especially when it was the furthest thing from the truth. True, he wanted inside her again, as many times as he could, as many times as she would allow. But he was just as happy standing here holding her and feeling her soft warm skin against his.

He knew what she was doing, and it hurt him to think that she still felt the need to distance and protect herself—her heart—from him.

Chance fleetingly wondered if she would act the same way with Russ, but then remembered the way she had been flipping out after Russ had left, how near ripping her hair out with frustration she had been. Maybe she would have distanced herself from him too by now.

“I’m saying it because you’re beautiful to me whether I wanted to fuck you or not.”

“You’re such a charmer.” She eased out of his arms and turned and stood on her toes to kiss him on the nose. “Want some breakfast before you leave?”

“If you’re having some with me.”

“What? I’m just making breakfast for you and not myself? Get real. This isn’t Japan, and I’m not going to stand behind you and wait for you to finish eating before I do.”

“Touchy, touchy.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

He reached out to smack her ass as she started to walk away.

She froze and flung back a hand to cover and rub the reddening spot before turning to him with a slow, sensual smile.

Chance felt her heartbeat and pulse speeding. She noticed her dilated pupils, the flush in her cheeks, the scent of her arousal heavy in the air.

She was turned on!

Okay, so it was just a playful slap and not an outright spanking, but something in the look she gave him, something that said she would welcome more, firmer punishment, made his cock twitch. And when he caught the stray notion from her, blasting out loud and clear—*More! I can take more. I need more*—his cock grew exponentially hard with Donna’s prurient thoughts.

She could take more, but he was sure he couldn’t, didn’t know how to give what she wanted and didn’t know what he was doing there, with her, alone.

He felt so out of his league, floundering in a sea of unrecognizable desires and emotions, and felt like a true third wheel when there were only two of them present.

The specter of Russ persisted—so raw, robust, and knowledgeable, so alpha—in every nook and cranny of the room so that Chance felt like he couldn’t compete, didn’t know if he wanted to, not like this, not in a game where he didn’t understand the rules.

I’m not a quitter! If you don’t know something, don’t understand, then you need to go out there and learn about it. Educate yourself.

“You coming?”

He shook his head to clear it, staring at Donna now standing across the room on the threshold and clad in a throwback Knicks jersey and her flip-flops.

She looked so innocent and sophisticated at the same time, so untouchable and yet accessible, that he thought he had imagined her unfathomable thoughts of a moment ago. Certainly someone who looked as easygoing and nonchalant as she did right then couldn't harbor the dark wants and needs that he had read in her.

He was in denial, didn't want to believe that Donna was the woman Russ thought she was. But he couldn't deny what he had seen and felt. He couldn't deny that there were layers to her character that were still a mystery to him, layers that he wanted to peel back and explore because he wanted to know her, every part.

“Chance?”

He closed his eyes and swallowed. “I'm right behind you.” He felt her confusion as she paused at the door jamb before finally turning to go down the hall to the kitchen.

Chance inhaled her psychic scent, immersing himself in her soul's signature and accepting that he would have to learn some things about himself and Donna in order to be with her. He would have to forget the past and trust someone other than himself, something he hadn't done in a long time. And he would have to do and accept something he hadn't done in almost two decades.

He would have to admit to Russ that he needed his help.

Chapter 19

Russ thought he was more excited about the barbecue than his kids were, and they were pretty excited, especially at the prospect of meeting their dad's new *girlfriend*.

Russ had been evasive the last two weeks about Donna—especially when he hadn't heard from her and she refused to answer his calls—only going as far as admitting that he was *seeing someone*. He made that enough for Wes and Kim when he went no further. No use in giving them information they could take back to their mother, intentionally or not, at least not yet.

Kids were kids, and Suzie was their mom. He couldn't see them not sharing with her who their dad was dating, not unless he specifically asked them not to. They were pretty good kids that way and could be discreet when the situation demanded it. *But* they were still kids and human beings, at that. Human beings had slipups through no fault of their own.

What would happen the next time they all got together and the kids realized that their Uncle Chance was part of their father's girlfriend equation? Better to just keep them in the dark as much as possible, although he knew eventually he would have to come clean to Suzie if things went the way they looked like they were going to go.

He was not willing to back off, and he knew Chance wasn't either, not after consummating their little threesome.

Russ had resigned himself to working together with his brother to earn and share Donna's affection and trust. With the passion that he sensed lurked beneath all that corporate gear and those emotional

walls, he figured Donna had more than enough to go around for him and his brother to share once it was ignited.

Problem was getting a hold of Donna to talk since she had been running scared.

Russ continued to tell himself to give her time, knew that she needed space to adjust to the new status quo, but he also knew that if he gave her too much time and space, she would try to retreat into denial and act as if what she and he and Chance had done hadn't happened. He couldn't let her do that. He had to find a way to bring her around the way Chance was slowly coming around.

Russ smiled at the tentative strides his brother had been making trying to accept Russ's dominant side. His brother had even reluctantly agreed to visit a fetish club with Russ to get a feel for what happened between a Dom and his sub. It wasn't the sort of relationship that could be easily explained. It had to be experienced, and there was a certain amount of intuition that went on between a Dom and sub which, Russ thought, Chance should have been really good at, considering his gifts.

But ultimately, the only real experience had to be learned on the job, hands-on, when the three of them—him, Chance, and Donna—were together.

Chance couldn't learn about personal dynamics visiting a fetish club—only about the overall techniques and codes of conduct and maybe the power exchanges involved in a D/s relationship. He had to experience the real deal with Russ and Donna as each of them brought their own issues to the table—personal demons and issues unique to the three of them and that could be worked out in a scene.

Just the idea of playing out a scene with Donna and his brother made Russ hot. He only hoped Chance would have the stomach for it when things got down and dirty, as they inevitably would. It was one thing to be willing to learn and wanting to please Donna, as Chance professed, but another thing altogether to watch a female, a woman

about whom he cared—more than likely loved, Russ thought—being disciplined by his brother.

Russ heard his cell phone as he got out of the shower and marched across the master bedroom to catch the call. “Hey, Chance.”

“It doesn’t look like I’m going to be able to make it, at least not until much later. The ER’s shorthanded, and I’m filling in.”

Russ didn’t know whether to be disappointed or happy. If Chance didn’t make it to the barbecue, that gave Russ that much more quality time to spend with Donna, granted surrounded by her family and his own kids. That is if she decided to show up. He wouldn’t put it past her stubborn ass to bail.

Russ grinned at the idea of punishing that stubborn ass with a well-deserved spanking. “Isn’t shorthanded a perennial state in city hospitals?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Duty comes before love, then, I guess.”

“It’s not like that, Russ.”

“You chickening out?” Russ was honest enough to admit to himself that he wanted Donna for himself, but he didn’t want to win her by default, and he knew that she had genuine feelings for Chance that needed to be resolved.

Chance shocked him when he said, “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous.”

“You? Mr. Intrepid? Nervous?”

“Running away isn’t being intrepid.” Chance sighed. “Protecting our shores and raising a family—that’s intrepid.”

“Chance...”

“No, I mean it. You did something I don’t know whether or not I can ever do.”

“Settle down?” *More like settle period.* Chance didn’t know how hard it had been for him to finally come out to Suzie and admit his nature.

“I love Donna, Russ. And I don’t think I can do those things to her.”

“Even if it’s what she wants?”

“That’s just it. I can’t reconcile myself with victimization and desire.”

It was obvious that Chance was more traumatized than Russ by his father’s behavior toward their mother. If he wasn’t more traumatized, then he was differently traumatized. And Russ wondered how this was so when Chance had barely been walking when his father left and hadn’t experienced any of the violence Russ had. At least he hadn’t experienced it firsthand.

Was he being too cold and calculating not take into account his brother’s feelings and the accuracy and vividness of his gifts?

“Donna’s not a victim, Chance. It may seem like that during a scene, but trust me, the very dynamics of the Dom/sub relationship demands that the sub is the one calling the shots.”

“I just don’t see it.”

“I thought we had gotten past this.”

“I did too. “

“So, what are we going to do when we’re all together? I know you’re not giving up.”

“No. I just need...”

“Time?” Russ provided.

“I’ll get over it. I’ve gotten over a lot worse.”

“That’s my man.”

“Why are you doing this, Russ?”

“Doing what?”

“Encouraging me? Fostering this threesome? I know how you feel about her.”

“It’s not only up to me and you whether this threesome moves forward. It’s ultimately Donna’s decision, and I’ll respect what she decides.” Except that now, her absence made it appear that she had decided not to have anything to do with either him or Chance. Russ

knew better. He just needed to get her alone in a room for five minutes to convince her that she needed him as much as he needed her.

He could point out to Chance how Donna-the-sub had been calling the shots just by not returning their calls, her silence in itself the epitome of a power play. But he didn't think Chance would appreciate the paradox, at least not right now.

"Even if her decision is to choose me?" Chance asked.

"I only want what's best for her." But he'd be damned if he would be going down without a fight.

* * * *

Donna stood naked in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom wondering what to wear to Angela's barbecue, wondering if she should go at all.

I'm not a coward.

Yeah, tell that to her knocking knees and her pounding heart.

The idea of seeing those two men again had her whole body tied in knots...and tingling.

Oh yeah, her body was definitely hot and tingling all over with anticipation.

She thought she might be able to handle Chance one-on-one, nothing about him as intimidating as his brother. She could negotiate with Chance, get her way. She knew the same couldn't be said for Russ. He wasn't so enamored that he couldn't see her faults, didn't adore her in the same starry-eyed, gentle way Chance did and surely wouldn't let her get away with anything. He saw right into her soul and seemed to know exactly what she needed. Well, he knew exactly what *he* thought she needed. But he was wrong. And he wasn't the boss of her!

Donna put her hands on her hips, turned her body this way and that, examined it from every angle, and wondered what about her signaled kinky and freaky to Russ.

Perhaps the fact that you sweated the evening away with him and his brother inside you at the same time was a clue. Gee, ya think?

Her phone rang, and Donna leaped across her bed to catch it, already knowing who it was. She took off her earring at the last minute and put it on the bedside table, silently reminding herself to put it back on before she left. She had lost more earrings this way when she was away from home and had to take a phone call.

“Hello, Angela!”

“Did you look at your caller ID, or are you getting as good at this stuff as I am?”

“I just know my big sister. And yes I’m still coming.” *I’m coming against my better judgment.*

“Just checking.”

“What would make you think I’m not?”

“What happened the other night when Russ and Chance came over?”

“Guess that birdie’s been singing again,” Donna grumbled.

Chance wouldn’t have mentioned his visit to Angela, would he? Would Russ? Would either man go running and tattling to her sister or asking for advice on how to get her back into bed? Worse, *had* Angela had a vision and knew what the three of them had done? Oh God!

Donna’s body heated at the mere idea that Angela had had a vision of her and Chance and Russ together and getting busy and...Oh God!

Angela chuckled. “Don’t be angry at the birdie. She only sings when she has something essential to impart.”

“Whatever.”

“So? What happened?”

Should she be like Russ and plead the Fifth? Like it would do any good with a pit bull like her sister.

Taking a deep breath, Donna said, “Russ came in while we were on the phone, as you know. Said you had called him...”

“Uh-huh...”

“And Chance arrived a couple of minutes after.”

“Did he say why he came over?”

Was she fishing to find out whether Donna knew about Chance’s gifts, or did she just assume Donna knew? Donna decided to do some fishing of her own. “You didn’t call him?”

“Uh, no.”

“You don’t know?”

“Of course I do!”

Liking the game and liking her sister sounding flustered for once, Donna asked, “How else would he know what happened and that I needed him unless you called him?”

“Uh...”

“I know, Angela.”

“Know what?”

“You don’t have to play dumb. I know that Chance is like you.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“How do you feel about it?”

Hmm, that was an interesting question, one she hadn’t really had a chance to examine in depth before now.

Let’s see, she had a sister and brother who had visions, saw the future, and could read minds. She had two brothers-in-law who were psychic and a burgeoning psychic in one of her nephews. And who knew how many other of Angela’s kids were harboring some secret gifts that none of the family even knew about yet?

She should be used to the idea of people who were out of the ordinary and could do the seemingly impossible. But the truth was the

idea of a lover, and not just a sibling, being able to read her mind bothered her.

She didn't have to deal with Angela and EJ 24/7. She didn't have to see or contend with them unless she wanted to. She could leave the psychoanalyzing to their significant others. With a lover, she wouldn't really have that choice, not once she decided to let him in and share her life.

Would there ever be any privacy or peace? Would she ever be free to be herself? Would she ever be able to keep a secret?

And what about Russ? He wasn't psychic, not that she knew of, yet he seemed to know her inside and out. And that scared her almost as much as the things that Chance could do.

"Donna? Are you okay?"

"I'm not sure."

"I know what you're going through, and I know you're nervous about moving forward."

"How could you know what I'm going through?" How could anyone?

"It's not going to be easy, but if you follow your heart and put your mind to it, you can work it out."

Was she just referring to the psychic thing or the ménage thing? Really, each one by itself was more than the average person would ever deal with in her lifetime, but the two of them together were more than enough to send someone who was already skirting the periphery of stressed-out right over the edge.

How did Freddie handle Angela? How did Tabitha handle EJ?

Maybe she needed to tap a much neglected resource and speak to her in-laws about their experiences. Not that she could ever bring up the issue of a threesome. But the other part, the living-with-a-psychic, could be a good topic to bring up.

Was it barbecue conversation?

"So, you're still coming right?"

"I guess so."

“Donna...”

Ooh, she hated when her sister got that tone in her voice, that I’m-the-big-sister-and-I-know-what’s-good-for-you-you-have-to-do-what-I-tell-you tone!

“Trust me. You could use the time and place to chill out and relax.”

“Is Russ still coming?”

“Far as I know.”

And she just bet Chance was coming too, but she wasn’t going to ask. Why bother? “Then how much chilling and relaxing do you really expect me to do?”

“What? Are you saying Russ isn’t an easygoing guy who likes to chill and relax?”

Oh, she was sure he could be a happy-go-lucky and fun kind of guy in the right circumstances, like hanging out with his kids at an amusement park or shooting the shit with the boys over a few beers and a ball game.

But Donna had glimpsed his other side, the brooding, demanding, and intense side that made up Russell Merrick, the man. She had seen her own scarred soul mirrored back from him.

She knew she had to be willing to take the good with the bad in a relationship, and she wasn’t sure she was ready to do that yet, if ever—with either brother.

That she had let her guard down as much as she had—and boy had she let it down a couple of weeks ago!—just proved how much she was following her heart and *wasn’t* putting her mind to it. If she put her mind in the mix, there was no way in hell she would have ever let what happened happen. Her mind would have told her No! Stop! Don’t Pass Go! Dangerous Curves Ahead! Or, this is your brain on drugs! *Anything* to let her know she was about to cross into the danger zone. But she had been listening to her heart *and* her body, the treacherous, lusty bitch, and her hot ass had gotten her into trouble with two men.

My hot ass and my know-it-all sister's gift got me into trouble with two men.

"I'll see you at the barbecue, Angela," Donna murmured before she hung up and hoped her sister didn't call her back.

And because she knew her sister so well, she wasn't surprised when the phone rang less than a minute later.

Donna snatched the cordless out of its cradle. "I said I'm coming, so stop bug—"

"Donna, it's Sophie."

Donna's stomach suddenly dipped at the solemn tone of Sophie's voice. She knew that something terrible had happened to one of her clients for her assistant to be calling her at home on a weekend, a three-day holiday weekend at that. Never mind that Donna billed herself as being *on* and available 24/7 to any of her clients who needed her, Sophie was pretty prudent and selective about calling her at home unless absolutely necessary.

When Sophie confirmed her suspicions about something serious having happened to someone at Safe Haven, Donna plunked down onto her bed, deflated like a balloon that had had the air let out of it, and began to cry.

Chapter 20

By the time Donna made it to her sister's later that afternoon, the barbecue was in full swing with the aroma of char-grilled food riding the wind to her nose before she even had a chance to park and get off her bike.

Several vehicles were already parked at the curb and in the driveway, including Russ's SUV.

Donna took a deep breath as she slid off her helmet and placed it on the back of her bike.

So, he was here. There would be no avoiding him, not on Angela's watch. Not that Russ needed Angela to fight his battles for him, on the contrary.

She took another deep breath, wondering how she was going to get through the afternoon without breaking down. How was she going to smile and play and act like a piece of her world hadn't come crumbling down earlier and was still scattered in ruins around her?

The front door opened, and Angela came down the pathway to greet Donna, her usual bright smile slowly disappearing as she neared her younger sister until, by the time she stood a foot in front of Donna, she was frowning.

"What's wrong?"

Donna silently shook her head, unable to speak, not *trusting* herself to speak without bursting into tears, and she didn't want to ruin the day with her bad news.

She just needed to get through the next few hours without breaking down. She just needed to experience the company of her

family in life-affirming endeavors. She just needed to get as far away from tragedy and death as she could.

Otherwise why else had she come, except that she had nowhere else to go and nothing else to do that would effectively keep the demons at bay.

Being alone was not a good option, left her too many opportunities to play the blame game, castigating herself until she was spent. And she didn't need to blame herself when she already had Naomi's family doing it for her.

She had called her client's home hoping to reach one of Naomi's relatives to extend her condolences and offer her personal and professional assistance, only to be told she was not welcome, she should not come to the house, and that the family did not need or want her kind of help. Naomi's sister wouldn't even put her niece and nephew on, and it broke Donna's heart to hear them crying in the background and not be able to put her arms around them to comfort them or let the feel of them against her comfort *her*.

Why hadn't Naomi stayed at Safe Haven? Why had she gone back home? Hadn't she listened to any of Donna's warnings and instructions?

Donna had paced the floor for several minutes after the call, trying to decide whether to ignore the animosity of Naomi's sister and just go over to the house despite it, before she finally settled on going to Angela's as she had originally planned.

Yeah, and she would have to act like nothing had happened, like her world hadn't irrevocably changed a few minutes after hanging up with her sister.

Angela took both of Donna's hands in hers, gently squeezing. "Don't tell me nothing's wrong. I can see it in your aura. It's cloudy."

"Please, Angela. I'm not in the moo—" Donna choked on the last word, eyes blurry with tears she futilely tried not to shed.

"Donna, what happened? Talk to me!"

"Oh God, Angela...she's dead. Naomi's dead!"

Angela didn't ask who Naomi was or how her death had occurred before she pulled Donna into her arms and just held her, allowing her sister to cry on her shoulder.

Donna tried not to get hysterical, but the feeling of Angela's hands gently patting and rubbing her back was her undoing, drawing big, wet, wracking sobs that came and came until she felt like a toddler weeping over a skinned knee.

This was a first for her. As bad as things had gotten in her profession, as much tragedy and suffering as she had seen among the people she daily tried to help and place in safe situations, none of her clients had ever died.

Murdered. She didn't just die. She was murdered.

After several long minutes, Donna pulled back, hiccupping and gasping as she noticed the wet spot on her sister's shirt. "I-I'm sorry, Angie. I've wet you all up."

"Oh pish-tosh. It's just a little salt and water. It won't kill me or the shirt." Angela wrapped an arm around Donna's shoulder and guided her toward the front door.

Donna paused just outside, shaking her head. "I can't go in there like this. I don't want to ruin everyone's good time."

"Everyone's out back playing games and eating already. We'll go upstairs to the master bathroom and get you settled down. How's that?"

Donna nodded, too exhausted to do anything else but follow her sister's lead into the house and listen to the raucous yells and laughter rising from the backyard.

She peeked through the sliding glass doors looking out on the deck and the large backyard and caught a glimpse of her brother Nick and his wife, Slany, participating in a three-legged race against EJ and his wife, Tabitha.

She grinned at the vision of her brothers and their spouses tumbling down the slight incline, hysterically giggling as they broke each other's falls and hugged.

Donna turned away, unwilling to watch anymore, especially knowing her brothers and their spouses. Any minute, they would be canoodling, and Donna just didn't think she could take that much sweetness and enthusiasm, not when she was so near cracking beneath the weight of her own melancholy.

Since everyone was out in the backyard having a ball from all the noise Donna heard, she and Angela mercifully didn't encounter anyone on their way up to the bathroom.

Angela closed the door behind them and ran some cold water on a washcloth before ringing it near dry and handing it to Donna to put over her eyes.

She appreciated her sister's patience and tenderness, but didn't think for a minute that Angela was going to let her off the hook, not for long. Any minute now she would have to fess up to what had happened and claim her part of the responsibility.

Donna knew what sort of pep talk to expect, something positive and nonjudgmental, absolving her of blame, telling Donna that what had happened wasn't her fault and she shouldn't feel guilty. She didn't need to be a mind reader to know this because she knew her sister, and Angela wouldn't allow her to wallow in self-pity for too long.

Now wallowing was easier said than done.

"Is Naomi one of your clients?"

Donna nodded, taking the washcloth from her eyes and resting it against her forehead as she sat on the closed lid of the toilet and leaned back against the tank.

"It's not your fault."

"Do you know how many times I've told myself that before I finally got up the nerve to leave the house and come over here? In the end it doesn't really matter. Two kids are motherless now because I failed to do my job."

“You didn’t fail to do your job. You don’t have control over life and death, Donna, especially when so many sinister variables are at work. Fate is not in your realm.”

She fixed her sister with a long stare before asking, “But it’s in yours?”

“I never claimed to be in control of anyone’s fate. I just help things along as much as I can and let nature takes its course. That’s what you do in your job, but in the end, people make their own decisions, and you can’t stop what’s meant to happen or be.”

“And if I decide that Chance and Russ aren’t my soul mates and I don’t want to be with them?”

“Clever change of subject.”

“Not at all. We’re still talking about fate and control. Do I ultimately have a say in what man I have in my life?”

“Of course you do, honey. No one can make you feel something you don’t feel or force you to do what you don’t want do.”

That was certainly true. No one had held a gun to her head and forced her to screw two men at the same time. She had done that totally on her own because she’d wanted them. And she’d liked it. But admitting it to anyone but herself wasn’t as easy as doing the deed had been. And admitting she had feelings for two men...well, she didn’t even want to consider that now.

“You do have feelings for them.”

Donna just looked at her sister and didn’t say anything. Why bother?

Angela leaned forward and patted Donna’s shoulder before she turned and headed for the door. She paused with her hand on the knob and looked at Donna over her shoulder.

“For the record, they *are* your soul mates. There’s no decision to be made about that except whether to recognize them as such.”

“Whatever.”

Angela grinned. “And by the way, it’s not *screwing* when you care about the person.”

Donna watched her sister leave and thought it was screwing until she decided different but admitted that she was falling for both Russ and Chance and they had all made love the other night. And she wasn't ready to give up her control and admit *that* to anyone yet.

* * * *

Russ almost mowed Donna over on his way into the house through the sliding glass doors, stopping abruptly to catch her around the shoulders before she could topple over.

"When did you get here?" He felt Donna tense in his grasp at the demanding tone and tightened his grip just enough to let her know that he wasn't letting her go anywhere.

He had been having so much fun the last few hours—stuffing his face and participating in all the various outdoor activities for which Angela had arranged—that he'd forgotten to think about Donna or how upset and disappointed he was in her for avoiding him and not making it to the barbecue.

But with her soft vanilla musk wafting out to him, firing all his horny cylinders, the memory of her mouth on his, how warm and tight she'd been around his cock when he'd been inside her, crashed into him like a tidal wave.

"A few minutes ago," she answered.

"Where have you been?"

"In the bathroom, if it's any business of yours. Now can I get by?" She tried to pull out of his grasp, and Russ gentled his hold but still didn't release her.

"What?"

He peered at her and sensed something wrong. "Are you okay?" He bent at the waist, leaning closer to get a look in her eyes as she lowered her head and averted her gaze, looking anywhere but at him.

"What happened to you?"

"Russ, please..." She tried to pull away again.

“Not this time.” He drew her against his chest, imprisoning her arms between them just as she raised them to shove him away. He leaned close to whisper in her ear, “Stop running away from me.”

“I’m not afraid of you. I just had things on my mind.”

“Who said anything about your being afraid?”

She gawked at him, didn’t say anything, and Russ added, “Freudian slip?”

Donna freed one fist to punch his chest, and it must have felt good to her because she freed the other, and before Russ knew it, she was full-out pounding on him with both fists and sobbing.

He pulled back to let her get her shit off and didn’t mind getting bruised if it gave her a moment of the release she so obviously needed. He let the abuse go on for a few moments before he finally caught her by the wrists, lowering and imprisoning her arms behind her back. He yanked her up against his chest again. He was hard and couldn’t help being so.

Donna didn’t seem to notice or care. She simply leaned her face against him, panting. For the time being, she was out of gas. After a long moment, she lifted her head and took a deep, shaky breath, standing so close her firm nipples brushed against him. She licked her lips and stood on her toes, her slit warm and demanding, her gaze inviting.

If his pulse hadn’t been jumpstarted by her attack, that look and the feel of her in his arms did the trick. It wasn’t long before Russ buried her lips beneath his, desperate for a sample of her. He swept his tongue into her mouth and was instantly assaulted with the salty taste of tears.

His heart tightened in his chest at the idea of what could have caused her emotional collapse, but he didn’t stop kissing her. Instead he pulled her as close as he could without climbing inside her, instinctively knowing that whatever trauma had occurred in her life, she didn’t need or want coddling. She wanted to get out her frustration in a very physical way.

He understood that type of need, that type of torment. He'd been there—as a kid—kicking toys and throwing his books when his stepfather locked him in his room so he could “talk” to Russ’s mother in private. He'd been annoyed that the opportunities to protect his mother had been denied him because he was too young, too small—helpless.

He wasn't helpless anymore. Neither was Donna, and he wasn't going to let her suffer alone, not on his watch.

She clung to him with her mouth, darting her tongue between his lips and taking her fill with what physical wiles were at her disposal. With her hands imprisoned, she used the rest of her body to the best of her ability, turning him inside out with the feel of her soft curves brushing against him, the sounds of her needful whimpers meshing with his primal growls.

When he finally pulled away, they were both breathless.

Damn, he had been here with her before, their encounters getting more and more intense each time. At this rate, they would both combust during a full-fledged scene, leaving Chance behind to clean up the debris.

“What happened to you?” Russ rasped.

“Not to me, to one of my clients.”

He arched a brow as she tilted back her head to look at him. He didn't release her wrists, and she didn't ask him to. He had a feeling she was enjoying the way he was restraining her. Maybe it was the way she rubbed against him and sighed that gave him a clue.

“Her husband...he killed her.”

Russ hissed, tightening his grip on her when he felt her go taut against him. “Are you okay?” he repeated.

“I will be.”

That went without saying. It was just a matter of time. But there was here and now, and she wasn't okay *now*. “I missed you.”

“I can't do this.”

“I’m not asking you to do anything except listen and let me hold you.”

She looked at him, defiance and sadness shining out of her doe eyes like twin beacons, electrifying his nervous system.

She still didn’t pull away, but he released his hold to ease the stress on her shoulders, gently squeezing and rubbing her arms as he took a step back.

“If you’re going to tell me I need to be careful, don’t bother. I get that speech from Angela and the rest of my family every other day.”

“They worry about you.”

“And if you’re even thinking about telling me to leave me job, you can forget it.”

“Why would I tell you to do that?” He watched her fidget beneath his frown, realization instantly dawning. “Has someone else told you to?”

“You could say that,” she muttered.

He heard every word, though—spoken and unspoken.

Some guy had done a real job on her in the past, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. “I wouldn’t give you an ultimatum like that.”

“You say that now. You don’t have a vested interest.”

“Who says I don’t?”

“You know what I mean. I’m just someone you slept with. There’s no commitment.”

“Really? You think two weeks ago was a one-shot deal?” He put his arms around her to draw her close, pressing against her, daring her with his body.

She didn’t retreat, glaring up at him with a challenge of her own. “Would it matter what I said? Since you and Angela seem to have your mind made up about this relationship.”

“Angela doesn’t speak for me. I’m perfectly capable of coming to my own conclusions.”

“And what conclusions have you come to concerning me and you?”

“I’d like to know the answer to that one myself.”

Russ noticed the uncomfortable look on Donna’s face and knew who had come into the house behind him.

Chapter 21

“Private party, or can anyone join?” Chance grinned, more for Donna’s benefit than his brother’s.

“Actually, I was on my way out to get some eats and join the sports action. I’ve got some catching up to do.” Donna pulled from Russ’s grasp, and Russ let her go.

Chance could tell from the look on his brother’s face that it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do, just as he could tell from the look on Donna’s face that her cheer was forced.

“Don’t leave before we talk,” Russ said to Donna’s back, and she waved over her shoulder without turning.

Chance wondered how long they had been alone in the house together, what else had been said before he’d gotten there, especially when he noticed Donna’s puffy, red-rimmed eyes.

His fingers itched to reach out and touch her, but he didn’t want to put her through any more grief than she had obviously been through. Not to mention he wanted to be alone with Russ to find out what the hell had happened.

When he had left Donna two weekends ago, it hadn’t been under antagonistic circumstances, not by a long shot. From what he had seen of her directly after Russ’s departure, Chance couldn’t say the same about their parting. She had been pissed at Russ, for whatever reasons. And Donna had been keeping her distance from both of them, as if Chance was guilty by association.

He watched her now, closing the sliding glass door behind her and running down the deck steps as if she couldn’t get away from them fast enough.

Chance whirled on Russ. “What did you say to her?”

“Nothing she didn’t need to hear.”

“She looked like she was crying.”

“She was.”

“You made her do that?”

“If you have to ask, then you don’t know anything about me.”

Chance sighed. That was the problem. He didn’t know anything about Russ, not what counted. He used to think he knew Russ as well as he knew himself. He knew, for instance, that Russ would never raise his hand to hurt a woman. But in the last two weeks, Chance had learned that the rules governing the meaning of “hurt” got a little fuzzy in the world of BDSM. Some women—and men—*liked* pain, were what Russ had referred to in passing as “pain sluts.”

Chance spent too much time around pain and suffering to understand the enjoyment that could be derived from either. Maybe he was in the wrong business. Or maybe he hadn’t met and been with the right woman.

“You’re still confused by the rules of the Life. I understand that, Chance. But let me handle Donna. I know what she needs, especially right now.”

“I’m beginning to wonder what purpose in this relationship I serve at all other than acting as your buffer and leading a lamb to the slaughter.”

“It’s that sort of pessimism that is going to rub off on Donna and make her more skittish about this whole thing than she already is.”

“If she’s skittish, maybe she really isn’t the sub you think she is. Maybe you’re wrong about her, and she’s not into BDSM.”

Russ gritted his teeth and shook his head. “I’m not wrong.”

Chance peered at him, noticed the determined set of his brother’s jaw, the steely glint to his gray eyes, and wondered how far Russ would go to prove he was right.

Russ put his arm around Chance's shoulder and pulled him close. "You think too much, Lil' Bro. You need to just let things happen and *feel*."

"This coming from Mr. Self Control?"

"There's a time and a place for everything." Russ gave him an enigmatic smile. "Trust me, I know how to let go when it counts."

Chance wanted to ask him how much letting go he planned to do with Donna and wondered if he could stomach a "scene," wondered if he wanted to.

He was a grown man and had seen some bad things in his life, had seen the end result of relationships between men and women, relationships gone horribly wrong. But none of this had yet inured him to the suffering of others.

Empathy in his profession, but more importantly in BDSM, was more of a drawback and a curse than a blessing.

"So what happened to her? Why was she crying?"

"I don't think it's my place to tell you."

"Why? Is it a secret?"

"I just think it's something she doesn't want broadcast all over the place. At least not yet and not by anyone else but her until she's ready to tell you."

Goddess, you'd think Russ was the mind reader. "Okay, fine." Chance headed for the glass doors, but paused with his hand on the handle when Russ caught him by an arm.

"Were you looking for her or me earlier?"

"Take a guess."

Russ chuckled. "Maybe you should give her some space."

"Will you?"

"Until I think she needs otherwise."

Chance was beginning to realize that being a Dominant was not just a part of Russ's sexual persona, but a part of what he was, an integral part of his personality. He guessed he'd already known this, though. Russ had always been domineering, a leader in any group and

a taskmaster when it came to raising Chance. But he had his tender and sensitive side. Chance had seen that too, been the beneficiary of it, especially right after their mother had been killed.

Russ had spent more than his fair share of time trying to convince Chance that their mom's death had not been his fault and that he shouldn't blame himself for not being able to save her. But Chance knew the truth. He had failed his mother and Russ.

"I'm hungry. I'm going to go get something to eat," Chance said. "You coming?"

"Not yet."

Chance just shook his head and smiled as he left.

* * * *

As much as she wanted to mingle and immerse herself in the activities, Donna could do nothing but sit on the sidelines and watch, pushing her food around on her Styrofoam plate, barely eating. She had no appetite, not for food or fun.

Again, she asked herself why she had come.

"Hey, Sis."

Donna grinned as Slany took a seat beside her on the wicker loveseat, fanning her face with a hand. The action reminded Donna of her and Russ's first sit-down, how he had taken a break from playing volleyball with her family. It seemed like years ago instead of weeks.

"Why over here all by your lonesome?"

Donna shrugged. "Not feeling very sociable right now. Maybe later."

"You're missing out."

"I know." She grinned to let Slany know her efforts were appreciated.

"You meet Kim and Wes yet?"

"Are those Russ's kids?"

“Unless one of your sisters has popped out another couple of kids we don’t know about.”

Donna nudged her sister-in-law in the arm with her own and laughed. It was the first genuine laugh she’d had all afternoon. “Angela’s pretty fertile, but I think her time has passed. And I think Tabitha’s done for a little while.”

“Not to hear EJ tell it. You know, he’s pretty persuasive. He might be able to talk her into a couple of more and soon.”

Donna followed her gaze to find the couple in question taking a break from the family’s traditional volleyball game—the young’uns against the old fogies—and necking as their team rotated to serve.

After almost five years of marriage and two kids, EJ and Tabitha showed no signs of slowing down, took every opportunity they could to touch, hug, kiss, and just genuinely show affection toward each other.

They set a wonderful example for their two kids, showing them how a mother and father in love were supposed to act, and it choked Donna up to think how Naomi’s kids had been deprived of such an example.

Donna swallowed as Slany nudged her back.

“So what’s got you down?”

If she didn’t pull herself out of her doldrums and pick up her face, Slany wouldn’t be the only one asking, and Donna would have to explain. She wasn’t ready to do that, had done enough explaining already to Angela and Russ without intending to. She couldn’t face another family member with the evidence of her failure.

“Not down. Just stressed. You know how it is with the job.” That should be close enough to the truth without telling to get her over.

Slany seemed to accept it at least, nodding as she grinned. “You’ve got a couple of stress relievers right here from what I hear.”

Angela’s birdie sure gets around.

Wait a minute. How much did Slany know? For that matter, how much did Donna’s brothers and sisters know? Would Angela have

told them all the details of her latest matchmaking efforts? Were all her siblings and in-laws as accepting of Angela's latest plot as Angela and Freddie evidently were?

God, the idea that her brothers and sisters knew what she was doing with Russ and Chance, that she had entertained two men at the same time, sent her temperature skyrocketing.

Slany leaned close and whispered, "Which one's got you blushing?"

She turned to her sister-in-law, heart pounding. "You know?"

"Of course we do. Angela thought we should all have fair warning."

"At least *you* guys *had* fair warning," Donna mumbled.

"Now you know how I felt when I showed up to your family barbecue expecting an apology and truce from your brother only to have him insult and practically throw me out on my ass for crashing the family barbecue uninvited."

Donna chuckled. Angela was notorious for her ambushes. But so far she'd been on the money with each of her picks, and her plans, though sometimes messy, always netted the desired result. EJ, Nick, Emilia, and Evelyn were all living in wedded bliss with their soul mates.

But still, the idea that her siblings, especially her brothers, knew about the circumstances between her, Russ and, Chance made her more than a little uncomfortable.

Nick and EJ didn't think any of their sisters were sexual beings, convinced that Angela's and Emilia's kids had all been conceived immaculately. This was how overprotective and old-fashioned her brothers were. She was used to it. She didn't think she could ever get used to them seeing her as some kind of nymphomaniac, though.

"The three of you are all consenting adults and what you do behind closed doors is nobody's business but yours," Slany said.

“Yeah, sure.” Intellectually, she knew Slany was right, but emotionally? And since when had she become so emotional, anyway, and caring what anyone thought of her?

Slany gave her a patient smile. “I know your brothers can be pretty overbearing, but don’t worry about them. We’re talking about you and your happiness. Besides, you’re the older sister. You’re the boss of them, not the other way around.”

Something clicked into place at Slany’s words, flashes of how she and Nick were with each other, the way Slany shamelessly catered to Nick. Then there were the times, rarer, but still there, when Nick catered to Slany, practically licking her feet in his reverence.

There was something in their relationship that touched something deep inside Donna, something in the dynamics between them that was slightly skewed and made her pussy and heart throb with longing.

She’d never made the connection before, that the relationship Slany and Nick shared was just a little darker and kinkier than the relationships that any of her other brother and sisters shared with their spouses.

Maybe she should just ask, since it seemed like all of *her* business was out there for everyone to speculate about. “Whenever we all get together for girls’ night out, you never really talk about yourself and Nick except in the most general terms. You seem satisfied, but you don’t go into details. You sit back and absorb it all with a Cheshire cat smile, like you know a secret.”

“It’s like I said—”

“What goes on behind close doors is nobody’s business. Yes, I got that.”

“Unless, of course, I *want* to share. And in this case, I think it’s warranted.”

“What case?”

“You want to know about me and Nick.”

Donna felt the resultant blush from her throat to her scalp. “You guys just seem like you march to the beat of a different drummer than

other couples I know. I mean, you're affectionate and attentive with each other, but there's a certain discipline to your actions."

"That's an interesting term and very perceptive." Slany raised her bottled water to her lips and took a big gulp before putting the bottle back on the cast iron table beside the loveseat.

When Slany didn't elaborate after a long moment, Donna lost her patience and threw up her arms in frustration. "Well?"

"Well, which one of your two men is the Dom?"

Donna wanted to say they weren't her men, but realized it would be a waste of time. Angela had done her job too well. "Dom? You mean as in Dominant?"

Slany tapped her finger with her chin. "I'm thinking it's Russ. There's something about him, the way he carries himself, the way he talks and looks at you..."

Was it that obvious? Was *she* that obvious in how she felt about him?

"It's something very proprietary."

"Like he owns me?"

Slany laughed at Donna's scandalized tone. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I just don't see the good or healthy in one person controlling or *owning* another. Only bad can come of a situation when one person holds all the cards."

"A Dominant/submissive relationship isn't all about one person controlling another, or one person being controlled. It's about give and take. Most times the sub has as much control as the Dom. It's just exercised in a different way, at different times."

Slany had called Russ a Dom. So that meant that Donna was a...Oh God, her heart fluttered in recognition and grudging acceptance.

She was a submissive?

"Take Nick and me, for instance," Slany was saying, and Donna turned to give her sister-in-law her full attention. "Sometimes we

switch, though not too often. Your brother...well, let's just say he's a Dom's Dom and isn't comfortable in the submissive role. Though he'll treat me once in a while and play out a scene after some negotiating."

Donna's eyes widened at the strangely familiar terminology. She felt so much like a naïve tyro around Slany despite being more than a decade older. She tried not to look too traumatized, but realized she was failing miserably when Slany said, "You look shocked."

"I just never realized."

"That's the point. No one does unless we tell them or unless they're in the Life too."

Donna followed Slany's gaze across the yard where Russ and Nick were sharing a beer during a break from one ball game or another. They looked right cozy with each other, like they shared a lot in common. Horrified, she caught Slany's arm.

"You don't think—"

"That they're discussing you?" Slany grinned and patted her hand. "Probably only in the most general terms, but nothing explicit. Your brother wouldn't be able to take anything more, and Russ isn't stupid or crazy, so he would never share what you two do, especially not with one of your brothers."

"Okay, so I'm being paranoid."

"Sharing what he's claimed isn't high on a Dom's to-do list. They're very territorial."

Slany didn't have to tell Donna that, but what surprised her the most, especially after the way Russ had acted with her earlier, was that he was okay sharing her with Chance. Maybe it was the whole sibling dynamic, and if they hadn't been brothers and already sharing their own close relationship, he wouldn't have even considered sharing Donna with Chance.

"Is this all a little TMI for you?"

Donna looked at Slany, seeing the younger woman in a different light, not to mention her baby brother. She didn't know how to

reconcile the man who was Slany's Dom and husband to the young boy with whom she had grown up teasing and roughhousing.

"Not too much information at all," she said, just glad she wasn't all alone when it came to her appetites, that she wasn't as weird as she had thought she was. It still didn't mean she was comfortable with this threesome she had been thrust into, but at least she wasn't as uninformed about the Life as she had been. And she knew, with a man like Russ, she would need all the information she could get in order to deal with him and the situation.

Slany squeezed her shoulder as she stood. "Just remember the most important thing when you go into this—Safe, Sane, Consensual—and you won't go wrong."

"Safe, Sane, Consensual." Well, hell, that sounded simple enough.

"As long as they treat you with consideration and respect and you're happy, we're all happy for you and support you, Donna. Never doubt that."

"Thanks, Slany. And I'm glad we talked."

"You know who you really have to thank for this chitchat."

Donna followed her sister-in-law's gaze again to see Angela standing several feet away, smiling her all-knowing big sister smile and saluting them with her glass of wine.

She should have known.

Chapter 22

Within an hour after her conversation with Slany, Donna had pulled herself out of her emotional morass enough to join the fun and play some volleyball. Or more accurately, Angela had dragged her off her ass and pulled her into the game, this one a battle of the sexes with Donna, Slany, Emilia, Tabitha, and Russ's daughter, Kim, on one side and EJ, Nick, Russ, Emilia's husband, Ramón, and Russ's son, Wes, on the other.

Angela played lineswoman calling fairs and fouls, while Freddie manned the grill, and Chance kept the rest of the teenagers and kids busy with other activities.

Donna got more of a glimpse of Russ's competitive nature facing off against him on opposite sides of the volleyball net. Like her brothers, he didn't pull any punches—or more accurately spikes—just because he was playing against women, nor did he go easier on her just because he had slept with her.

In fact, he seemed to get particular pleasure using his superior weight and height to spike the ball against her. But this was okay because Donna had a few tricks up her sleeve and managed to block several of his shots, negating his size with cunning and good timing. With these and her competitive sisters backing her up—Emilia, the smallest of them, was particularly cutthroat—the women managed to give the men a serious run for their money, keeping the game close and only losing by one point.

After promises of a rematch, the gang all broke up in search of more sustenance.,

Russ caught up with Donna as she headed for one of the coolers Angela had strategically placed throughout the backyard.

“You guys are bloodthirsty,” she said.

“That’s the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Maybe a little.”

Russ laughed. “You wouldn’t have appreciated it if we pulled our shots and let you win, would you?”

“Bite your tongue.” Donna dug down in the ice before emerging with two Coronas. She handed one longneck to Russ, then twisted the cap off of her own and took a deep swallow.

She found a spot near Angela’s prized lighted fountain, sitting on the edge and admiring the way the waning spring sun reflected off of the surface of the water.

Wordlessly, Russ joined her, leaving barely an inch between them as he took a seat beside her.

They sat for a long moment in silence, not as uncomfortable as Donna expected to be with all that was between them.

She watched Chance corralling the kids for a game of Monkey in the Middle. “He’s good with them,” she said.

“I know. He’s just the right combination of firm and playful.”

Sounded like he was describing himself, Donna thought, tingling inside at the idea of being on the other end of his games, role-playing with him and Chance. She tried to change the subject to something more innocuous than their ménage.

“Kim and Wes are two sweet kids.”

“Most of the time.”

Donna chuckled at his grudging agreement.

“They think you’re pretty cool too.”

“Did they tell you that?”

Russ nodded. “Wes said you’ve got a sweet serve and a mean setup. Kim wants to be like you when she grows up.”

Donna felt her face flush with heat. “Wow, I’ve never had glowing endorsements like that before.”

“That’s just the beginning.” Russ leaned into her, circling the shell of her ear with his tongue and making her shudder. If he didn’t catch her around the waist when he did, she probably would have plummeted right into the water. “I’m glad you decided to come, Donna.”

“Me too.”

“You’re not out of the doghouse yet, though.”

She pulled back to stare at him. “Doghouse?”

“For coming so late and worrying everyone. That wasn’t a nice thing to do.”

“Worrying everyone?”

“We’re all a little on edge after what happened a couple of weeks ago.”

She hadn’t thought about that. But if they were worried about a measly, anonymous rock-throwing incident, they would be totally freaked out if they knew about this latest episode and how Naomi’s husband, Morgan, had left a little message with his kids for Donna right after he shot Naomi to death in front of them.

“You tell that Safe Haven Vega bitch I’m coming for her next.”

Naomi’s sister had bitterly delivered that piece of information when Donna had called, but it was nothing that she would dare repeat to her own family. They would all want to hire an armed contingent to escort her everywhere. And it was bad enough that an unmarked police car had tailed her all the way to Angela’s house “as a precaution.”

Russ leaned even closer, his mouth on her ear when he murmured, “So what sort of punishment do you think your flagrant disregard warrants?”

Donna’s heart sped with anticipation, her mouth watering with the idea of being on the other end of Russ’s handling. “Punishment?”

“Discipline is necessary to curb misbehavior.”

Is this what Slany was talking about when she mentioned a scene? Was this what role-playing was all about? Would she be showing her

greenness if she asked, or should she just go with her instincts and continue to play along and *negotiate*? “What about Chance?”

“What about him?”

“Will he be there too? When you punish me?”

“He’s going to help me.”

He still hadn’t taken his mouth away from her ear, and Donna didn’t know whether it was his closeness, his words, or the deep timbre of his voice that sent a thrill of electricity shimmering through her limbs until they felt aflame.

She should have been terrified by the prospect of being at the mercy of two men, but she wasn’t, at least not yet. She was horny and soaking wet. But she wasn’t afraid. And maybe this was because she wouldn’t be totally alone with Russ, the idea of Chance being there too simultaneously comforting and disturbing.

Russ slid his free hand up from her waist to just under a breast and had Donna squirming in her seat as she gazed around the backyard to see if anyone was watching them. He sucked her earlobe into his mouth, licking and nibbling before releasing it.

Donna took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of his woody aftershave and his underlying, tangy musk, slivers of white fire shooting from her chest straight to her center when he fluttered his fingers over her breast.

“You’re wet, aren’t you?” he murmured.

Dazed, she nodded, wondering if he would try to check, out here with the kids—his kids and her nieces and nephews—running back and forth all over the backyard.

“No one’s looking.”

He was a mind reader, like his brother, had to be. How else did he know her so well, know what she was thinking almost before she thought it? Or was she just that plain obvious, that obviously nervous?

Russ leaned in again to nip her throat, never moving his hand from the underside of her breast, just softly caressing and igniting the

sensitive nerve endings until her nipples rose, taut against her bra, making it look like she was cold or not wearing a bra at all.

She felt so vulnerable and exposed, yet strangely secure in his embrace, like she knew he would never let anything happen to her. Even when he was punishing her, she knew he would do it with precision and care.

Was she being a total idiot for thinking about trusting this man with her body, more than she had already, trusting him with her admittedly fragile psyche? The prospect of opening up to anyone, especially a man, was scary.

She had been in hiding after her divorce, an emotional exile, licking her wounds the last few years, building a shell around and convincing herself that she didn't need anyone, particularly not a man.

But this man proved otherwise. She needed him in ways she hadn't realized she could need a man, needed him in ways she was desperate and hungry to explore.

She would not love him. She would enjoy the sex for what it was, enjoy the experience and the instruction, but she *would not* fall in love. That was the ultimate weakness, and she was not weak, could not afford to be. She had too many people depending on her to keep a clear and focused head.

Today just proved what could happen when a woman let her guard down, how much damage a man could do to a woman who trusted him not to hurt her. Well, *this* woman wasn't letting her guard down to trust any man.

"There's more where this came from."

Donna gasped when he slid his hand between her legs, taking advantage of the waning light and everyone's distraction. But the distraction wouldn't last forever, not with her family. Someone would come looking for them soon to drag them into some competition. Her family was notorious for wringing an event for everything it was worth. And that was okay with her, because right now, she needed the

distraction, too near exploding beneath the weight of an approaching climax to be of any use to anyone.

She put her longneck down on the fountain edge before she could drop it, and Russ did the same as if he were preparing for something that would necessitate two hands.

Donna trembled at the idea. Damn, the man was barely touching her, and she was about to come. Outside! At a family barbecue!

“Not yet, baby.” Russ pressed his lips against her ear and gave her slit one parting, caressing swipe that had her squeezing her thighs together in a delayed defensive reaction.

“Later, when I have you all trussed up and ready for your punishment.”

Every time he said that word, it made her hot and tremble with expectation.

It was confirmed. She was an official weirdo despite her discussion with Slany. What person, what grown woman, *wanted* to be punished by her lover?

On the heels of this thought, Chance strolled over. Hands in his jeans pockets, he took a seat on the opposite side of Donna, familiarly sandwiching her between him and his brother.

He slid a hand out of his pocket to rest on her thigh and squeeze, silently conveying his strength and assurance with the small gesture, where before him Russ had been busy tearing apart her sanity and composure with his sexual innuendos and promises.

Balanced between the light and dark sides of her desire, she leaned against Chance, threading her fingers through his, and boldly put her other hand on Russ, delicately stroking the hard ridge of his cock. Her pussy throbbed at the breath that hissed through his teeth when he peered at her with those heated gray eyes.

“That’s going to add to the severity and duration of your punishment.”

A quiver of eagerness scudded through her vitals at his dangerous tone, but Donna didn’t back down, increasing the pressure against his

shaft and panting when he surreptitiously moved his hips to rub himself against her palm.

She was comfortable, way too comfortable, with these two men she felt like she had known forever, so comfortable she just barely removed her hand from Russ's crotch and sat up from leaning on Chance several seconds before a pretty blonde made her way over with Russ's daughter and son.

The woman looked like an older version of Kim, her blue eyes lighting the evening as they landed on the three of them seated on the fountain.

"The kids said I'd find you guys out here." She paused before them and looked at the fountain with admiration. "It's as beautiful as everyone described it. I can see your handiwork in every stone and line."

"You always were good for my ego," Russ said as he took Donna's hand and stood.

Donna stood beside him and noticed that Chance hung back, but didn't break contact with her, his hand secretly resting against the small of her back, one finger teasing her spine in small circular motions.

"You must be Donna." The blonde stuck out her hand. "I'm Suzie, the kids' mom."

Donna put her hand in Suzie's, self-conscious at her moist palm even though it wasn't the one that had recently cupped Russ. "It's so nice to meet you, Suzie."

"Likewise." Suzie put an arm around each child and hugged them close. "They've been singing your praises, especially this one. She says her dad finally hit the jackpot."

Donna just smiled, speechless as she watched Kim blush. She wondered what the ex-Mrs. Merrick would have to say if she knew the kids' dad was sharing his new *girlfriend* with the kids' uncle Chance.

Sure, Angela and the rest of her sibs didn't seem to have a problem with the idea of one of their sibs involved in a ménage, but what about the rest of the world at large? What about the rest of her family—her parents and nieces and nephews? What kind of example was she setting for the young ones? It couldn't be as bad nor damaging an example as Russ's mother and stepfather had set for him and Chance, or the example Morgan had set for his and Naomi's kids, could it?

She'd never worried about what other people thought of her before, but suddenly it mattered to her what this woman and her children thought of her.

"Well, I just wanted to introduce myself and see the new lady in Russ's life before I took the kids home," Suzie said.

"Ah, Mom, do we have to go now?" Wes and Kim chorused, and Donna laughed. She hadn't missed how well Kim got along with Emilia's tweener son, Anthony, or that Wes seemed particularly smitten with Angela's next-to-last, Danni.

"You guys have to go to school bright and early tomorrow, and you've got a long drive back to the city. So quit giving your mother a hard time."

"Thanks, Russ. I couldn't have said it better myself."

Donna leaned in to give each kid a kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you two again on the Fourth, if not sooner, right?"

"Right!" Wes and Kim said.

Donna smiled at their synchronicity, thought that despite their three-year difference in age, and their sex, they seemed like identical twins, finishing each other's sentences when they weren't blurting out the same thing at the same time.

She watched as Russ stepped forward, ruffled his son's hair, and gave his daughter a big hug and kiss. "Go out to the car, and wait for your mom."

Wes gave Chance a fist bump, and Kim gave him a tight hug before they darted toward the back of the house to say their good-byes to everyone on their way out to the driveway.

Suzie gave Chance a hug of her own. “It’s nice to finally meet you in the flesh. I feel like I know you already, Russ talks about you so much.”

Chance arched a brow, and Russ shrugged, grinning as he leaned in to give Donna a more-than-chaste kiss on the lips before sliding an arm around Suzie’s shoulders. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to walk them out.”

Donna watched them leave, feeling bereft and confused until she looked at Chance standing just beside her and noticed his solemn expression.

She slid her hand into his, and he squeezed it as if to transmit his strength, reassure her that everything was going to be okay.

It dawned on her that he hadn’t brought up the shooting, and she wondered if he was blocking her thoughts or just being polite in not bringing up what had happened to Naomi.

She turned to face him, but his eyes were guarded, didn’t give her any indication what he was thinking or feeling.

It was a neat trick. She wished she could pull it off, but most of the time with him and Russ, she felt like a big-faced clock with her thoughts and feelings written all over her expression.

“Have you and Russ hammered out what happens next?” Chance asked.

“I should be asking *you* that.”

“We’ve decided that whatever happens between us all now is totally up to you. It’s your choice. You’re the one in control.”

He sounded like he was trying to convince her. Or maybe he was trying to convince himself. “Is that so?”

Chance nodded, totally serious.

Donna blinked and felt like the ground had shifted under her.

She was in control? The very dynamics of her relationship with Russ said otherwise. Was she missing something?

Chance slid his hand up to her nape, gently collaring her neck. “You’re okay with that, aren’t you?”

She couldn’t help thinking that Russ didn’t ask, wouldn’t. He just stated what was and would be, and that was that.

Her body trilled at the idea of following his lead, his directions.

Russ came back down the path from the house just then, steps jaunty, his olive-toned complexion flushed as he rubbed his hands together. “We ready to get this show on the road?”

Translation—was she ready for her punishment?

No, what she was ready for was to have her head examined.

Chapter 23

His heart pounded so hard in his ears, Chance felt like he was underwater and sinking fast. He was drowning again.

He'd only been three when he'd, technically, died, but he remembered everything now as if he'd been much older, acutely aware of what had happened to him, feeling different, lighter somehow, once he'd been revived by Russ. Most importantly, he remembered how frightened his brother and their mother had been at almost losing him.

Russ's sense of guilt and failure had been a pervading force back then, as much as his hunger and passion permeated everything in Chance that wanted Donna now.

It made him wonder if he was going along with this scene out of his own desires and hunger or because he had something to prove—to Donna, to Russ—and didn't want to run away from who and what he was, couldn't run away from what he wanted anymore.

Chance looked at his handiwork now, Donna with her wrists bound behind her back, kneeling in the middle of the king-sized bed, ass pointed at the ceiling, and a cheek resting on one of Russ's down pillows, totally naked and powerless, totally accepting so far.

He looked at her face, searching for any clue that this was too much for her and she wanted out. Chance focused on her eyes, saw his own doubts mirrored in their mink depths, and turned his back to her, swallowing hard.

He wasn't sure he could go through with this, despite his arousal.

Yes, he was totally hard and more than anxious. The only things keeping him put were his traitorous libido and his promise and loyalty to Russ.

“Remember, no matter what happens, unless she uses her safe word, we don’t stop.”

Maybe he needed a safe word too if things got too intense.

But this scene wasn’t about him, never had been. From the beginning this had been all about Donna—pleasuring her, giving her what she needed, disciplining her.

He didn’t even know *why* she was being disciplined, only that this scenario was necessary to “clear the air,” as Russ had put it.

“Chance?”

He turned at the sound of her voice—trembling and hesitant, so unlike what he was used to hearing from her.

Whenever he’d see her at the hospital, she was always in charge, fiercely protective, had to be. And the only other arena he had seen her in so far was with her family, and with them she was the rebel, the loner, the hard-ass about whom all her sibs worried.

She cleared her throat. “I want you to touch me.”

Goddess, she was bossy for someone bound and helpless.

Chance grinned, went to the bed, and sat beside her, keeping his hands folded in his lap, to himself. Maybe she wasn’t so helpless after all since just being near her without being able to touch her almost destroyed him, and she didn’t have to lift a finger to accomplish it. “I want to touch you. You don’t know how much.”

“Then do it.”

He wasn’t sure if she wanted him to touch her for the enjoyment and comfort it would give her—the shelter she thought he could provide from Russ’s kinky attentions—or if she genuinely, at that moment, desired him. He didn’t think it was possible that she wanted him as much as he wanted her or that she was as turned on by all this as he and Russ were.

“Is there some rule that says you can’t?”

Now she sounded miffed and demanding, like any minute she would make him untie her and get her clothes so she could get dressed and leave.

“Actually there is. Don’t you remember?”

“You and Russ torment me with deprivation until I’m in such a sexual frenzy that I’m forced to beg you to get me off.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“Did you hear me say Safe Haven?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not having second thoughts.”

Liar.

She’d be a fool not to have second thoughts. He was having them, second, third, and fourth thoughts.

“How’s our girl holding up?”

Chance jerked his head to the bedroom door as his brother breezed into the room clad in only a pair of well-worn blue jeans, poker face firmly in place and a riding crop in one hand.

“Your girl is uncomfortable and bored and—Ow! What the—”

Russ had brought the riding crop down against Donna’s ass so fast, Chance had no time to react, and by the time he realized what had happened, Russ was already caressing the reddening spot with his fingers.

“Did I address you?” he demanded.

“No,” Donna murmured.

“No what?”

“No...sir.”

Chance didn’t miss Donna gritting her teeth before she expelled the address of respect. He would have laughed if the situation wasn’t so serious. He had been so near grabbing the riding crop from Russ’s hand and putting an end to the scene before it had even begun, it wasn’t funny.

Russ climbed up onto the bed behind Donna, sliding the head of the riding crop between her legs, an expression of such cool, grim

concentration on his face that belied a sensitive and gentle human being dwelled behind it.

“You liked that, didn’t you, slave?”

Donna didn’t respond, and Russ removed the crop from between her legs to strike her across the ass again.

She yelped. “Yes, damn you!”

Chance stood to intervene, and Russ gave him a warning glare that stopped him in his tracks. He paused, balled his hands at his sides instead, returning the glare, not even appeased when Russ showed him the head of the crop dripping with Donna’s female juices as if to prove that she was turned on.

“Tell me something, slave.”

“What?”

Chance heard her peevish tone and grinned. He thought his Dom brother had met his match.

He was surprised that Donna didn’t object to the “slave” designation.

“Why so tough?”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean, sir.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. You heard me the first time.”

“Because I..I *have* to be.”

“That’s not a good enough answer. Why?”

“Because I don’t trust anyone to take care of me as well as I can take care of myself!”

Chance hadn’t meant to do it, but he’d let down his shields, and the thought jumped out at him loud and clear.

He slid his gaze to Donna’s and caught her unflinching stare, the surface of her eyes glistening with tears she refused to shed.

“Don’t look to Chance for help. He can’t help you. This is between you and me for now.”

“I wasn’t.”

Crack!

The riding crop came down again, knocking Donna off-balance and forward on the bed.

Chance motioned to help her, and Russ barred him with the riding crop, pressing it into his chest. The musky, sweet scent of Donna's arousal wafted up, tickling his nostrils, making him painfully spike hard in spite of his fury at Russ.

"She doesn't need your help."

"Russ, this isn't nece—"

"If you can't handle this, then you can leave."

"You bastard."

"Do you hear our girl complaining? Have you heard her safe word?"

Chance wasn't sure she even remembered what her safe word was. He didn't think he would under the circumstances, not with all the adrenaline and pheromones flying through the air, clouding judgment. He was sure Russ was under the influence of the biological impulses and chemical reaction himself.

He peered down at Donna as she struggled to get back to her knees without the use of her hands, his throat tight with emotion. "Are you okay?"

"Don't answer that."

"Why can't she?"

"If she hasn't used her safe word, we are to assume that she's fine. Is that correct, slave?"

"Yes, sir." She was back on her knees, one cheek on the pillow, ass pointing to the ceiling in an erotic invitation that made Chance's cock throb.

How could Russ not want to pull her against him and stroke and hold her until she purred? Why would he want to strike that flawless smooth ass with a riding crop and risk damaging its sensual perfection?

He just didn't understand what kind of "clearing the air" Russ had in mind.

Hell, Chance could get what he needed using his gifts. He didn't need to beat Donna's thoughts and feelings out of her. But then reading her mind would be an unforgivable act of betrayal, stealing what was hers and hers alone.

There had to be an easier middle ground.

Chance met Russ's steely gaze and dropped his shields.

"She has to admit that she needs us, that she wants to be protected and cared for and knocking down her walls is the only way to get her to do that."

Russ nodded at him, acknowledging that he knew Chance was reading him. Then he turned his attention back to Donna.

"So you're a strong and independent woman, slave?"

Donna didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir."

"And you don't need a man for anything, is that right?"

"Men serve their purpose...sir."

Crack!

"I'm sure they do."

Donna gasped. "What was that for?"

"Being a smart-ass." Russ leaned forward and blew on her ass, then gently rubbed each reddened cheek. "Why didn't you tell us about the police surveillance?"

"You mean the unmarked car that's following me?"

"Are you trying to hide your vulnerabilities? Trying to hide that you need help?"

"I'm not trying to hide anything. I just didn't think about it."

"You thought we didn't need to know. That we didn't *deserve* to know."

Crack!

Donna shook her head as much as she could in her position, tears rolling down her cheeks. "I thought I could handle the situation myself."

Crack!

"You don't need to do that anymore. You have us."

“What if you...what if you go away? I have to be able to take care of myself.”

“*That’s* a negative mindset, lone wolf.”

Crack.

“Fuck you!”

“Not until you beg me.”

“I can’t count on you or any man to always be there for me when I need him.”

“How do you know that? Did you even bother to ask?”

Crack.

The tears were flowing, and Donna was outright sobbing, her slender shoulders shaking as she gulped big gasps of air in between.

Chance watched, immobile, mesmerized by the scene, by the emotions whirring in the air and the way Russ masterfully directed the scene and elicited Donna’s responses.

“Will you admit that you need me? That you need us?”

“I’ll burn in hell first. I don’t need any man.”

Russ slid the crop between her legs again, this time pushing it into Donna’s dewy entrance, slowly turning it.

She whimpered and squirmed on the bed.

She had to be uncomfortable kneeling in that position for so long, but something made her endure Russ’s treatment when she could have easily used her safe word and put an end to the scene. Was it the same thing that made Chance stay—to see how far Russ would go, how far he would push Donna, and how far she would let him push her?

She wants to be punished! Chance thought. *Not just because she’s enjoying the tactile sensations, but because she thinks she deserves it.*

“You don’t need us, but you want us,” Russ growled.

“Yes.”

“You want more of this?” He inched the crop inside a little farther. “You want my cock? You want Chance’s?”

“One cock is the same as any other. They’re all attached to men.”

“And you don’t like men.”

“I like them just fine. I just don’t need one in my life.”

Crack!

“Please...” She whimpered, pushing back against the crop. “I don’t want a man!”

“Why not, Donna? Why not!”

“Because men hurt women! I could never trust a man not to hurt me. It’s what they do! It’s what they *all* do. They hurt women, they betray them, and then they toss them away!”

“*Fuck.*” Russ dropped the riding crop to the carpeted floor, sat down on the bed, grasped Donna around the waist, and pulled her onto his lap.

She leaned her head on his chest, her shoulders still shaking as she cried and panted, babbling incoherently.

“It wasn’t your fault, Donna. You didn’t kill anyone,” Russ murmured, stroking her hair and tucking silken strands of it behind her ear.

“I didn’t use my safe word. I didn’t say Safe Haven. Why did you stop? I didn’t want you to stop. I wanted you to keep going. I wanted—”

“A break. You need to give yourself a break, baby.”

Chance watched them, not feeling as much like a magic number as he felt like an unneeded third wheel on a bike. He didn’t know what kept him standing there like an unwanted voyeur until Russ looked up at him and stood with Donna in his arms, reverently handing her over to Chance.

“Take care of her,” he whispered. “I’ll be right back.”

Chance gawked as Russ stalked to the adjoining master bathroom and closed the door.

He looked down at the woman in his arms, gently placed her on her stomach on the bed, and unknotted the rope tied around her wrists.

Donna rubbed the slightly chafed area, then propped herself up on her elbows and patted the space beside her. “Sit with me.”

Chance did and reached out to run the back of his hand over her jaw. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." She reached for his crotch, stroking his erection through the denim.

Chance hissed out a breath and closed his eyes.

"Aren't you supposed to take care of me?"

He opened his eyes to stare at her. "Why?"

"Because Russ told you to."

"No." Chance shook his head. "I mean why did you let him do that to you?"

"Because I wanted him to."

"Really?"

"I know you don't understand it, and I don't understand it all myself."

"You're right. I don't understand it."

"But, I enjoyed what Russ did to me. I *needed* it." She made quick work of undoing the button and zipper on his jeans and reached inside to grasp his hard cock. "Being here with you and Russ makes me feel alive, like I'm a part of something important, like I matter."

"You matter to me. You've always mattered to me."

"I know." She lowered her head to lick the head of his penis, dipping the tip of her tongue into his slit to scoop out the jewel of precum. She licked her lips and looked up at him. "Are you reading my mind now?"

"No," he said.

"But you did earlier. I felt you."

His face and the tip of his ears got hot with a blush. "I did."

She smiled. "I guess we're all comfortable with each other now, huh?"

Not comfortable enough to say "I love you," which was what Chance wanted to say, which was what he almost *did* say right before Russ opened the bathroom door and came back into the bedroom with a white terry towel draped around and riding low on his hips.

Chance saw the turbulent look in his brother's eyes and wondered if he was at all ready for Round Two.

Chapter 24

They just thought he was so stupid, like he didn't know how to keep a low profile or stay below the radar of the authorities and away from their attention.

He could smell a cop a mile away. He had a lot of experience recognizing them and consequently avoiding them. He wouldn't have survived and lasted as long as he had had he not been adept at assimilating and thinking fast on his feet.

The cop was in an unmarked car sitting there in the driver's seat like *he* hadn't spotted him. What a joke. Guy stood out like a pit bull in a litter of dalmatians, even in plain clothes, not like *him*, who knew how and when to infiltrate and blend in. He would have been caught, exposed a long time ago, if he didn't know a few tricks.

But maybe this was the cop's plan. Maybe he wanted to make it obvious that the heifer was being watched and followed. Maybe he thought he was trying to deter another attack just with his presence, scare off her stalker.

The tactic might have worked if the cop was dealing with an average Joe.

But he wasn't average, nor was he going to be deterred, and he definitely wasn't going to get caught.

Sure he'd had a few reckless moments and close calls, especially lately. But this was because he was so close to getting what he wanted. He was ready to make a move. He just needed the right opportunity to take out his nemeses and then declare his love for Russ.

And finally come out of hiding.

* * * *

“Because men hurt women. I could never trust a man not to hurt me...”

Russ’s heart just about shattered when Donna said that, to think that she had been so scarred, was so jaded about men.

He and Chance had a lot of work to do to erase what other men had done before them, and Russ was beginning to doubt his ability to make Donna trust them, love them.

Damn, he was falling in love.

He was glad he hadn’t slipped up and said it earlier when she had been on his lap and at her most vulnerable. She wouldn’t have been able to appreciate the sentiment, would have had another reason not to trust him.

Besides, it was way too early in the game to start throwing that word around. At least it was too early for him, especially when he wasn’t sure *how* he felt. Russ didn’t know what Chance’s thoughts and feelings were on the subject, but from the way he looked at Donna, Russ suspected his little brother was halfway in love with their girl too.

Russ paused several feet from the end of the bed, his cock throbbing beneath the towel as he noticed Donna with her face in Chance’s lap, enthusiastically sucking his cock.

He closed his eyes to listen to the slurping sounds and Chance’s responding moans. He inhaled the aroma of sex in the air, his breath hitching in his chest at the idea of Donna’s lips on his brother. Russ didn’t know whether to be jealous or excited, both emotions rushing through him and making him glaringly hard.

He opened his eyes to meet his brother’s lust-hazy stare. He listened to the puffs of air hiss through Chance’s lips in rapid bursts as Donna brought him to a stunning crescendo with her mouth. Chance

shuddered, fisted her hair, and released a husky cry as she swallowed his essence.

Donna lifted her head, lovingly licking and nibbling Chance's shaft, unaware of Russ's presence as she finished off by kissing the head of Chance's cock.

"I love the way you taste," she murmured.

The sound of her throaty whisper almost had Russ marching across the floor to snatch her from Chance, but he took a mental step back and counted to ten before yanking the towel from around his waist and dropping it to the floor.

"Can I taste?"

Donna glanced at him over her shoulder, staring as she took in his state of undress.

He closed the distance between them until his knees pressed the foot of the bed, his ramrod cock proudly jutting toward her and waiting for its turn at ecstasy.

Donna licked her lips. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Would it have made a difference?"

"I'm not sure."

"Come here." Russ proffered a hand and watched as Donna got to her feet with catlike grace to take his hand and stand before him.

"Is there something you wanted, sir?"

"Your mouth. On me." He watched as she started to lower herself to her knees and caught her around the elbows to bring her back to her feet. "No. Kiss me."

She frowned. "Are you sure?"

Russ stepped to her and bracketed her face between his hands. "I want to taste you. I want to taste Chance on you." He listened as Chance hissed, standing behind Donna and gawking. "Take off your clothes, Bro, and get what we need."

Russ didn't wait to see if Chance obeyed, just lowered his head and drew Donna's face closer. He pressed his lips to hers, didn't know what drove his need until he teased the seam of her lips and

sampled the basic, bittersweet taste of his brother on her and his groin tightened with hunger and ownership.

“Open, and give me your tongue,” he rasped against her mouth.

Donna obeyed, thrusting out her tongue to swirl around and duel with his.

Even in this simple act, she exhibited the need to be strong and in control and not susceptible to the physical urges Russ instigated, instead wanted to conquer them.

He nipped her lower lip, then sucked her tongue into his mouth, swallowing down the moan she released before sweeping his tongue into her sultry, sweet mouth, taking over the kiss.

She pressed her lower body against him, and Russ felt her dew on his upper thigh as she rubbed against him. “Please...”

He didn’t need to hear more before he plunged a finger into her wetness, exploring her inner hot depths with slow, purposeful strokes until she dragged her lips from his, panting as she arched her neck. She gripped his biceps and curved one leg up around his hip, desperately opening herself up to him, giving him better access.

Russ marveled at the wanton look of surrender splashed across her face, her peaches-and-cream complexion flushed pink.

He lowered his head again, tempted by the burnished glow of her skin beneath the lamplight in the room, and drew his tongue along the tense column of her neck, biting and kissing his way back up to her mouth.

Russ sucked her full lower lip before taking her mouth with his and delving into her pussy deeper. He added a finger, scissoring and thrusting them in rhythm to Donna rocking her hips against his hand. He found her swollen clit with his thumb, alternately pressing and flicking the nub until Donna whimpered.

“*Russ!*”

And with that fierce cry, he jerked his fingers out of her.

Donna stumbled against him, bracing herself with her palms on his shoulders. “Why?”

“I wasn’t ready to let you come yet.”

“Am I still being punished?”

“Oh, yeah.” He clasped her around the shoulders and felt her body vibrating in his hands. She was like a live wire, the air charged around her as if she was an approaching tornado.

She leaned her forehead against his chest. “Please, make me come, sir. Please *finish* it.”

The need in her voice twisted his heart and made his dick contract, but Russ held firm, eyeing Chance as his brother took a step behind Donna.

Russ released her as Chance pressed against her back, and Donna gasped at the unexpected contact.

Chance brought his arms up around Donna to cup her breasts, drawing her back to lean against him while he tweaked and rolled her hard nipples.

Donna put her hands over Chance’s, grinding her ass back against him.

Russ’s heart hurried at the stunning picture they made together—carnal and vigorous, evocative and sensuous. He grasped his shaft and lightly pumped it as he watched them, Donna’s encompassing gaze sending a shudder through him before she closed her eyes, bit her bottom lip, and leaned her head back to rest against Chance’s shoulder.

Chance slid a hand down Donna’s body, caressing the glistening, soft skin covering her ribs and farther down to her hips, languidly fondling as he made his way to her pussy.

Russ licked his lips, firmly fisting himself now as he saw Chance slide his middle finger into Donna’s wet heat.

She bucked back against Chance with a little gasp, and Russ began to pump himself in earnest, closing his eyes and listening to the orgasmic sounds of Chance finger-fucking Donna.

“Don’t stop...Don’t...stop...”

Russ couldn't have expressed it better. His body reacted in kind, his full balls constricting against his groin and the blood rushing straight from his head to his dick. He rubbed the distended head of his penis on Donna's slightly rounded belly, right before white lightning struck his lower body, and he came on a long groan.

He opened his eyes moments later to see that he had found Chance and Donna's rhythm, rolling his hips near her pubis as Chance rocked his hips against her ass. Russ circled her navel with his cock head, just avoided brushing his brother's wrist, smearing his cum on Donna's belly until he was empty, and Donna cried out as her own orgasm crashed down on her.

She turned in Chance's arms and threw her own around his neck. "Hold me, Chance. I can't stand on my own anymore."

He chuckled and scooped her up into his arms, feverishly kissing her face as if he couldn't get enough of her taste.

Russ understood the sentiments perfectly. He wanted to taste all of her himself.

He watched as Chance laid her across the bed on her back and Donna flipped onto her side to face him, her face propped up by one hand.

"Are you going to punish me some more?" She switched her gaze from Chance to Russ, holding him in abeyance with her intense expression as she licked her lips.

Russ mimicked her gesture, licking his lips as he crawled onto the bed behind her and slid his arms around her waist. He pulled her back against him, his hard cock teasing her back opening, the warmth of her reaching the deepest, darkest parts of him.

"You want me inside you?"

"Oh, yes."

Her voice sounded faraway, as if she was half asleep and caught in an erotic dream she wanted to experience in real life, real time.

Chance wordlessly reached over Donna to hand Russ a tube of lubricant and a condom before donning a condom himself.

Russ opened the tube and squeezed a generous amount onto Donna's ass.

"That's cold." She shivered.

"Let's see if we can do something about warming you up." He smacked her ass, then gently rubbed the lube over the sensitive area.

Donna purred, turning her head and reaching for Russ's mouth with her own.

Russ accommodated her, fusing his mouth with Donna's and thrusting in his tongue in synch with his fingers applying the lubricant around and just inside her entrance.

He didn't know how she had been able to take Chance with only her own natural dew since his brother was sizable. But he was sure it would be a lot more difficult for her to take him in the back without the proper amount of lubrication to ease the way.

Once done, Russ opened the condom and quickly rolled the latex down over his rigid shaft, teasing the crack of Donna's ass with the underside as he rocked his hips against her, prolonging the torture and waiting for Chance to put his talented fingers and mouth to work.

Russ watched as his brother lay on his side and positioned his face between Donna's legs, spreading her labia with his thumbs.

Times like these, Russ welcomed his brother's mind-reading abilities, liked that he didn't have to verbalize everything, just had to think about something he wanted done and Chance would automatically do it.

They made a good team.

Russ glanced over Donna's shoulder, appreciating the way Chance appreciated *her*, his brother's agile tongue stroking her vulva and delving into her pussy as deep as he could.

Donna began to shudder in his arms, and Russ tightened his hold, felt like he had a tiger by the tail as she groaned and plowed her fingers through Chance's hair. She fisted her hands in Chance's long hair to hold him in place, and Chance responded by adding his hand

to the mix, thrusting two fingers into Donna's soaked cunt and pressing and rolling her clit with his thumb.

Inch by inch, Russ slowly eased his cock past the outer ring of muscles at Donna's anus, beyond turned on at the sight of Chance getting her off.

She panted and jerked forward, her hips already rocking wildly under Chance's dexterous and oral ministrations, making it difficult for Russ to find the rhythm his brother was setting.

Chance brought Donna to the edge, and like Russ before him, he pulled the plug, slowing his strokes to a crawl as Russ pushed farther, breaching Donna fully before he rotated his hips and took several deep breaths, acclimating to the warm clutch of her.

Donna clenched down on him with her inner muscles and elicited a growl.

"Damn, you are so tight...so hot." He circled the shell of her ear with his tongue, then nipped her lobe, reveling in the shivers that rode her curvy, lush body.

Donna's only reply was to squeeze his thigh, digging her nails into his skin, tightening her muscles around him, and sucking him deeper.

"Oh shit..." He had never been with anyone so responsive, had never been with anyone who suited him so well. She fit, inside and out, and the fact that his brother was sharing in their act of fulfillment only made the experience that much more perfect and sweeter.

Russ buried his face in her neck, licking and sucking her nape, marking her as she marked him with the succulent sweet aroma of her skin, her arousal. He would never react to the scent of vanilla the same way again, wouldn't be able to inhale it in mixed company without getting hard and embarrassing himself.

Donna bore down on his shaft as he pumped his hips behind her, and Chance took his fill of her juices until she cried out.

Her tremors drew Russ's own climax seconds later, and he gently sunk his teeth into the patch of muscle and skin connecting her neck

to her shoulders as he came, waves and waves of ecstasy crashing over him in a blinding rush of energy and light.

Chance slid up Donna's body and was passionately kissing her by the time Russ came back to himself and opened his eyes to watch them.

"Let me taste."

Donna turned from Chance, cupping Russ's cheek as she turned to him.

Russ licked her lips and plunged his tongue in, moaning. Even secondhand, her flavor was enticing and robust, and Russ savored all the rich and subtle textures of her female juices.

After a long moment, he pulled out of her and ended the kiss. "I have to go take care of this." He gestured to the full condom. "I'll be right back."

"You can walk?"

He chuckled. "Just barely." He surprised himself when he got up on steady legs and headed for the bathroom, still semi-erect. He'd never had such staying power with anyone before, never been in such an unrelenting state of stimulation with anyone.

Maybe it was the situation and not just the woman, but he knew for damn sure that Donna was a big part of his invariable arousal.

What was he going to do if she decided that, even after everything they'd done tonight, this wasn't for her? What would he do if she decided to make a choice between him and his brother? *Would* she choose between them or just decide not to be with either of them?

Russ couldn't imagine a life without her now that he knew what she felt like wrapped around him. He couldn't imagine a life without her since he had fallen in love with her.

Damn. He was fucked.

Chapter 25

Donna turned in to Russ's body. She was sandwiched between him and his brother, two gorgeous men who had brought her to unimaginable heights last night and this morning.

They had also brought her to some frightening realizations, things about herself that she had never wanted to face, though she'd always known they were there, lurking beneath the hard exterior she put up for the world to see, her brave face.

Russ had cracked her, broken through that long- and well-maintained exterior, and she should have been angry at him for making her feel so needy and weak, but she wasn't angry.

She'd wanted his treatment. God how she'd wanted him to discipline her, spank her into admitting what she needed, spank her into capitulation. But more than needing his discipline, she had been fully prepared to take anything he had to dish out to prove that she wasn't weak, not even in her submission.

The experience had been cathartic, even if a little frightening, making her feel lighter than she had in a long time, not since before she had left home to go to college.

She'd let her experiences with Bo and, later, Peter color her world to a dismal gray of distrust, pessimism, and misanthropy. How was she able to help other women be optimists, find liberation and new lives, when she had such a dim view of the world, such a dim view of men?

Was this why she'd needed *two* men to bring her around? Was she that hard-ass, that damaged, that only two strong men in their own rights could get through her defenses?

Angela certainly seemed to think so, that she needed Russ and Chance both in her life. Although Donna still wasn't sure if she was worthy of two men like Russ and Chance, wasn't sure if she deserved the thrill of having two men cater to her needs when so many other women were doing without the same comfort and loving. That she wanted them both and couldn't imagine an existence without them playing integral roles was beside the point. She couldn't have her cake and eat it too, could she? If she thought she had been punished yesterday for failing Naomi, then her gluttony was sure to put her on God's shit list in a major way, right?

A big, warm palm came down on one of her ass cheeks and squeezed.

"Ouch." Man, were her ass and pussy sore. It was an alien sore, but a good sore, a very good sore. "You mind?"

"Not at all." Russ growled and bent his head to nuzzle her neck. He inhaled deeply and pulled her against him so that she could feel the total brunt of his morning hard-on.

"You can't be ready again."

"You don't know what you've gotten yourself into, little girl."

She should have been angry at the designation. But she wasn't, just as she hadn't been angry at his calling her a slave. What was that all about? Gloria Steinem would be snatching back her emancipated, independent female card in a flash if she got wind of this.

The problem was she felt like a little girl, inexperienced and in need of a strong and knowledgeable teacher, when she was with Russ. Yet, she felt like such a woman of the world too, a sensual being ready to fully accept the power of her femininity and sex.

"Well, why don't you show me what I've gotten myself into?" she purred. God, she was such a slut, a real glutton for punishment!

Chance pressed against her back as if in response to her thoughts, his semi-erect cock nudging her ass where Russ's hand wasn't.

Russ reached for her pussy and languidly caressed her moist curls. "I think our girl's ready for us again, Bro."

Donna shuddered at his use of “our girl,” never felt as protected and secure as she did when she was with these two men. They made her feel like she belonged, like this was right, while *she* just kept waiting for the bottom to fall out.

She trusted them with her body, her sexual safety and pleasure, but she still wasn’t sure if she trusted them not to leave her, not to abuse her ego. She thought she’d rather take a hit from someone like Luther or Morgan than have her emotions and psyche toyed with again.

Chance pressed his lips against her ear. “Are you ready?”

She patted the hand he had over her breast, and he tightened his hold as if he was afraid she would bolt. She felt his uncertainty and thought that, of the three of them, Russ seemed like the surest of them all—sure of his place in the world and his place with them. He was the leader of this little pack, and Donna wished she knew exactly where he was leading them and how far she would let him take her.

They had gone pretty far last night, further than she ever imagined she would go with kinky mind games. But she still wasn’t sure she was cut out for a life of submission, a life of being totally vulnerable at will—Russ’s will.

Donna swallowed hard and nodded in response to Chance’s question.

She watched him pass a foil pack over her to Russ and waited a few seconds before they were both sheathed and ready to take her.

Donna didn’t think she could be geared up for them again this soon after they’d had at her in the shower a few hours ago before they’d all settled into bed naked and cuddled together to fall asleep, but she was so geared up.

Russ slid down her body until his face was poised at her pussy, and her entire body tingled at seeing him down there ready to partake. She squirmed, waiting for him to touch her, but instead almost jumped out of her skin when Chance squeezed some lube on her ass and began massaging it in and around her anus.

Russ touched her then, spreading her lips with his thumbs before he bent his head, opened his mouth over her moist, warm pussy, and sucked heartily.

Donna closed her eyes and arched her neck, rotating and rocking her hips against Russ's eager mouth. She was halfway to rapture with just Russ's mouth, but then Chance slid a hand between her legs to sink two fingers into her wet cunt, twisting them and stimulating her inner walls to send her straight past "Go" to ecstasy. Russ simultaneously moved his efforts to her clit, licking and nibbling the engorged kernel of flesh, the guys' familiar tandem act pushing her closer and closer to the edge.

Donna didn't lose herself completely, though, too aware of the game, waiting for them to put the brakes on and pull the rug from under her. In just the few times she had been with them, she had grown to understand how they operated.

And sure enough, as soon as she groaned her pleasure, unable to hold it in anymore, Chance removed his fingers, and Russ gave her one farewell stroke with his tongue before pulling away to lick in and around her navel, driving her insane with frustration.

"Oooh, you two make me so mad!"

Russ gave her a sound smack on the ass. "Are you itching for the riding crop so early in the morning?"

"What for?"

"Your insolence."

"My *insolence*?"

"It's not your place to make demands. It's up to us to anticipate your needs and fulfill—"

"Well you're doing a piss-poor job of it."

Smack!

"Hey! Stop that!"

"I think the slave has forgotten her place," Russ said, his voice dangerously low and sending her hormones into orbit with wanting him, wanting *more*.

Damn, she was a sick chippy. “I haven’t forgotten. I’m just saying, though...”

“And as I was saying, before you so rudely interrupted me, it’s not your place to make demands. You have to trust us to know what you need and to give it to you. We may not give it to you exactly when or how you want it, but you will have your needs satisfied. That’s our job.”

Donna turned her head to risk a glance at Chance and see what he thought of all this and was confronted with the most stoic expression she had ever seen on him. Well, hell, Russ was certainly rubbing off! Guess she couldn’t count on her gentle diplomat to back her up. Not like she ever could anyway, not where Russ was concerned.

Chance was the silent partner in all this, strong and his own man, but deferring to Russ, letting his brother run the show—just like she did—especially in this arena where he was less experienced.

And this is what made Russ the Dominant and her and Chance the subs.

This is what makes you love them both.

Smack!

She gritted her teeth against the sting, had half expected a lick for her defiance, but damn that stung. Maybe love wasn’t quite the word she was looking for in this situation. Right now she was feeling more annoyed and chagrined than in love. Men!

Donna turned back to glare at Russ, and he glared right back. She held his look for a long moment before finally dropping her eyes, cowed by his authority.

“Do you think we’re depriving you by not letting you come right away?”

It certainly felt like it to her. “Okay, I get it. You’re giving me a lesson on patience and self-control.” Like she hadn’t been exerting each in spades over the last couple of years? She’d been patient, detached, and *deprived*. She deserved a little pleasure and—

Smack!

“What was *that* for?”

“That was for being a smart-ass, Grasshopper.”

She licked her lips and gave Russ her best saucy grin right before she felt Chance slide his hand between her legs again, easing one finger into her pussy and wiggling it.

“Oh!” She squeezed her legs together, pumping her hips against his hand.

“Do you want Chance to get you off?”

“Yessss.”

“Do you think you deserve to come?”

“No, but I want to.”

“And?”

“I’m sorry I was disrespectful, sir. It won’t happen again.”

Russ chuckled and smacked her ass again. “A likely story.”

* * * *

“You make a good Betty Crocker,” Donna said, taking a bite into a crispy piece of bacon and pointing the remainder at Russ as he took a seat at the kitchen island.

“Bite your tongue.”

“What? I think men who can cook are sexy, not to mention very masculine.”

“Nice try, but don’t get too used to me making you breakfast all the time. You’re a guest, and this is a special occasion.”

Donna arched a brow and looked from Russ to Chance, sitting beside him, and back again. “Okay, you got me. What’s the occasion?”

“We’re celebrating you being on the road to independence.”

Now she frowned. Road to independence? Independence from what? “I thought I was pretty independent before you came along.”

“It was a false sense of independence. What we experienced last night, that was real. Don’t make the mistake of thinking because

you're submissive and I call you "slave" that you aren't independent. You have more power than you know—over me and Chance."

"Kind of like handing me a loaded gun, saying something like that, don't you think?"

Russ shook his head and reached across the table to take her hand in his. "I trust you."

She just looked at him, stunned, trying not to gawk. After a long moment, she blinked and brought her glass of OJ to her mouth to take a swallow, washing down a bite of syrup-covered pancake and scrambled eggs.

Russ didn't take his eyes off of her as he raised his own glass of OJ to his mouth. After taking a big gulp, he put his glass back on the island top and grinned at her.

What was she supposed to say? Was he waiting for her to say she trusted him too? He was going to be sorely disappointed then.

Donna glanced at Chance. "How do you feel about what Russ said?" she asked, though she thought she already knew what his answer would be, especially when Chance fixed her with his tender brandy gaze and shrugged as if the conversation didn't mean anything to him.

Someone rang the front doorbell, and Russ got up to answer it with a "Be right back" flung over his shoulder.

Donna was not ready to let Chance off the hook and peered at him as he too washed down a mouthful of pancake with his OJ. "Chance?"

He paused to wipe his mouth with a napkin. "You know how I feel about you."

"Unlike you, I'm not a mind reader."

"You're more gifted than you think."

She didn't even want to think about their experience in the hospital, when she had realized how gifted she was. She already felt like someone who'd been exposed to the euphoric effects of heroin. Now she looked for that thrill of feeling Chance's feelings every time

they were together. That wasn't good. She didn't want to get used to having him around. She didn't want to get used to *needing* him.

"Too late," he murmured.

"Tell me how you feel about me."

He fixed her with a searing look that just about had her melting into a puddle on the floor. "I love you, Donna. I've loved you from the first moment I met you, and the feelings have only gotten stronger this last month being with you and Russ. I love you, and nothing we've all done these last two days together has changed that."

Someone cleared her throat from the threshold, and Donna realized they had an audience.

She and Chance both jerked their heads toward the doorway where an impassive Russ and gawking Suzie now stood.

"I, uh, didn't mean to interrupt."

Donna leapt to her feet to go to Suzie, but the other woman backed up, an expression of utter bewilderment and disappointment clearly written across her face, before she turned on Russ with a glare.

"So this is why we had to get a divorce? So you could be *you*?" She pointed her finger to encompass Chance and Donna. "*This* is you? Keeping house with a woman and *sharing* her with your brother? My God, Russ."

"It's not what you think," Donna croaked.

"It's exactly what I think!"

Duly chastised, Donna snapped her mouth shut and let her arms fall back to her sides, saw the woman's tears, and recognized that she was hurt more than angry, but that there was nothing she or Russ or Chance could do to comfort her, not now anyway.

"So all that BDSM stuff wasn't enough for you? You had to go out and start some kind of kinky commune?"

"Suzie, you need to calm down and think about what you're saying," Russ said, so calmly Donna stared at him in awe.

She wished she could be so calm when things were coming apart at the seams around her. But despite some of her coworkers and

clients believing she had nerves of steel and considering her their personal hero, she knew the truth. She was nowhere near as fearless as Russ and Chance, nowhere near ready to open herself up and trust someone as Russ had done earlier, nor brave enough to declare her love as had Chance.

“I don’t need to calm down. What I need to do is get away from you.” Suzie turned on her heels and marched through the living room toward the front door.

Russ followed, and Donna followed Russ, couldn’t help herself.

Suzie froze before the door and suddenly pivoted to glare at Russ again. “And to think I wanted to come over to wish you well and congratulate you, in person, on your new relationship. I was so happy for you.”

“What’s changed? Why can’t you still be happy for me?”

Her eyes went saucer-wide, and she moved her lips several times before anything came out. “How dare you ask me that!”

“Why? Is it that hard a question to answer?” Russ asked, clearly working up a head of his own steam, but still in control. “So what we’re doing isn’t the *norm*, isn’t *conventional*. It doesn’t make our relationship wrong or any less respectable than your marriage to Harold.”

“How can you stand there and flaunt your indiscretion and irresponsibility in my face? And how can you compare this...this *orgy* with my marriage to Harold.”

“This isn’t an orgy. It’s just three people who care about each other. That’s all.”

Suzie shook her head, the tears finally falling. “I cared about you once too, Russ.”

She was speaking in the past tense. That wasn’t good for Russ, not at all.

“Suzie...” He stepped to her, and she let him put his arms around her.

For a moment, Donna thought everything would be all right, that Suzie was willing to listen, forgive and forget. But she suddenly pulled away from Russ, pounding him in the chest with her fists, much as Donna had at the barbecue.

And like Russ had done with Donna, he let Suzie get out her frustrations on him for several moments before he finally caught her wrists to restrain her.

“Let go of me.”

“Not until you calm down.”

Suzie gritted her teeth. “I’m as calm as I’m going to get. Let me go.”

Russ released her as she jerked away to open the door.

She stepped outside before she turned back to give Russ one more glare. “You can forget about seeing the kids anytime soon.”

“Suzie, don’t make any rash deci—”

“Don’t touch me.” She held up a hand to stop Russ’s forward motion, and he stopped in his tracks. “I have some things to think about, and so do you. Don’t call me, and don’t come by. I’ll call you.”

Chapter 26

He watched the pretty blonde leave Russ's house in a huff and almost cheered.

He considered catching up with her to confirm why she was so upset, to commiserate, but thought better of it.

She was just as much a nemesis to him as the heifer and pretty-boy brother were. She couldn't *really* understand how he felt. No one could, except Russ.

But getting close to her could prove useful. He just had to figure out how. Or maybe it would prove more troublesome than throwing the rock through the heifer's window had been.

He was still stinging over that little setback, could see now how the act had done the exact opposite of what he had planned.

There had to be a way to alienate Russ from the heifer, and maybe the brother too. He had to do *something* before it was too late and Russ was irrevocably bound to her and committed to this ménage.

He'd come too far to lose Russ now.

* * * *

Love and trust were the cornerstones of any successful relationship.

Chance felt them for Donna. And even though Russ hadn't *said* he loved her, only that he trusted her, Chance knew better, knew that his brother loved Donna as much as he did.

The question was, did Donna love them?

He knew she enjoyed their company, liked the sex, even cared about them to a certain degree. But she hadn't said she loved them.

Chance could have read her, had thought about doing it several times in the last couple of days, but refused to violate her that way. It was enough that he knew half of the things he knew already without her permission.

Like Russ had said about her trusting them, she had to come to the realization herself, admit, of her own volition, that she loved them, and no amount of scenes, discipline, or spankings were going to get *that* out of her.

Chance knew this like he knew no amount of empathy or telepathy was going to help Russ in his situation with Suzie.

He watched his brother and Donna now as they made it back to the kitchen, didn't have to read them to know how disastrous things had turned out with Russ's ex-wife.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have said all that."

"It's not your fault. You were only saying how you feel," Russ said and retook his seat.

Donna sat across from them as before, looking from one to the other.

Chance felt her gaze fasten on him and tried his best not to fidget beneath her scrutiny.

He couldn't blame her for looking at him like he had lost his mind. He certainly felt like he had, hadn't been right in the head since he met her. It was through no fault of hers. It was all him, chasing after someone who was so emotionally unavailable, more so than he had ever been.

After a long moment, he raised his gaze to meet hers and froze with his heart in his throat at her confused, incredulous look.

Was what he said so unbelievable to her? Didn't she believe him, or did she think she wasn't worthy of his, or anyone else's, love?

Chance lifted his eyebrows in question. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I just..."

“You just?”

“Maybe I should go.” She looked to Russ, as if she wanted him to disagree, but he didn’t say anything, which told Chance just how out of it his brother was.

“No, *I* should go. I’m the one who caused this me—”

A piercing whistle split the air, and Chance and Donna both looked to Russ, who was now standing and had his index finger and thumb in his mouth. He whistled again as if to make sure he had their undivided attention.

“This is no one’s fault. You can’t take the blame for Suzie’s intolerance.”

“I don’t know how tolerant *I* would be in her place,” Donna said.

“How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true.”

“I’m not going to let you use this situation to push us away.”

Chance didn’t think she needed much to justify pushing them away. She hadn’t committed herself to this like they had. Her heart wasn’t in it. And that thought just made *his* heart ache—for all of them.

“Russ, you can’t force her to feel something she doesn’t.”

“This isn’t about forcing anyone to do anything except face the truth.”

“*Your* truth?” Donna asked.

“Truth is truth. *You’re* just in denial.”

“Okay, that’s it.” Donna threw down her napkin. “I don’t need to sit here and listen to you criticize me for my *failings*.”

Chance caught her arm to stop her as she leapt from her stool and tried to leave the kitchen. “He didn’t mean anything by it.”

“You don’t have to defend me, Chance. I know exactly what I meant, and I said it. She’s running scared, and she knows it.”

“Fuck you,” Donna said.

“That’s your answer to everything, isn’t it?”

“No wonder Suzie left you. You’re a bossy, insensitive brute. You don’t deserve her, or me, for that matter.”

“If that’s what lets you sleep soundly at night, believe that if you want.”

Her hand whipped out so fast neither Russ nor Chance could stop her. The resultant crack of Donna’s palm connecting with Russ’s cheek was deafening.

Chance gawked, watching his brother’s face redden with the mark of Donna’s handprint.

“You feel better now?”

“I think I could get used to that, yeah, and I so see what *you* get out of it now.” Donna jerked her arm out of Chance’s grasp, turned on her heel, and stalked out of the kitchen.

Damn, two women storming off within a matter of minutes. The morning that had started out so promisingly had really gone to shit.

“Aren’t you going to stop her?” Chance asked.

“Do you think she’d really listen to me in the mood she’s in?”

“Maybe if you took your head out of your ass to understand how she’s feeling.”

“How *she*’s feeling? I laid my heart out on a silver platter for her, and she calls me an insensitive brute.”

“Don’t forget bossy.”

Russ grinned, but his humor was short-lived as he raked a hand through his hair and released a tired sigh. “You want to know what’s so messed up about this whole situation?”

“What?”

“Suzie’s reaction. I just don’t understand it. She’s never been the type of person to jump to conclusions, never been judgmental.”

“You have to admit it’s a lot for the average person to take in. You can’t just expect her to be all hunky-dory with this. She’s a mother raising two kids.” Not to mention the fact that she was probably still more than a little bit in love with Russ.

“And you think I would do *anything* to jeopardize Suzie’s and my kids’ well-being?”

“I know you wouldn’t, Russ. But Suzie’s not seeing things rationally right now. I’m sure she’s only thinking about setting a good Christian example for the kids. You know that whole conservative family values rhetoric.”

“And I suppose a Dom father mixed up in BDSM and a ménage a trois isn’t a good Christian example. Never mind he’s involved in more of a committed, loving relationship than any of those hypocritical proponents of family values would ever understand, or at least it would be a committed, loving relationship if Donna would just come to her senses.”

Chance put a hand on Russ’s shoulder. “She’ll come around. She just needs time.”

“You’re talking about Suzie or Donna?”

“Suzie, actually, but I guess the statement applies to both.”

“I’ll give Suzie all the time she needs. But if she’s planning on keeping me from my kids, she’s going to have a fight on her hands.”

“And Donna?”

“She hasn’t *seen* my bossy side yet.”

* * * *

“Okay to come in?”

“Not if you’re initials are RM.”

“I guess I’m in the clear then. Mine happen to be CN.” Chance came into the master bedroom, his heart hopscotching as he crossed the floor and saw Donna’s smile.

She was such a sensitive, sensual, and sexual woman. Any man would be lucky to call her his own. He just wasn’t that man yet, but every minute of every day, he prayed for the miracle that would make her realize she loved and needed him as much as he and Russ loved and needed her. Every day he wished he could make her hurt go away

and give her a fresh start. But that was impossible. They all had baggage and their pasts to deal with. They had to get over it. Whether she chose to do it alone or with them was totally up to her—always up to her.

“He’s not a bad guy, you know.”

Donna didn’t answer as she shoved her right foot into her Doc Martens like she had a grudge against the boot before buckling it up.

Chance sat on the bed beside her, thought he had never seen a woman get dressed and ready to go so fast, like rabid hunting dogs were chomping at her heels.

She finished putting on her boots and turned to Chance. “I know he’s not a bad guy,” she finally said. “He’s just a man.”

“And that’s a problem?”

“It can be sometimes. But we’ve already covered this. I’m not going to go into the poor-me-I-was-hurt-in-the-past-by-a-man-and-now-I-hate-all-men act. I don’t want pity. I’m a big girl. I’ll get over it.”

“Gee, you say all the right things. I’m almost convinced.” He put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “You don’t have to get over it alone, you know. You can ask for help from someone who’s been there.”

“You?”

“Don’t look so shocked. I’ve been hurt before. Maybe not like you, but I’m human. None of us reach adulthood without suffering a little, some of us more than others.”

“Who hurt and made you suffer, Mr. Novak?”

He shrugged, suddenly sorry he had brought up the subject. “A girl.”

“Just one? Not a long string of jilted lovers and busted hearts in your wake?”

He smirked. “Not likely.”

She stared at him, making him feel like a bug under a magnifying glass and the hot summer sun. “You never really talk about yourself.

You just sit back and listen to everyone else's problems. Is that a healer thing?"

"You should know. You're a bit of a healer yourself."

Donna shook her head. "I wouldn't dare put myself in the same league as you."

"You don't think what you do is worthy?"

She averted her gaze, and he instantly felt her remorse.

Chance put an arm around her shoulders and held her. "It wasn't your fault what happened to Naomi."

"I was wondering when you'd bring that up."

"You didn't seem like you wanted to talk about it."

"How do *you* know about her? Did Russ tell you?"

"I knew something was wrong when I first arrived at the barbecue. When I saw you with Russ, I asked him why you were crying. He wouldn't go into details, said I should ask you."

"But you never did."

"My powers get a little erratic during times of extreme excitement and stress, and I'm not always able to keep up my shields as well as I'd like. Somewhere during the last couple of days, the information slipped through."

She put a hand on his thigh, her gaze instantly softening. "I'm sorry, Chance. It can't be easy for you always having to hear what other people are thinking and feeling."

He shrugged again. "I'm used to it."

"Is that why a girl hurt you, because of what you can do?"

"It was a long time ago. I was twenty-two, practically a kid. She was too, so I don't blame her."

She just looked at him. "Really?"

"Everyone can't handle what I am the way you did."

"You think I handled it?"

"You didn't run screaming from the room like I'm a freak."

"You're not a freak. You're a human being who can do amazing things."

Chance got all choked up at her sincerity and the sound of determination in her voice. “Thanks for that,” he whispered.

“For what?”

“For being you.”

Now it was her turn to shrug, her shoulders eloquently lifting and dropping as she patted his thigh and peered at him. “I’d better get going.”

He caught her hand as she stood. “Not so fast.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t like you leaving under these circumstances.”

“You mean Russ?”

Chance nodded. “You two need to talk.”

“Maybe so, but not now. I’m not in the mood to be bossed around.”

“What if he doesn’t want to boss and just wants to talk?”

“Does he?”

Chance couldn’t honestly say one way or another, and he didn’t want to lie. He just hated seeing people he cared about so at odds with each other.

“Uh-huh. I didn’t think so.” Donna plunked back down on the bed and released a long sigh. “What do you think Suzie will do about what she heard?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know her much better than you do. Yesterday evening was the first time I ever met her, though I’ve heard a lot about her and the kids from Russ.”

“From what you’ve heard, do you think she would make trouble for Russ, that she’d actually keep the kids from him?”

He felt her anxiety, wanted to reassure her that everything would be all right, but he couldn’t, in good faith, do that. Suzie had been pretty mad when she left. Who knew what she’d do in that frame of mind? He responded with the only thing he could think of to say.

“If she does, it’s not your responsibility.”

“Even though I’m not appreciating the asshole right now, I hate to see him having any difficulties, not if we can avoid it.”

“Don’t hold back. Tell me how you really feel.” Chance chuckled. “Look, there’s nothing you can do to stop any *difficulties*. They’re a part of life, and I’m sure Russ will deal with the fallout in his own way, and he and Suzie will find a way to work things out. Just please don’t use the whole earlier scene as an excuse to stay away from us again.”

“Oh, Chance, I...I don’t like staying away from either of you.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Her grin had a tinge of sadness to it. “It’s just that it’s easier to avoid you two altogether than it is to deal with the emotional upheaval when I see you.”

“Is it really?”

“Well, not that easy, just preferable to maintain my sanity.”

“I suppose I should take that as a compliment, that we drive you crazy.”

She slid an arm around his waist and hugged him. “Why can’t all men be like you?”

“Because I’m an original, baby.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder and took a deep breath. “You both are. That’s the problem.”

“Why’s that a problem?”

“I just feel like I’m being too greedy accepting you and Russ into my life and enjoying you so much, like I’m tempting fate.”

“Oh Goddess, stop being so superstitious! Nothing bad’s going to happen to you—to any of us—just because you allow yourself a little pleasure. I promise.”

“Okay. I won’t be so superstitious.”

Her smile was without mirth or confidence, and her obvious lack of conviction made Chance wonder.

He had never been the superstitious type. He believed in science and his abilities and dealt with the rest of life as it came. And despite

his experiences with people when it came to his abilities and spirituality, he still wouldn't consider himself jaded or a cynic.

But what if there was something to Donna's feelings? What if they were all courting disaster flouting convention to be together? The idea that they were tempting fate alarmed Chance as much as the idea of never seeing Donna again.

He could be on guard and protect her from physical and emotional harm, and he would. But how did he protect her from an amorphous idea or a feeling?

Chapter 27

He was smothering inside his own skin. It itched so much he wanted to rip it off to free himself, ease the pain, let what was inside him out. His head ached from all the ideas and plans roaming through it without a means of release.

He was stifling himself, and he needed to stop to survive. If he didn't act soon, it would be the death of him and his dreams to be with Russ.

No! He wasn't going to let them win.

He was tired of being the loser, the lowlife that everyone shunned, or worse, ignored.

This was his time now. His mother was dead. There was no one left to hold him back, no one to tell him he was less than nothing and didn't deserve to be happy or be around *normal* people. His mother couldn't hurt him anymore. No one could hurt him, except for maybe Russ if he rejected him. But Russ wouldn't do that, would he? Surely he'd see past his sex to realize that they were made for each other and no one could take care of him better than him, that no one *cared* about him more.

He needed to get rid of that bitch. She was standing in his way, more so than the pretty-boy brother who was just an annoyance, much like the kids. But that heifer...she was a real rival.

She had the power to turn Russ's head, to take his heart, her with her round, swinging hips and hot pussy to tempt Russ with—her with the big doe eyes and the fluttering lashes.

Bitch! So he couldn't play the helpless damsel in distress game as well as her, and he didn't have tits and a cunt to seduce and suck in a man like Russ. Did that mean he didn't deserve love too?

John had assured him he deserved love. John had him believing he was worthy despite his past.

He decided he could be whatever Russ wanted him to be to get back that feeling of worthiness he'd had with John. He just needed a chance.

And he would get it.

He closed his eyes and pictured her stomped beneath the heel of his boots, her vital organs slowly shutting down as she bled out before finally dying.

That's it. He would make sure she died as slowly and painfully as possible. He wanted her to suffer the way he was suffering. He wanted her to know exactly how much he despised her for keeping Russ away from him. She was vile, like an insidious disease, no better than the accident that had taken John away from him.

He tipped the vodka bottle to his head and took a long swig, wincing as the alcohol burned a path down his throat and esophagus before it finally lit a fire in his stomach.

He was not much of a drinker. He liked to keep a clear head so he didn't make mistakes. But lately, he needed the alcohol to dull the pain, keep the visions of the heifer and Russ together at bay. The mere images made him sick.

But he wouldn't have to put up with her presence for much longer. He had plans for her.

He would carry them out soon—very soon.

* * * *

When the phone on his desk rang, Russ groaned.

He was not expecting good news, not after the way his day had started out and especially not after it continued to go straight down the crapper ever since. And it was now barely noon.

No, he wasn't going to answer the phone. He'd let Stu handle whatever and whoever it was. Stu was capable, and that's what Russ had hired him for.

He just couldn't deal with another crisis, didn't want to hear about another client locking horns with one of his contractors, didn't want to hear about materials that had failed to reach their destination or job, didn't want to hear about another project snag, didn't want to hear about once-reliable employees calling in sick yet again.

This wasn't like him. He didn't run from problems, and he definitely didn't run from phone calls. Whoever was on the other end, he was sure he could deal with them efficiently and courteously, in a manner befitting his position as owner of the company and a well-trained designer. He didn't run from his problems, unlike some people he knew.

Damn, that was a low blow. It wasn't Donna's fault that *he* had fallen for her. It was him, all him. She wasn't responsible for his feelings, but damn didn't she hold his heart in her hands without even knowing it. Hell, he hadn't known it for sure until a couple of weeks ago when she'd silently glanced his way before quickly averting her eyes and leaving his house before Chance left him a few minutes later.

The phone stopped ringing. Good. He could get back to his wallowing in peace.

He aimlessly clicked the mouse on his computer, halfheartedly going over the needs assessment specs for one of his latest projects, but all he could think about was Donna and the way he'd felt watching her leave. She hadn't said a word, had barely looked at him, but just those little gestures had been enough to rip out a piece of him, the good and promising piece that inspired him, made him whole.

Hell, now he was waxing poetic. Why didn't he just take his truck to her house and tell her she completed him. That oughta go over real well.

He definitely was in a bad place, had been ever since that scene with Donna and Suzie. Handling one irate woman who didn't want to listen to reason was bad enough, but handling two was beyond frustrating. And to top it off, neither Suzie nor Donna had called him yet, just leaving him swinging in the wind, ass out and in the dark.

"Knock, knock."

Russ looked up from his computer monitor to see Amy, his administrative assistant, standing on the threshold of his office.

He smiled, couldn't help himself. She had the kind of clean-scrubbed, fresh beauty and sweet personality that brought a smile to everyone's face, especially the guys in the company.

Stu, in particular, seemed to have a genuine fondness for the girl, Russ noticed. He had caught the man hanging around her desk chatting on more than several occasions since Russ had hired her almost a year ago, intense, secretive conversations that made Russ wonder if there was anything going on between the two. It wasn't totally improbable. Despite his being close to Russ's age and Amy being twenty-two, Stu could still pull the women, had the looks and kind of charm that never went out of style.

Russ didn't miss all the interested looks, suggestive remarks, and invitations that Stu got when he and Russ went out on a job together, looks from the lonely and not-so-lonely housewives and career women who contracted the services of Merrick Outdoor Designs, looks from the old and the young that all just seemed to go unnoticed by Stu.

It made Russ wonder now about the man's sex life, why, before now, he had never noticed that Stu's seemed about as active as his own. But then who was he to judge when, before Donna, he had practically been living like a monk himself?

"I buzzed you, but you must have been really engrossed."

“I was, but not with anything important. What’s up?”

“I know you said you didn’t want any interruptions and to let Stu handle any emergencies, but your daughter’s on line three.”

His heart skipped in alarm. His kids never called him at work. “I’ll take it.”

Amy nodded, backing out of the door and closing it behind her.

Russ pressed down the blinking red light on his console. “Kim, what’s the matter?”

“Daddy, why don’t you want us to come to your house for the summer?”

His heart sank at the sound of her shaky voice, the thought of the tears he knew were in her eyes. “Who told you I didn’t want you for the summer?”

“Mom said you needed to decide whether you really wanted me and Wes to come and spend the summer with you. She said either you were going to be a proper father or you were going to live your life instead. What’d she mean by that, Dad?”

He’d like to know the answer to that himself. And he could just imagine the sarcastic tone Suzie used when she said “be a proper father” and “live your life.”

Was she insinuating that, because he loved the same woman as his brother, because they *shared* the same woman, that he wasn’t a proper father figure? Never mind that Suzie had been the one always pushing him to get out there and date and *he* had been the one who wasn’t in a rush, who wanted to hold back and stay single until the kids got a little older. Now that he was ready to share his life with someone, she wanted to take issue.

He really hated that Suzie had dragged the kids into their disagreement like this, especially when it and her innuendos were totally unnecessary. But from what Kim said, her mother hadn’t seemed to go into too many details. Russ guessed that was something in Suzie’s favor and she hadn’t totally lost her mind.

“It’s nothing for you to worry yourself about, honey. Your mother and I just need to talk some things out.”

“But what happened? You two were so cool with each other and everything at the barbecue, and Mom really liked Donna and...” She sniffed and hiccupped. “Was it anything we did to make Mom upset? I asked her, but she just clammed up and won’t tell me anything.”

“It’s nothing you did, sweetheart, nothing at all. This is between me and your mother.” Of course he couldn’t leave Donna and Chance out of the equation because they were so a part of this, a part of his life that he *wasn’t* giving up no matter what Suzie said.

She was giving out ultimatums? Either, or, and instead? What the hell?

“Dad, is Mom going to take you to court for full custody and stop your visitation?”

She’ll get full custody and stop my visitation over my dead body. Russ gritted his teeth and counted to ten before he answered. “Don’t you worry about that, baby. We’ll work this out.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” She took a deep, trembling breath. “I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, baby. Talk to you later.” Russ waited for his daughter to hang up before he did. He ran a hand down his face and took a long, deep breath.

He couldn’t lose his kids, wouldn’t let Suzie take them from him.

But what if she decided to punish him, to take this situation to the max and go to court, contesting his suitability as a father? He was sure the court wouldn’t look kindly on the father of two impressionable children sharing a household and woman with his brother.

What had Suzie called the living arrangement? A kinky commune? She always had been fond of alliteration.

But this was all jumping the gun considering Donna looked like she didn't want to have anything to do with him or Chance—again. Seemed he wasn't going to have his cake *or* eat it.

God, he missed her, and they had only been together a few times, granted a few very intense, exhilarating, and satisfying times that made him hungry for more, so much more of what he knew Donna was capable.

Russ hadn't known just how much he'd missed sex, missed the Life, before he'd experienced the feel of Donna's tender flesh giving beneath the weight of the riding crop he'd wielded, hadn't known how much he'd missed a woman willing and ready to give herself—body and soul—to him before he'd experienced Donna breaking and opening up to his grilling.

Life with her and Chance would be so stimulating, the angst that they both carried around melding and twining with his for a dynamic he had only fantasized about before meeting Donna and his brother's long overdue return.

They were a perfect threesome, and they were being threatened by petty-mindedness.

He had to talk to Suzie sooner rather than later, before she got any more crazy ideas in her head about what he, Donna, and Chance were doing together, about how the three of them were living. Problem was how to approach his ex without antagonizing her any more than he already, unintentionally had.

Normally, he didn't have a problem talking to Suzie. For ex-spouses they had pretty good rapport and were usually in agreement on how to handle the kids. But after dropping his initial bombshell about his proclivities, he had to admit things had been strained between them before Suzie came around to understand that they weren't meant to be together and that staying together for the sake of the kids wasn't wise for either of them. Pretty soon, their disenfranchisement with each other would have spilled into their relationship with the kids, never a good thing.

So Suzie had come around to see the sagacity of divorce and signed the papers—irreconcilable differences.

As many times as he used to see and hear the term on TV, as many of his friends and coworkers who had gotten divorced for the same reason or others, Russ had never thought he'd be using the identical, what he thought of as, cop-out reason to divorce Suzie. But he had, had had no choice. It was either divorce or languish in a land of bland matrimony with no hope of ever reaching fulfillment ever again, emotionally and spiritually wasting away beneath the twin weights of loyalty and obligation.

Someone knocked on the door, and Russ shook his head to clear the fog that had settled over him. "Come in."

Amy opened the door and stood on the threshold. "I thought you should know, Derek called again to say he more than likely wouldn't be in tomorrow. He's still not feeling up to par and doesn't anticipate feeling any better tomorrow."

"That's just great," Russ mumbled, wondering what the hell was going on with one of his better workers. Even though he had barely been with the company a year, Derek knew his job and jumped right in to do it. His unassuming quietness and attention to detail made him a perfect fit with the rest of his coworkers, and before last week, he'd never called in sick.

But shit happened, of course, and people got sick. He just hated that it would leave him shorthanded again tomorrow. "Thanks for letting me know, Amy."

"Is everything okay with your kids?"

He glanced up to see the genuine concern shining out of her eyes and wanted to reassure her, didn't want to burden her with his personal problems. That wasn't him. He hated bringing his personal life to the job and vice versa. But sometimes, it couldn't be helped, like losing his train of thought in the middle of a project because he was too preoccupied thinking about a certain luscious, chestnut-haired woman who had a serious attitude problem.

Russ smiled as he thought about Donna and her façade of toughness. He had only gotten a hint of what was beneath all that bravado, but he knew she wasn't as tough as she tried to seem. He also knew why she thought she had to be so tough and respected her dedication and passion for her clients.

"Everything's fine," he said finally, lying through his teeth. But he knew, even though things weren't okay now, they would be as soon as he talked to Suzie and Donna and straightened things out.

He would accept nothing less.

Chapter 28

Her heart already pounding after hearing Russ's voice over the intercom, Donna unlocked and flung open her apartment door without looking through the peephole. Her breath hitched in her chest when she saw Russ's broad-shouldered figure filling her doorway, the reality of him reaching in to grasp her lungs.

He frowned. "You didn't ask who it was, and you didn't look through the peephole."

Despite the fact she'd buzzed him in and been prepared for his arrival, seeing him in the flesh and hearing that deep baritone up close and personal, unfettered by mechanical static, was another thing altogether. "I knew it was you."

"How did you know? Anyone could have gotten up here before me and knocked on your door. You just didn't know."

She opened her mouth to argue, but couldn't. He was right.

Usually she was much more cautious, but she guessed the cop parked outside her building gave her a false sense of security that she never should have fallen victim to.

Donna opened the door all the way to let him into the apartment. "You look like shit, by the way," she murmured as he walked past her and stood in the middle of the living room, feet planted and spread apart and fists on his hips.

"Thanks. *You're* as beautiful as ever."

She smiled, happy now that she hadn't slammed the door in his face when he'd started in on her careless behavior. Russ in the flesh and in disciplinarian mode was bad enough on her hormone levels. But a Russ all tousle-haired with a day-old growth of whiskers

covering his square jaw and stubborn cleft chin definitely wreaked havoc on her libido.

She hadn't realized how much she'd missed him until this moment, but she'd be damned if she told him and gave him a bigger head than he already had. "What happened to make you look so stressed?"

"Nothing a little TLC won't cure."

"And you thought of *me* for a little TLC?"

He shrugged. "I know. Crazy, huh?" He grinned, and it just about did her in. "Besides, I'm always thinking about you."

Donna felt the telltale heat of a blush rush to her face.

I am not going to fall for this man. I am not... Too late, honey.

"I've missed you, Donna."

"It's only been two weeks."

He looked at her as if she had grown another head. "Two weeks too long."

Did being so open with one's feelings come with being a Dominant? Donna wondered because she was finding it decidedly difficult to tell this man exactly how she felt about him, at least when she wasn't upset with him.

"I've missed you too," she finally rasped.

He arched a brow and smirked in response.

"Don't be such a wiseass. I know I don't always act like it, but I am only human, after all. I have my weaknesses." What she didn't say outright was what he already knew—that he was one of them.

"Come here."

"Is the word *please* a part of your vocabulary at all?" She huffed, crossing the room to stand just in front of him, at arm's reach as she glared up at him.

"Pretty please." He slid his arms around Donna and drew her close.

She giggled as he bent his head to nuzzle her ear, admired his resilience and how he didn't seem to let anything get to him.

She knew she had hurt his feelings their last time together, but couldn't bring herself to say sorry even though she hadn't meant half the things she'd said. Sure he was bossy, but that was a part of his charm and main attraction to her.

While Donna was busy beating herself up over how she had treated him, Russ was busy kissing and licking his way from her ear to her lips, taking possession of them with one hard kiss before thrusting in his tongue.

Donna met his strokes and caresses with her tongue, reveling in the taste of him before he swept into her mouth and totally subjugated her senses.

He moved his hands from her back to her front, palming each breast and rubbing her already hard nipples through her T-shirt with the heel of his hands.

Donna moaned into his mouth right before he pulled away to lick his way from her throat toward her ear again, nipping her lobe. "Will you let me have you the way I want?"

Donna's legs became weak, her stomach quivering with anticipation and her pussy throbbing with want.

The man had been in her apartment a couple of minutes, and he already had her wet!

"How..." She cleared her throat, swallowed hard, her mouth suddenly dry. She licked her lips, tried again. "How do you want me?"

"Bound to the bed. Blindfolded. Helpless."

His low murmur was a seductive touch against her ear, each word that left his mouth like a nail in her coffin as she gushed into the crotch of her thong.

"Will you let me?"

"Yesss." She shuddered at the idea of what she was agreeing to, rubbed herself against his upper thigh like a cat in heat, desperate for the release he promised.

How had she done without him so long?

The frequent sightings of Chance at the hospital were a nice diversion and tease, as well as a constant reminder of what she was denying herself staying away from him personally. He was like a snack, feeding her superficially with their shop talk, all the while stepping around the minefield that was their relationship, starving emotionally, spiritually, physically, and missing that one link that completed them both.

Russ scooped her up into his arms and carried her down the hall to her bedroom, tossing her into the middle of the queen-sized bed like she weighed nothing. “Do you have rope?”

“Th-the laundry room. Back down the hall, to the left of the kitchen.”

Russ shot out of the room, and Donna lay back on her bed, beads of perspiration dotting her forehead, her core ablaze with liquid heat and her heart thundering in her ears so hard she thought she would have a heart attack. She knew she wasn’t too young for one, and with the constant stress she put herself under with her job, it wasn’t totally beyond the realm of possibility despite how she took care of herself in other areas of her life.

But Russ’s stress, this was good stress, the kind of stress she liked.

Donna had just sat up and reached for the hem of her T-shirt when Russ came back into the bedroom with several sections of rope dangling from his hands.

“Don’t.” He stalked across the room, planting himself between her legs and pushing them apart with his knees. “I’ll replace your clothesline.”

Like she cared about that right now? “Thanks.”

He leaned in to kiss her lips, slowly, fiercely, before he pulled back to cup her face. “I’m going to undress you.”

“Okay.”

“Not yet, though.” He tossed the rope pieces onto the bed then sat down beside her.

Donna turned to look at him, the heat in his gray gaze nearly scorching her like the uncovered gaze of Cyclops. The famous X-Man's powers had nothing on Russ's.

He bent his head to nuzzle her neck.

Donna closed her eyes and arched her throat as he unsnapped and unzipped the front of her cutoffs before easily slipping a hand inside. She lifted her hips as he cupped her crotch and teased her swollen clit with his thumb.

"Have you seen Chance since the last time we were all together?"

She nodded. "Only professionally, at the hospital."

"So you've been avoiding him too."

"You thought you were special?"

He nipped her throat, and she gasped at the flash of pain before he licked and sucked the mark. "I am special. You just haven't realized it yet."

Oh, she realized it. She just wouldn't let him know how special he was to her. "Are we going to spend our time together talking or fucking?"

He pulled back to cup her face with both hands. "We're going to spend our time together doing exactly what I want to do, as you agreed."

She licked her lips and took supreme pleasure in his ensuing moan.

"You remember your safe word."

"Y-yes." She forgot about that, the need to rein him in if things got too rough. They hadn't yet. He hadn't don't anything to her she hadn't enjoyed or wanted.

To an outsider he had hurt her as much as Bo had, or worse. But there was nothing uncontrolled or violent about Russ's swipes with the riding crop, nothing that left any marks. Bo's punches, pinches, and slaps left black eyes and bruises that Donna had had to hide under extra makeup, shades, and long sleeves. Peter's castigations and desertion left her ego wounded and her self-confidence in tatters.

No, what Russ did to her was therapeutic and fed her soul.

He traced the lace trim of her thong, teasing the thatch of moist curls before he eased a finger insider her.

Donna gasped and grabbed hold of his biceps.

“Get it out of your system now. You won’t be able to when I tie your hands.”

She dug her nails into his skin when he thrust deeper, turning and wiggling his finger in search of her G-spot.

“You’ll miss it, won’t you? Miss the control?”

“Yes.” As if she had any right now. He had her in the palm of his hand, literally, bringing her to the edge with one finger inside her and his tongue stroking the outer shell of her ear.

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Will you?” she breathlessly asked.

“I’m going to make you come—hard and long.”

“I’m listening.”

He added another finger, pressing and flicking her clit with his thumb as she thrust her hips against his hand.

Russ found the soft, secret organ he sought, one finger hooking just beneath it before he lovingly stroke it and set Donna on fire.

“Oh!” She held on to him tight, undulating and pumping her hips, careening towards the edge and toppling into the realms of rapture so fast it made her head spin.

Donna plopped back on the bed, gasping for breath as Russ leaned over her and brushed her hair away from her face with his free hand. The other he kept inside her, his fingers gently, almost absently, fondling her moist canal. But she knew better. Russ didn’t do absently, every word calculated to do to the maximum amount of damage to her senses, every move choreographed for its erotic effect.

“You let me come.”

“You sound surprised.”

“You like to tease me.”

“Punish. Get it right.”

“So you’re not punishing me for staying away from you?”

“I thought about it.”

She arched a brow and waited for him to elaborate.

“I think we’ve both been punished enough, don’t you?”

“Mmmm.” She nodded, burying her face in his throat and inhaling deeply. The clean, spicy scent of his cologne and soap filled her lungs, and a more basic scent—musky and male right beneath it—made her nipples tight and tingly with need.

“Are you ready?”

She pulled back to stare at him. “Ready?”

“To be my prisoner and sex slave?”

Chapter 29

He watched her mink eyes dilate, widen, and his heart lurched at the idea of covering them, depriving her of sight and putting all her other organs and senses on high alert with just one touch from him, just one word.

Her body would be his to play with, his to control, and his to please. For a few hours, her body, if not her heart, would belong to him.

Was that enough for him? Hell no, but he would take it for now.

“Is this how you want me?”

He stood at the foot of the bed, watching as she lay on the bed spread-eagle. “This is exactly how I want you.” He put a knee to the bed, crawling across the mattress before he planted his knee between her legs and heard her intake of breath when he grasped her wrists, then nudged and rubbed her mound.

He caressed her slit, putting pressure on her clitoris and labia, feeling her moisture on his jeans as he took his knee away. “You’re ready for me, aren’t you?”

“I think that’s safe to say.”

He smacked her thigh. “Always the wiseass.”

She chuckled, then purred as she rubbed herself against his knee.

Russ pulled his leg back, shaking his head as he brandished the ropes in front of her face. “Time to show you who’s boss.”

“I’m ready.”

“I need a scarf.”

Her eyebrows lifted in a silent question, looking adorably confused and innocent.

“To blindfold you.”

“I’m not sure I want—”

“You’re going back on your word?” he challenged, knowing that she would rise to the occasion and meet his dare. She wasn’t one to have her character called into question by anyone, especially not him, and he knew she wasn’t a coward.

He watched as she bit her bottom lip, bravado warring with the unfamiliar before bravado finally won out. “Top, left-hand drawer behind you.”

Russ got off the bed and slowly approached the bureau behind him, every action designed to arouse, to tease, and make her want him more, make her want what he had to offer—him, all of him, body, heart, and soul.

“Hmm, nice array.” He sifted through all the various colors and silk and silk blend, finally settling on a black one for maximum dramatic effect.

He walked back across the room, crawled onto the bed, and held the scarf up for her inspection. “I think it goes perfect against your peaches-and-cream complexion.”

“Whatever you say.”

She tried to sound nonchalant, but he knew better, heard the tremor in her voice, felt the shudders riding her body when he covered her eyes with the silk material before firmly tying it at the back of her head.

“Not too tight, is it?”

“No.”

“You can’t see, can you?”

She sighed. “No. Can you?” She scratched her nose with her middle finger.

“Tsk. So disrespectful. You’re just asking to be disciplined, aren’t you?” Russ chuckled and reached for the hem of her T-shirt. “Sit up, and lift your arms.” When she obeyed, Russ slid the shirt up over her head and tossed it before sitting back on his heels to enjoy the view,

her breasts pert and round, the rosy nipples erect and begging for his attention. “Lay back down.”

She did, and he followed her, bracing himself above her on his palms before he leaned in to lave and suck each breast in turn until she was moaning and writhing beneath him.

“You have the most perfect breasts—soft but firm, ample enough to fill my hands.” He lovingly fondled each one as if to prove his point.

“There’s nothing perfect about me.”

“You’re perfect to *me*,” he whispered and saw the flush reddening her cheeks beneath the blindfold.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Complimenting you?”

She shook her head, but said nothing.

He leaned in again, snuggling his face against the base of her throat and taking in the piquant scent of vanilla musk clinging to her skin. “You smell perfect too. Good enough to eat.”

“Then eat me.”

He brought his hand down against her thigh with a loud smack. “Sassy little slave.”

She arched her back, blindly reaching for his hand. “Please...”

He shook her hand off, rough enough to show her he meant business, but not too rough that he hurt her. He took each wrist and placed it above her head near the headboard, quickly tying one to each post.

Russ went for her shorts, watching as Donna lifted her hips to help him before he slid them and her thong all the way off and pitched them with her T-shirt.

He paused with his mouth right above her pussy, breathing just heavy enough for her to feel the puffs of air against her center and tremble. Unable to resist, he bent his head to taste her, sucking one labial lip into his mouth before caressing her folds, gently spreading them with his thumbs. He stroked her vulva with his tongue, just one

languorous stroke to tide him over before he commenced to tie her ankles to the posts at the foot of the bed.

Russ stood and circled the bed to admire his work, taking deep, controlled breaths before he pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it. It wouldn't do for both of them to lose control, and he could tell Donna was close the way she dug her nails into her palms and pulled against her restraints. "If the bindings are too tight, let me know. Don't pull on them," he instructed.

She stopped abruptly. "They're not. I didn't realize..."

Like he thought, she was nervous and fidgeting. Would it help her if she knew how nervous he was, how nervous and afraid that she would never seek a relationship with him, afraid that she would never admit she loved him?

He didn't want to think about that right now. For now he only wanted to think about making her respond to his touch, making her come and scream his name.

"Do you know how breathtaking you are right now?" he asked.

"Trussed up and helpless. Yeah, sure."

"You have more power than you think."

"Chance said the same thing to me when he tied me up."

"My brother's a smart man."

"He is." She paused, taking a deep breath before saying, "He'd be pleased right now if he could see us. He wanted us to kiss and make up. He doesn't like us to be at odds."

"Neither do I."

"Are we still at odds?"

"What do you think?" *Say it, baby. Break down and say you love me.*

But how could he expect it of her, when he hadn't said it himself?

Chance was the one breaking all the barriers, laying all his cards on the table to say how he felt. Chance was the brave one.

"I think I want you to taste me again. I need you to."

“So do I.” Russ untied and took off his work boots and socks, then stripped out of his jeans and boxers, taking his time, taking special care to make sure she heard every swish of clothing or thump of his boots against the floor, making sure she was as on edge as possible.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting naked for you.”

She took a deep breath. “Why is it taking you so long?”

He crawled up the bed, straddling her hips and settling his hard cock against her slightly rounded belly. He took his shaft in hand and guided the moistened head to the apex of her thighs, rubbing it up and down her slit, teasing her opening and mingling his pre-cum with her female lube. “You want this then?”

She arched her neck, rolling her hips against him. “Yesss.”

“I have a condom, but I’d rather not use it. How do you feel about that?”

“You’re giving me a choice?”

“In this? Of course.”

“I..I trust you,” she murmured.

He could have hugged her but stopped himself from showing too much exuberance. He was supposed to be the in-control Dom, after all. He wanted to let her know her trust wasn’t misplaced, however, and leaned down to peck her nose.

“I love you.” *Way to go, Mr. In-control Dom.* That wasn’t what he’d meant to come out of his mouth. He was going to say something like “I’m safe,” but “I love you” just blurted out.

Russ watched her throat muscles work as she swallowed, but she didn’t say anything, just left his declaration hanging out there forcing him to act as if he hadn’t just laid his vein open and drained his life’s fluid into a goblet as an offering to her.

“I want to feel you,” she whispered. “All of you. Do you trust me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then take me.”

Russ lowered his head to take one nipple between his teeth, simultaneously sliding one finger into her tight, wet sheath.

Donna bucked beneath him, panting as he increased the friction and thrust his finger inside her faster and faster. By the time he licked his way from her breasts down to her center, her inner muscles were clamping down on his finger to signal the approach of her orgasm.

Russ seamlessly replaced his finger with his mouth, plunging his tongue as deep as it would go and working her clit with his thumb.

The sweet-tangy taste of her flooded his mouth when he licked and sucked her pussy. He was heady with her climax when she suddenly stiffened beneath him then began to convulse.

“Oh...God!”

Russ took his last taste of her, moving up Donna’s body to share it.

She greedily took what he offered, straining against her bounds, arching her back and bumping his hip bone with her pubis.

Panting, he wrapped his tongue around hers, caressing it before pulling back to stare down at her. “You’re sure about this?”

“I’m negative.”

“So am I. But you’re not too old to get pregnant.”

She chuckled. “Thanks for saying so.”

“I’m serious.”

“I’m on the Pill. Any more questions?” She bumped her pussy against his balls, and he released a hiss through his teeth.

“Smart-ass,” he mumbled and bent his head to kiss her again. He guided his throbbing cock toward her opening, sheathing himself inside her in one easy stroke. He pushed further and slid deeper, deeper than he ever had before, her dew helping him seat himself to the hilt as she sighed against his throat and sent his pulse racing even faster than it beat already.

Russ braced himself, one palm planted against the mattress on either side of Donna’s face. He didn’t move for one long moment, just

closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of her warmth surrounding him, her inner muscles clutching him tight and pulling him home.

He grunted, flung his head back, and rotated his hips as he moved inside her, slowly at first, then gradually building a rhythm.

“God, I want to wrap my legs around you!” Donna pumped her hips, matching his rhythm beat for beat.

He had to admit he missed the feel of her legs wrapped around his waist. But he’d left enough slack in the ropes for her to bend her knees, and he hooked his hand under one of them as he angled his thrusts inside her, grinding, then undulating his hips against her.

Donna cried out as she came, her body quivering in the throes of one long, drawn-out orgasm that Russ absorbed and made his own. When he came, it felt like his dick was blasting off, his balls churning cum out and into her scorching canal like lava.

Russ wrapped his arms around her, lifting and holding her close to his chest until her tremors subsided. He untied her blindfold, kissed her face all over, tasting the salt of her perspiration, the scent of arousal and sex heavy in the air.

Their pants echoed in the room until Russ was overwhelmed with the sound of it. He concentrated on her face to center himself as Donna blinked several times, obviously trying to bring him into focus.

Finally, she smiled. “That was...explosive.”

He waved the blindfold in front of her face. “I think this helped.”

“No.” She shook her head and nuzzled her cheek against his chest, her warm breath teasing his sensitized flesh. “It was you, Russ. All you.”

* * * *

Donna lay on her side, one cheek in her palm, propped up on one elbow, her free hand idly caressing the light sprinkling of hair between Russ’s pectorals. She watched the gentle rise and fall of his

chest, doing figure eights around his nipples with one finger before roaming down to caress his rib cage.

Russ caught her hand and pulled her over and onto him, his semi-erect cock pressing into her belly. He gave her a gentle smack on the ass, and she yelped with the appropriate amount of histrionics before snuggling close. He slid his hand up from her buttocks to cup the base of her skull, drawing her forward for a kiss.

His tongue slid into her mouth as he wrapped his arms around her and tumbled them onto their sides. He eased a thigh between her legs as she curved a leg up around his hip.

She was damp and getting damper by the minute, her dew seeping down her thigh as Russ reached between their bodies and skillfully rubbed and plucked her already swollen clit, shooting a jolt of electricity through her body. She bucked against him, wrapping her arms around his neck and deepening the kiss. Her nipples sang as she pressed closer to him, the hard buds rubbing against the warm skin and hair on Russ's chest.

For several long moments, their tongues battled for supremacy, Russ easing a finger into her wetness and decisively tipping the scales in his favor.

Donna gasped and pulled back to whisper, "No fair," against his lips before he collared the back of her neck to draw her back, taking her to new heights with his demanding mouth, the dexterity of his finger, delving, twirling, and wiggling before he finally hit pay dirt.

The orgasm snuck up on her, rising from her core and spreading out until her whole body was engulfed in tingling heat. Her inner muscles convulsively clamped down on his finger, sucking him deeper as she gushed into his hand and cried out.

Russ held her until her tremors abated. He stared at her and eased his hand from her pussy, finger glistening with her juices. He raised it to his lips, tongue darting out to lick his finger as if it was the sweetest lollipop and he was a little kid addicted to sugar.

She smiled, pussy throbbing, as she watched him, already aching to be filled again. "I miss Chance," she blurted and watched as Russ froze, his face falling. "Oh God, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like you think."

He looked at her but didn't say anything.

"I just wish he was here with us."

"Not instead of me?"

"No! I just miss something when he's not here. The same as I miss something when I'm with him and you're not here." It was so easy to admit that it shocked her.

He nodded as if he understood how she felt. "I miss him too."

Donna sighed, relieved she hadn't put a complete damper on things, especially when she needed to ask him an even more uncomfortable question. She took a deep breath and felt Russ stiffen beside her as if he knew what she was going to ask.

"Have you spoken to Suzie since that day at your house?"

He gritted his teeth before answering, and she wondered if he was upset with her. "She hasn't called me yet. I'm trying to give her time to come around before I call her."

"What if she doesn't? Come around I mean?"

He pulled her close and held her. "She will. She has to."

Chapter 30

Chance parked his bike at the curb in front of Donna's brownstone, not surprised to see Russ's SUV already there. He grinned as he slid off his helmet and strapped it to the back of his bike, wondering if he would be interrupting anything more than sleep. It was early, after all, the sun barely peaking over the dusky, rose-hued horizon.

Chance glanced back over his shoulder to see the unmarked car that had been shadowing Donna's every move since Naomi had been murdered.

Goddess, he still couldn't believe those two adorable kids he had taken out for dinner with Donna a month ago had had their mother snatched from them in such a horrible way.

What had the husband been thinking? Despite his gift, Chance just didn't understand what made some people tick and knew that Naomi's husband was one person he would never understand. He knew too, much like Donna, he'd like to get Mr. Morgan in a room alone for just five minutes. He didn't think he'd be his usual diplomatic self with the man, however. Some situations just called for hands-on action and not talk.

He gave the officer behind the wheel a covert wave, bounded up the stairs in front of the brownstone, and rang Donna's bell. When Russ's voice sounded over the intercom, Chance chuckled and said, "It's me." The buzzer sounded an instant later, and Chance pushed open the door to take the inside staircase two at a time until he reached the top floor, where Donna's apartment was located.

The door was ajar. Chance pushed his way into the apartment, his nostrils leading him to the kitchen from where the enticing aroma of cooking drifted.

Russ was standing at the stove scrambling eggs in a pan. His short wavy hair was wet as if he'd just left the shower. He was shirtless, barefoot, and in a pair of jeans, looking more relaxed and comfortable than Chance could ever remember seeing him.

"We were expecting you."

Chance arched a brow. "You were?"

"Donna mentioned how she missed you."

"And you?"

"I agreed."

Chance chuckled, couldn't imagine what had prompted Donna's admission, when and where she had said it, and how Russ had taken it. He was just glad that they weren't mad at each other anymore. They couldn't be, could they? Not with Russ cooking in her kitchen and Donna...

"Where is she?"

"In the shower. Why don't you go join her?"

"You don't think she'd be too tired?"

"Go check and see. Won't hurt to try."

Chance slowly turned to go, then paused when Russ asked, "Want some coffee?"

"I'd prefer tea."

"Right. Tea's healthier than coffee. I forgot, Mr. Vegan."

"Vegetarian. Get it straight. Vegans are much stricter." He grinned at Russ's teasing smile and again turned to leave.

Russ was so natural and nonchalant his attitude rubbed off on Chance, made him feel like he belonged and would automatically be welcomed into Donna's arms. Yet he halted briefly in the middle of her bedroom, wondering what he was doing.

Donna's seductive, smoky voice lifted in song, her slightly off-key rendition of Rod Stewart's "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy?" wafting

with the steam from the shower made up his mind, and Chance quickly stripped out of his clothes before walking to the bathroom and pulling back the shower curtain.

Donna yelped and jumped back, bubbles glistening and running down her full breasts, smooth abdomen, and curvy hips.

He watched the glistening, soapy trail, his gaze lingering on the wet thatch of russet curls covering her sex. Chance licked his lips, felt his hard-on growing, before he brought his gaze back up to meet hers.

She smiled and proffered the bar of soap to him. “Get my back.”

He took the bar, stepped into the tub with her, and pulled the curtain closed behind them.

Donna turned, but instead of washing her back, Chance pulled her against his chest as she continued to hum her song and glided her palms down her front.

Chance slid his arms around her, following the path of her hands, gliding the fragrant soap down to her center then back up to tease her breasts, rubbing the bar over each nipple again and again until she moaned and turned in his arms.

“That’s not my back,” she whispered.

“My mistake.”

“You’re forgiven this time.”

“Just so you know—” He bent his head to kiss her, his tongue sliding into her mouth and slowly tasting her beneath the hot cascade of water before he pulled back to say, “Yes, I want your body, and I think you’re sexy.” He leaned in to kiss her again. “Very sexy.”

“Then reach out and touch me.”

He grinned as he smoothed the soap down her back, pausing at her buttocks to skim the bar over each round, shapely cheek before he placed it on a shelf of the shower caddy.

He guided Donna under the water, watching it sluice down her body, rinsing the soapy residue away before he slid down to his knees in front of her. He gripped her hips and drew her close, burying his face between her legs and inhaling the scent of soap and her arousal.

He spread her labia lips with his thumbs and dipped his tongue into her entrance, rolling his tongue experimentally, as if she was a fine wine he wanted to savor. He collected her female dew on his buds and licked his lips before moving in and delving deeper.

Donna groaned, bracing her hands on his shoulders, rocking her hips against his mouth, and Chance alternately stroked her vulva with his tongue and sucked her swollen clit into his mouth to nibble and nip.

He replaced his tongue with two fingers, working her pussy with his mouth and hands for several intense moments before Donna cried out and buried her fingers in his hair. She fisted her hands and held on tight as an orgasm rolled through her.

Chance wrapped his arms around her hips and held her against him until her tremors dwindled before he slowly worked his way up from her center. He kissed and nibbled a path from her belly to her breasts, where he spent the next several moments concentrating all his attention on her erect and flushed nipples. He sucked them into his mouth, swirled his tongue around each areola, so damn inviting that he didn't want to leave them and wouldn't have if Donna hadn't cupped his face and lifted his head until he met her glazed eyes.

"I wondered when you'd show up."

"I was told you were expecting me."

"I miss you when you're not here."

Chance didn't miss her sincerity or the part she left out, when you're not here *with us*, like he was the lost piece to their puzzle.

"I called you," she said.

"I got your message on my cell, but I was a little too tied up to answer or call back."

"I was a little tied up myself."

He caught the impish grin and slid a hand between her thighs. He caressed her slippery, moist folds. "I figured, rather than call, I'd just come straight over after my shift to see what was up."

"From the looks of it, you are."

At her tantalizing whisper, Chance glanced down at his jutting cock as she reached for him, wrapping her hand around his hard, aching shaft. “I don’t have a condom.”

“I covered this with Russ earlier. The same goes for you, Chance. I trust you.”

He was glad that she at least felt this for him and decided that for now it would have to be enough—for now. “That’s ni—” He almost swallowed his tongue when she put her mouth on his cock, sucking him halfway down her throat before she stopped to run her tongue along the sensitive underside of his penis.

She came back up to suck his engorged head, licking the pre-cum from his slit, then pulled him in farther, hollowing out her cheeks as the head of his dick bumped the back of her throat and he moaned.

Chance pitched his hips, couldn’t help himself. Her mouth felt so good wrapped around him, but he wanted to be inside her when he came, wanted to feel her hot, tight sheath glove and milk him.

He caught her under her arms, lifted her off her knees and up against his chest. He braced his palms beneath her generous ass as she naturally curved her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. Chance guided himself toward her pussy, easily sliding through her wet canal, impaling her with one long stroke.

“Mmmm. I like the way you feel inside me.”

“I like the way you feel around me.”

She moaned and buried her face against his throat as he began to move inside her, slow at first, then driving himself into her as he slid his hands up her back, gripped her shoulders, and pulled her down to meet his thrusts.

Donna’s gasps grew louder and more fervent right before her inner muscles contracted against him and she came the same instant as a knock sounded on the door jamb.

“Breakfast is almost ready, you two.”

“We’re coming!” Chance called and heard Russ’s chuckles over the running shower and didn’t care. He continued to pump into

Donna, finding his own release amidst her grasping muscles. He burrowed a cheek against her breasts, drawing a firm nipple into his mouth and nibbled as her quivering pussy clutched and sucked him dry.

When he caught his breath, Chance lifted his head to look at her. “Guess we’d better go grab some breakfast.”

“If I have any hope of keeping up with the two of you, I guess we’d better.”

* * * *

They sat eating breakfast in silence, the whole while Donna planned her next move to help Russ make amends with his kids’ mother.

She’d only met Suzie twice, but she liked the woman, despite how their second meeting had ended, and she hated to see her at odds with her ex who, Donna knew, she usually got along with. She blamed herself for agreeing to go back to Russ’s house with him and Chance that day. If she hadn’t been so hot-to-trot and horny, she wouldn’t have been there when Suzie came by. And if she hadn’t been there, Chance wouldn’t have found the need to make his declaration just in time for Suzie’s arrival.

She knew she was being illogical and punishing herself for something that hadn’t been anyone’s fault, but she couldn’t help it. Besides, she figured she might as well make good use of all her psychosocial training and fancy degrees anyway and go see what she could do to smooth Suzie’s ruffled feathers and make the other woman listen to reason.

Chance reached over to put his hand over hers on the maple table, twining his fingers with hers and squeezing as if he knew what she was planning.

She looked at him and gave him a shaky grin. She didn’t think he would tell Russ, hoped he wouldn’t because she didn’t want Russ to

know. She knew he would insist he could handle things himself, that he didn't need her help. She knew that he would be a typical macho male, but some situations didn't need domination. Some situations needed finessing, a woman's touch, and Donna hoped that Suzie would respond to a woman-to-woman talk more than an ex-to-ex talk, especially now that she'd had time to cool down. She hoped.

"How's your day looking?"

She dragged her gaze away from Chance to look at Russ, trying to read him, but he had his famous poker face in place.

"Work, work, and more work."

He didn't need to know she planned on going in a couple of hours late so that she could drop in on Suzie.

"I was going to be in the Bronx on a job today and thought maybe we could all have lunch together."

"That's sweet, but I've got appointments all afternoon." She didn't know how long things would take with Suzie and didn't want to rush—from Suzie or to Russ and Chance. She didn't think she'd be able to hide what she'd been doing if she went straight to them after Suzie.

"I can't go too far away from the hospital while I'm on, but if you can make it there, we can grab a bite to eat together. There's even a greasy spoon where you can have some meat, flesh-eater."

"Good deal. I thought you were going to drag me to one of those tofu bars."

"I'll get you on the road to vegetables and good health yet."

"Between you and my daughter." Russ chuckled, then grinned at Donna, catching her free hand. "Guess we'll have to make it another day then."

"Okay."

"I mean it, Donna. I don't want to waste any more time being apart unnecessarily."

"What about Suzie?"

"Don't worry about Suzie. I'll handle my ex."

“Sure.” She nodded. It was just like she thought, just like he handled her and everything else in his life—decisively and firmly.

She had a little surprise for him, though, because she could be just as decisive and firm when she needed to be too.

And this situation with Suzie definitely called for her to put her best social worker foot forward—for Russ and his kids.

She looked at each man in turn, wanting to give them as much as they gave her, even if it wasn't quite what she knew they wanted from her. She couldn't give them that, didn't know if she'd ever be able to give that to anyone, but she knew that if she did give her heart to anyone, it would be these two men.

However, she could give them some peace of mind. “What happened to your mother was neither of your faults.”

“How do you—”

She squeezed their hands to stop their chorus, and when they both snapped their mouths shut to stare at her, she finished. “That's not important. What's important is that you both stop blaming yourselves and move on.”

“Will you?” Russ asked.

Donna frowned. “Will I what?”

“Move on.” Chance said.

“I...I'll try.”

“Then we will too,” Russ said and looked at Chance who nodded his agreement.

That was all she could ask of them for now.

Chapter 31

Now that she was here, Donna wasn't sure she could go through with it, wasn't sure where to begin.

Let your heart guide you.

She didn't know whether that was her own advice, Angela reaching out to her from Wantagh, or...Donna lifted her gaze to the ceiling briefly and smirked.

She'd never been that spiritual coming up, despite her parents raising her and her siblings strict Catholics. Somewhere along the line, she had lost her faith, not just with Catholicism, but any organized religion. She didn't see where any of them helped the people they were set up to help. But then too, she realized one only got out of a religion what one put in. She just didn't have the heart to put anything into any belief system created and run by men, where most of the ancient texts and rules considered women as property instead of one half of a couple with equal rights and free will.

Angela and Chance's spirituality was beginning to look better and better to her every day because of this, their system one that revered females as well as males.

She did agree with one passage from her youth, however—"The Lord helps those who help themselves"—a personal mantra she carried with her always, and she was determined to do her part to help as many women help themselves as humanly possible.

Would she be helping Suzie by helping Russ? Wasn't the woman allowed her pain? Didn't she have the right to handle her kids the way she saw fit?

Normally, Donna would have agreed with this, but these weren't normal circumstances, and she didn't think it was fair of Suzie to punish Russ for loving how he loved or feeling the way he felt. He wasn't hurting anyone, after all, not even Donna. No, she was doing that to herself by denying her feelings and denying him and Chance access to her.

Damn, she hadn't come here to psychoanalyze *herself*. She'd come here to get inside *Suzie's* head.

Donna took a deep breath and rang the doorbell, knew she had taken a big chance by just showing up unannounced, and silently castigated herself for the next several seconds before Suzie opened the door.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"We have nothing to discuss." Suzie started to close the door, and Donna slapped her palm against it to stop her.

"Please. I just need you to listen to me for five minutes."

Suzie stared at her, wavering.

"Please, Suzie."

She silently nodded and opened the door further to let Donna into the apartment.

The vestibule featured a vaulted ceiling that Michelangelo would have been proud of and which made Donna feel as if she was entering hallowed halls, as if she wasn't nervous enough already.

Suzie led her into the living room, a neat, spacious area outfitted in eclectic and modern furnishings, and pointed her to the overstuffed taupe sofa. "Have a seat."

Right at that moment, Kim came into the room, her expression lighting up when she saw her father's girlfriend. "Hi, Donna!" She ran over and gave Donna a big hug.

Donna eagerly returned the show of affection, her chest tightening with emotion, especially when the young girl pulled back to smile up

at her. She had her mother's eyes, but that dimpled smile definitely belonged to her father.

"How's my dad?"

Suzie cleared her throat right before Donna responded.

"Your father was fine the last time I saw him. And how are things with you, kiddo?"

"They're okay except that Wes and I might not be coming to my dad's for the summer like we always do."

"Kim. That's enough." Suzie gritted her teeth. "Why don't you go to your room now? Ms. Vega and I need to talk."

She had been relegated to the formality of a title and last name. That wasn't good.

Kim gave Donna a beseeching look as if to consult with her before she obeyed her mother. It was a big mistake.

Suzie extended her right arm and pointed toward where Kim had just come. "Kimberly Elizabeth Merrick, go to your room now!"

The girl's face fell as she scrambled to leave her mother and Donna alone and returned to her room. Somewhere down a hall in the distance, a door slammed amidst the sniffles and cries of a confused and wounded teenage girl.

Donna noticed Suzie's flush and felt for the woman. She also felt for Kim whom she knew loved both her parents and was caught in the middle of their tiff.

She wanted to tell Suzie not to be too hard on the girl, but knew she was already on thin ice where the other woman was concerned and didn't want to jeopardize their tête-à-tête before she had a chance to speak her piece.

Suzie took a seat on the sofa, and Donna followed suit, edgy as hell when she turned to face the other woman and wondered what had been on her mind to make her come to Suzie's house.

You're here to help Russ. Whether you love him or not isn't the point. Making things right between him and his ex any way you can is.

Suzie folded her arms across her breasts in an obvious defensive gesture. Long gone was any pretense of civility. Long gone were the woman and mother happy with her ex's choice of lover. In her place were Donna's judge and jury.

At least for now, Donna thought, though she didn't know what to say to Suzie to change her from foe to friend.

She took another deep breath and stared at Suzie, words suddenly spilling from her. "Whatever you think of me and my relationship with Russ and his brother, please don't let it make you make a bad decision. Don't take Russ's kids away from him."

"That sounded rather heartfelt."

"It was," Donna said, ignoring the other woman's sarcasm.

Suzie closed her eyes and sighed as she uncrossed her arms. She opened her eyes to meet Donna's gaze, her own glassy and brimming. "I'd be lying to you if I told you I haven't considered doing just what you said. But I wouldn't do that."

"You wouldn't?"

Suzie shook her head, the tears rolling down her cheeks now, and she did nothing to stop them. "I couldn't do that to Russ. I know he loves his kids, and he's a good father, the best father Kim and Wes could ever have. It would kill them—the kids and him—if I separated them."

Donna took a tissue from the package in her bag and handed it to Suzie. She moved closer to wrap an arm around Suzie's shoulders as the other woman first patted dry her eyes, then blew her nose with the tissue.

"I don't know where this is coming from."

"You're still in love with him."

Suzie laughed without mirth, nodding. "I love him. A part of me always will. But we can't be together. We tried for a long time, and it didn't work for either of us."

It was nice that they had realized this before curses, fists, or bullets started flying, nice that they'd spared their kids the anguish of

seeing their parents at each other's throats. If more couples realized what Russ and Suzie had—when to call it quits—Donna would happily be out of a job. Russ and Chance wouldn't be so screwed up. Naomi would still be alive.

“For the better part of our marriage, I thought it was working. Russ made me happy, said and did all the right things. But *he* wasn't happy. And I didn't know how to make him happy, didn't know how to give him what he needed. Couldn't.”

“I'm sure you did the best you could.”

“I did, but it wasn't enough. Russ needed someone like you, someone special.”

Donna chuckled, not sure whether she had been insulted or not.

Suzie must have seen her uncertainty and quickly added, “I meant that in a good way, not in a competes-in-the-Special-Olympics way, as my kids would put it.”

Now Donna laughed, glad that she could and doubly glad when Suzie joined her.

More tears streamed down Suzie's face, but this time there were tears of sweetness diluting the bitter.

She peered at Donna and gave a tentative smile. “You're what he needed. I saw it at the barbecue, how happy he was, how different he was with you than anyone else I've ever seen him with, even me. There was this light in his eyes.”

Donna didn't know what to say. She couldn't reciprocate and tell Suzie that Russ was what she needed, even if it was true. “I think Russ is special too.”

“You're in love with them, aren't you?”

Donna focused on Suzie's inquisitive, earnest expression. No longer adversaries, they were two women with something in common. They both loved Russ.

She stopped short of gaping as Suzie smiled at her. “It's okay to admit. I won't think any less of you for loving two men. Hell, I applaud you for your bravery.”

Love and bravery did seem to go hand in hand, especially in her case.

Donna hadn't thought she could love one man again after Peter, much less two. With Peter she had waited so long before she finally opened up, as much as *she* could open up anyway. She had taken her time and made all the right decisions, or so she'd thought. And Peter had still smashed her heart when he walked out on her.

After the divorce and at almost forty-four, she'd figured her loving and settling down days were over, that there was no hope for her. Angela had known differently.

Donna had to admit Russ and Chance both made her heart go pitter-patter and her pussy instantly moist just being in her zip code. Just the sound of their voices made her go all soft inside. And when she looked in their eyes, she saw all the good things she could be and have in her life. She saw her future.

Was that love after barely more than a month?

"I think crazy's more like it," Donna whispered, almost to herself.

But Suzie had heard and giggled as she slapped Donna on the thigh, then stood and headed for the kitchen. "How about I make us a fresh pot of coffee?"

"I'd like that."

* * * *

An hour and two flavorful cups of coffee later, Donna felt more relaxed than she ever had in the presence of a woman outside of family in a long time.

At Safe Haven she was always on duty, had to be strong, the leader. Outside of work, well, she really didn't socialize too much except for family functions, and at those she always felt like she had a big red target on her chest—*here lives a lonely old spinster just waiting to be fixed up*—that pegged her an outsider even among her blood.

With Suzie, and aside from the whole BDSM thing, she'd discovered a kindred spirit. She could see why Russ had fallen for her and been willing to live a lie for so long.

Donna had already learned about so many similarities in their childhood that she would have never guessed at, the top one being Suzie had an bossy older sister too who thought she knew what was best for Suzie. There was also the tomboy thing that Donna—and she knew her sister Evelyn—could definitely relate to. And finally, there was the abusive past.

It never surprised Donna when she met yet another woman who'd been a victim of domestic abuse, the problem so much more prevalent than the general public actually realized.

She could understand why BDSM would hold no attraction for Suzie, even if she was a lot like Donna in many other respects. BDSM wasn't for everyone, and before she met Russ, Donna certainly didn't think it was for her. But she knew the truth now, that BDSM—and Russ and Chance—completed her, that they were all the missing pieces in her life she had been searching for without even knowing it.

She loved them.

The phone on the end table rang. Suzie lifted the cordless and greeted the person on the other end. Her face lit up when she heard the voice, and she smiled at Donna.

"I know. I was going to call you. I had a change of heart, and I'm sorry I kept you waiting so long..." She listened for a few seconds, then said, "Why the change of heart? Let's just say your guardian angel visited me today. You want to talk to her?"

Donna lifted her brows as Suzie handed her the cordless, already suspecting who was on the other end before Suzie confirmed and said, "It's Russ."

Donna unclipped her earring and put it on the coffee table before she brought the receiver to her ear. "How did you know I was here?" Was he channeling Chance now?

“I didn’t. I was calling to speak to Suzie. But now that I have you on the line—”

“Before you get upset, I just wanted to help clear the air with Suzie. That’s all.”

“I’m not upset.”

“No?”

“Actually, I’m feeling kind of privileged that you think enough of me to make the effort.”

She let out the breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding. She’d been totally prepared for his anger. But his next words told her she wasn’t totally off the hook.

“You know you’re going to be punished for going behind my back after I explicitly told you I had this situation covered.”

Her face quickly heated with a flush. Donna turned her back on Suzie as the other woman got busy pouring herself another cup of coffee. She pressed her lips to the mouthpiece and lowered her voice as much as possible to still be heard by only him. “Is that a promise?”

“That’s going to get you an extra lash with the riding crop.”

Just the threat and the deep, raspy sound of his voice had her panties damp. If he said another word, she thought she might just come, but Donna couldn’t help pushing her luck. “How long are you going to make me wait this time?”

“Just know you’ve had it easy so far, slave. I could tease you for hours before I let you come. I’ve been merciful.”

Donna shuddered, her pussy clenching as if he was already inside her. She was ready to meet him somewhere that minute and let him tease her until she screamed from pleasure and exhaustion. But she had to get to work. She’d already let herself get sidetracked enough for one morning. “I’d love to discuss this with you in more detail, but I really have to get to work now.”

Russ chuckled and said, “Put Suzie back on the line, smart-ass.”

Donna turned and handed the phone to Suzie with a laugh. She poured herself another cup of coffee as Suzie finished off her

conversation with Russ, trying her hardest not to listen in before Suzie finally ended the call.

“He’s such a different person since he met you,” Suzie said as she replaced the handset, her voice filled with awe.

“In what way?”

“He sounds like he’s at peace, like he’s finally found a place to lay down his head and call his home.”

“It doesn’t negate anything he has or had with you and the kids.”

“Oh, I know that. He had a home with us, a good life. But every day he was with me, his soul died just a little. I was too hurt and angry to see it then, but I see it now.”

“You sound like my sister.”

“The infamous matchmaker, I presume.”

“Matchmaker, philosopher, resident New Age Wiccan goddess, take your pick.” Donna grinned and brought the cup to her lips, savoring the vanilla and hazelnut tang reminded her of the nonchalant days hanging with her sisters and chatting over flavored coffee just like this, nonchalant days before fixing her up became her siblings’ cause célèbre.

“She sounds like quite a character.”

“She is that.” Donna took another sip of her coffee. She was reluctant to cut her time with Suzie short and was encouraged and surprised by the way the day had turned out. She was feeling kind of at peace herself.

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes before Donna finally finished off her coffee and stood from the sofa. “I hate to go, but I really need to get to work.”

Suzie stood too and walked Donna to the front door. “I’m glad you dropped by today.”

“I am too.”

“I guess I’ll be seeing you this weekend when I drop the kids off.”

“If not sooner.” She leaned in to pull Suzie into a brief but tight hug before she opened the door to leave. She felt like she had made a new friend.

All the way down to the parking garage in the elevator, Donna had a feeling of well-being and accomplishment that she hadn’t experienced in a long time. At Safe Haven the well-being and accomplishment was short-lived and always tempered with the knowledge that as soon as they got one woman placed in a safer environment away from her abuser—if Donna could talk the woman into leaving her abuser at all—another woman in the same or worse situation would soon be walking through Safe Haven’s entrance in desperate need of help. It was a revolving-door process that never ended. The sufferers and their perpetrators were victims of the cruelest form of social recidivism. And she was just a cog in the system.

At least she could put a stop to her own vicious cycle of catch and release by admitting the truth and telling Russ and Chance exactly how she felt. She would, she decided, as soon as she saw them. Together would be great, but she would tell them separately, repeat it several times if she needed to.

Donna actually found herself doing something she hadn’t done since she was a kid. She whistled as she walked to her car, a lightness in her step that she hadn’t had since her carefree hoyden days when she’d thought nothing of challenging her brothers and the other neighborhood boys to foot races and other athletic competitions of speed, endurance, and fearlessness. She’d been one of the only girls in her neighborhood growing up who hadn’t been afraid of worms, frogs, and snakes. She had even convinced her parents to let her have a snake for a pet.

Those were the days when she hadn’t been afraid of much of anything, her biggest fears disappointing her parents and alienating her family. She still feared these, but more she feared losing the best

things that had ever happened to her in a long time because she was too stubborn to admit her feelings.

Now that she'd made the decision to share her feelings, she was anxious to see Russ and Chance again, *needed* to see them.

Donna turned when she heard a noise behind her, but didn't see anything or anyone who could have made it. She told herself she was just being paranoid. Sure Morgan still hadn't been apprehended, and who knew what kind of friends Luther had on the outside at his disposal and ready to do his malevolent bidding? But would either of them try something in front of the policeman that had been trailing her since Naomi's murder?

She searched for the unmarked car and breathed a sigh of relief when she found it parked several yards away with the plainclothes cop sitting behind the wheel.

Donna waved, but when she didn't get a reaction, she walked closer and peered at the driver. Something wasn't right. He was slumped in his seat, and there was...Oh God, there was blood dripping from a slash in his throat!

She backed up, reaching for the cell phone in her bag a second before the back of her head exploded in exquisite pain.

Donna collapsed to the cold concrete, her cell and most of the contents of her bag skittering across the floor as her right cheek and shoulder suffered the brunt of her fall.

A pair of jeans-clad legs came into her line of sight a second before a booted foot slammed into her midsection.

Donna cried out and went fetal, her arms automatically curving around her stomach in a useless protective gesture.

Her attacker paced around her, mumbling incoherently before he slammed his foot into her back and made her kidneys scream. "You can't have him, bitch! I won't let you have him."

What was he talking about? Have whom?

Donna rolled to her stomach, lifted up on her hands and knees, and managed to crawl a foot away before her attacker caught her around the collar and dragged her to her feet.

She gazed up into the eyeholes of his ski mask big enough to reveal a pair of the coldest, deadest eyes she had ever seen. “Morgan?”

“Got a lot of enemies to choose from, do you?” He slammed his fist into her face, and a bright cluster of stars erupted in front of her eyes before he dropped her to the ground again.

Where had all those self-defense classes gone? What had happened to her training?

She couldn’t remember anything about defending herself against a surprise attack in the depths of an underground garage by some raving maniac, but maybe she had been absent the day they covered this scenario.

Donna barely had time to further consider her lapse before that booted foot collided with her ribs. She heard something snap and was sure they were broken.

Oh God, he was going to kill her.

She wondered briefly why he didn’t use the bat he’d initially hit her with. Was he getting too much enjoyment employing a more personal and direct approach with his hands, intimately feeling the crunch of her bone beneath his hands and boots?

At the thought, her attacker reared his foot back for another assault, and this time when he tried to kick her, Donna caught his foot with both hands. But she was too weak to do anything more than momentarily throw him off-balance. He slammed the bat handle against her knuckles, then forcefully shook off her defensive gesture and kicked her in the face for her trouble.

For what seemed like the next hour but was probably closer to a minute, he released a volley of punches and kicks to her body that had her alternately blacking out and coming back around with the next blow before the elevator dinged.

Oh God, help me. Somebody, please...

Someone got off of the elevator and must have seen her attacker standing over her.

A piercing scream bounced off the walls, vaguely sounded like Russ's daughter, but Donna was already too far gone to appreciate her apparent imminent rescue.

She blacked out for the last time right after her assailant ran off.

Chapter 32

He paused behind a Dumpster in an alley on the way to his truck, checking his clothes to make sure he hadn't gotten any of the bitch's blood on him. He didn't find anything that would make him stand out. He would burn everything he had on as soon as he got home anyway, including the latex gloves, ski mask, and bat he had wrapped in his light trench coat. He just needed to quickly get from point A to point B without drawing any undue notice.

He took several deep, invigorating breaths as he made it out onto the street, feeling more alive than he had felt in a long time. Adrenaline pumped through his veins like liquid fire, making him feel hot and tingly all over.

Hot damn that had almost been as good as some of his best scenes! Hell, he even had a hard-on. But it would have been even better if he had Russ to go home to, Russ to hold him after a hard day's work, Russ to discipline him for his misbehavior.

He caught himself jogging and consciously changed his pace to a leisurely walk. He needed to slow down and get his bearings. He didn't want to bring attention to himself. He'd come this far without anyone catching on to him. Sure, he had killed the cop, but there were no witnesses to what he had done, except for that little brat who'd interrupted his work.

Damn it! He had only gotten started when Russ's daughter came down and screamed her freaking spoiled head off. She'd caught him mid-punch, standing over the bitch, panting, with his fist raised behind him right before he delivered another blow.

He spared the kid a look, shooting visual daggers that he wished could actually kill her. Then he flung the heifer down before running in the opposite direction.

He wasn't concerned about Russ's daughter recognizing him since he'd had on the mask. He'd almost risked doing the deed without it, had wanted the bitch to see who her competition was, let her know that she wasn't strong enough for a man like Russ and that *he* was. He'd decided against going without the mask at the last minute, good thing too.

So he'd put on the mask, and the kid hadn't seen him. But by virtue of her presence, she had prevented him from doing what he needed to do, and that just plain stuck in his craw. He'd only needed another ten minutes or so. He had barely caused the hurt that she and all women like her had caused him, barely caused the damage that he'd wanted to, and he knew for sure the heifer was still breathing when he'd run off.

She wouldn't be breathing for much longer though.

He needed to get home, regroup, then find out what hospital they had taken the bitch to and, unless she died en route, finish the job he started.

* * * *

Chance had just come back on duty with about two hours' sleep under his belt and a cup of tea in his system when the ambulance arrived.

As soon as it backed into the loading dock to disembark, Chance's extra senses immediately went on high alert.

Someone close to him was in the back of that ambulance.

The thought had only a moment to form before the ambulance's back doors burst open and two paramedics leaped out, lowering the occupied gurney between them onto the tarmac.

The occupant looked female, but it was hard to tell from all the bruises and blood on the face, and all the surrounding medical equipment dwarfed the small form.

Chance reached out to the battered and unconscious person on the gurney with his mind, felt the familiar red thread, just barely pulsing, and pulled back in shock. “Oh no.”

“You know the victim?” one of the paramedics asked as he and his partner began to roll the gurney toward the pneumatic doors and into the emergency room while Chance kept pace, jogging beside them.

“What happened to her?” Chance asked instead of answering the paramedic’s question.

“She was beaten to within an inch of her life from the looks of it.”

“The people who called it in are on their way and should be able to give you more details. Medically, she’s in bad shape...”

Chance’s head started to swim at the paramedic’s litany of Donna’s injuries, and he wondered how she’d survived her trauma.

He closed his eyes to concentrate, reaching for her thread and coiling his blue thread around her red one. Goddess, she was so weak!

“Hold on, baby. Hold on. I can still feel you. Feel me. Touch me. Hold on.”

“Chance!”

He turned to see Suzie and Kim standing in the path between the waiting area and treatment rooms. He jogged over to them as two of his senior residents and a nurse helped the paramedics transfer Donna from the ambulance gurney to the treatment room stretcher. “You guys called it in?”

Kim nodded, tears streaming down her face as she clutched Donna’s large leather handbag against her chest. Chance recognized it from the day Donna had been brought in for treatment of her head injury and left without it.

Damn, had that only been a few weeks ago?

“She forgot her earring, and Mom said I could go run down and catch her, and there was a man in the parking garage, and he was punching and kicking her and...”

Chance pulled her into his arms as she hiccupped and cried in earnest. He patted and rubbed her back, transmitting soothing vibes, trying to calm her down.

“She’s going to be all right, honey. We’re going to take good care of her.”

She pulled away to look at her mother and then at him, her blue eyes round and pleading. “Please make her okay. She has to be okay.”

“I’ll do my best.” He squeezed first Kim’s shoulder, then her mother’s. “You guys stay here, and I’ll let you know as soon as we have her stabilized.”

Damn, he sounded like he knew what he was talking about, like he could make her well. But after what he’d seen and felt, he wasn’t so sure.

Chance watched Kim and Suzie turn toward the waiting room chairs in unison before he ran back to the treatment room where the residents and nurse had already begun cutting away Donna’s clothes and assessing her wounds.

“What have we got?” he asked unnecessarily. He knew exactly what was wrong with her, which internal organs were damaged, how badly they were damaged, and...He choked back a sob, suddenly catapulted to his childhood when he’d held his mother in his lap and watched her life slip away, unable to do anything about it.

But I’m an adult now. I’m stronger. I can save her.

“Dr. Novak?”

Chance blinked and shook his head at the nurse’s question. He focused on Donna’s various injuries as he donned a pair of latex gloves.

She had bruises from her head to her waist, broken ribs, tension pneumothorax, internal bleeding, possible blunt liver trauma. Damn, this wasn’t looking good at all. She was more than likely going to

need surgery, and he detested the idea of someone cutting her open, especially not if he could avoid the unnecessary ordeal.

Chance moved his hands over her abdomen, generating heat and energy as he caressed her rib cage and mended the broken bones so that he could get a better look at the damage behind them. He moved on to her kidneys next. All the while his eyes never left her bruised face. He wanted to heal it so that he could see her eyes, even if they were closed. He had a vague notion and tenuous hope that the woman lying so motionless on the stretcher wasn't Donna. But he knew the truth. He had felt her essence. He had touched it.

Perspiration beaded on his upper lip and forehead, and his hands began to shake. His heat and energy quickly dwindled beneath his exertions. He grasped the crystal around his neck with one hand, desperate for help now, desperate for more strength, and unsure from where or how he would get either.

Davis, the surgery resident, burst into the room then, rubbing his hands together and looking like a hungry hyena who'd picked up the scent of a lion's recent kill. "Someone call for a surgery consult?"

Chance didn't want to tell Davis what they were looking at. He knew what the verdict would be. But he didn't have a choice.

"Definitely a candidate for surgery," Davis said. "At the very least we'll need to do a peritoneal lavage to evaluate—"

"There's no indication for surgery, not without a CT scan, Davis. Surgical literature—"

"You can't count on the bleeding to stop before exploration. That's too risk—"

"Damn it, I'm not cutting her open!"

"You're right. You're not, Novak," Davis whispered, put his hand on Chance's arm and squeezed. "You're too close to this case, too close to this patient. You need to recuse yourself."

Chance jerked away. "I know what I'm talking about, Davis. We need to go with conservative treat—"

"She's going into arrest!"

“Vasopressin 40 U IV!” Chance shouted as he charged up the defibrillator, and one of his residents rushed to prepare the intravenous solution as ordered.

She’s not going to die, she’s not going to die, she is not going to die!

Twenty minutes later Donna was still flatlining, and Chance was just beginning to lose hope when all the doctors and nurses around him had given up hope ten minutes before.

He took a deep breath, tilted back his head, and that’s when he saw it—Donna’s apparition floating above them, reaching for a pair of glowing hands. “No!”

* * * *

When Russ saw Suzie’s cell number displayed on his cell phone’s caller ID, he vaguely wondered if she had had another change of heart. His stomach started to churn before he answered the call. Damn, he hoped he wasn’t getting an ulcer. Maybe Chance had a point. He could definitely afford to cut back on the frequency that he ate meat, and consuming more vegetables wouldn’t hurt. He was just one of those lucky people who could eat anything he wanted, and it didn’t seem to do him any damage. He always came away from his annual physicals with optimal numbers for his blood pressure, sugar, and cholesterol, a fact that consistently baffled his brother. But he *was* getting older. He needed to watch it if he wanted to be around for his kids. Not to mention he was looking forward to sticking around another thirty or more years with Donna if she would have him.

“Hey Suzie. What’s up?”

“Oh God, Russ, I’m so glad I caught you! Something terrible has happened.”

His heart fell, but he kept his voice calm. “What’s going on? Where are you?”

“We’re at Belfiore Hospital, Kim and I.”

“Are you two okay? Where’s Wes?”

“Wes is at a friend’s house. Kim and I are okay. But Kim’s pretty shaken up. She witnessed some man attacking Donna in the underground garage of our building. She scared him off when she got off of the elevator but not before he did a lot of damage.”

Shit, what kind of damage was she talking about? “How badly is she hurt?” The sob he heard on Suzie’s end did not bode well for Donna. “Suzie, everything’s going to be okay. Just calm down and tell me how she is.”

“I’m not sure, but it didn’t look good when they brought her in. She was unconscious and really banged up. Chance was in the treatment room working on her up until a little while ago, before another team of doctors rushed him out and into another treatment room to work on *him*. I don’t know what happened to him, but he wasn’t moving when they wheeled him by us and...” Another sob choked off her words, and Russ briefly closed his eyes as if he could block out the idea of Donna beaten and unconscious, a vision Chance had seen weeks ago.

Damn, he had just spoken to her a couple of hours ago. She had been fine, healthy, lively and in a teasing mood. They were making progress. He knew it, sure that she would soon tell him and Chance she loved them.

“What about the cop that was tailing her?” he blurted. “Do you know what happened to him?”

“Oh God, Russ! The other police that arrived on the scene, they found him in his car with his throat slashed.”

Had his daughter seen him? How close had she come to becoming a victim herself?

Russ shuddered at the idea that he could have lost his baby. Then he thought about Donna’s family. He knew how close and protective they all were and asked, “Do you know if anyone has gotten in contact with Donna’s next of kin?” He winced as the last three words

left his mouth. Saying it felt like a betrayal, as if he had already written her off.

“One of the paramedics mentioned something about contacting the ICE numbers she had listed on her cell.”

Russ sighed in relief. He was glad she’d had the foresight to have “In Case of Emergency” numbers with her. Technology actually paid off at times.

“Russ, where are you now?”

“I was already on my way to the hospital when you called. Chance and I were supposed to have a late lunch...” Damn, had it only been a few hours ago when he, Chance, and Donna had sat in her apartment kitchen having breakfast and a heart-to-heart? When he had suggested them all getting together for lunch, he hadn’t imagined it would be under these circumstances.

What had happened to Chance? Had he overextended himself trying to heal Donna? Russ had never seen his brother go so far trying to heal someone that he passed out. This was serious. As if Suzie’s hysterics and crying hadn’t been enough to convince him.

“Russ?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Please hurry.”

“I’m almost there.” Russ ended the call, made a left turn at the next corner, the hospital visible in the near distance, just several blocks away.

He caught the light and stopped just short of flooring the gas, closing the gap between him and the emergency entrance of Belfiore within a minute.

Russ pulled into the nearest parking space he found, put his truck in park, leaped out, and ran through the pneumatic doors. He breathlessly and frantically searched the floor for his daughter and ex-wife.

“Russ! Over here!”

“Daddy!”

He found them standing at the back of the waiting area, Kim with a large, vaguely familiar handbag clutched against her chest and her face still wet with tears.

Russ jogged over to them and pulled Kim into his arms. She wrapped one arm around him, holding on to the bag with the other as if her life depended on it, like she could stay connected to Donna by keeping a hold of it.

He pulled away to thumb the tears from her eyes, then welcomed Suzie into his embrace. She held on to him tight for several minutes before he pulled away and held her arm's length to peer at her.

"Any news yet?"

"Not on Donna, but last I heard, Chance was coming around from whatever happened to him while he was treating her."

"Any of Donna's family arrive yet?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do you know what room Chance is in?"

Suzie pointed across the hall from where they were standing.

Russ squeezed her shoulder reassuringly and gave Kim a peck on the forehead before he headed toward where Suzie had pointed.

He supposed it was good news that Chance was still down here in a treatment room and hadn't been taken upstairs and admitted to one of the wards. He held on to this thought as he stepped around the curtain to see his brother propped up in a stretcher, eyes closed, and an IV drip attached to the inside of one of his arms.

He looked pale, which was saying something since Chance sported a healthy, natural golden tan year-round. And he looked younger than Russ had ever seen him since he was a teenager.

Protective instincts going into overdrive, Russ crossed the threshold of the room, grabbed a chair, dragged it over to the bed as silently as he could, and sat down to watch his brother.

He didn't know how long he sat there, listening to the comings and goings of staff and patients in the outer rooms, but he couldn't

bring himself to leave until he knew Chance was okay and what had happened to him and Donna.

At one point Suzie came in to check on them and let Russ know that Donna's parents and older sister had arrived and were waiting in the outer room with Kim.

He vaguely acknowledged the news, but still didn't leave.

He didn't have any news to give them about Donna, as hungry as he was for it himself, and wouldn't be able to tell them anything to ease their fears.

After a few hours, Angela came in to see how he and Chance were doing and to share the news that Donna was out of surgery and in ICU.

Russ hugged her and accepted the news with elation and relief.

"I'll leave you two alone," Angela said before leaving.

He watched her go, then turned his attention back to Chance.

After another hour, his brother finally blinked open his eyes.

Russ's breath hitched in his chest as Chance's gaze settled on him. "Been up to your old tricks again, playing God, I see."

"Russ." Chance gripped the bedside rail and tried to sit up, but Russ gently planted a hand in the center of his chest and pushed him back. When Chance went down without a fight, Russ knew how weak he was.

"Tell me what happened to you, Chancellor."

Chance grinned, eyes still closed. "I can't explain it. I...I had an experience when I was treating Donna. I felt her feelings, saw her memories. The guy who hurt her...he really did a job on her. He hated her, Russ, with a vengeance."

"You felt all that?"

Chance nodded.

Could it have been that guy Morgan or maybe one of the other irate husbands and boyfriends of Donna's clients?

Chance grabbed his wrist and squeezed so hard Russ thought he would break a bone.

“A vision?”

“He’s going to try it again. He’s going to come and finish what he started. Soon. We have to be prepared. We have to stop him.”

“No. *You* need to get some rest. I’ll alert the police and hospital security.”

“Don’t let anything happen to her, Russ. You have to protect her.”

“I’m not going to let anything happen to her, Chance.” *And I’m not going to let anything happen to you.*

Chapter 33

Chance drifted once Russ left. He didn't go to sleep but let his consciousness float up out of his body in search of Donna's, praying that she remained in that in-between place where he had seen her last and that she hadn't gone over to the other side yet.

He traveled through and searched all of the treatment quarters in the emergency room first, then went up to surgery, exploring each room before retreating back into the hallways to search some more.

He tried to home in on her spirit, her familiar psychic energy leaving as distinctive a trail as her light vanilla scent, easy to follow once he picked it up.

Chance found her in ICU, in a room guarded by one uniformed policeman—her body supine, motionless, and occupying a bed while her spirit hovered close by, watching over herself like some guardian angel.

“This takes some getting used to, huh?”

She turned to him slowly. She didn't look as shocked to see him as she had before in the emergency room. “You seem to be handling it okay.”

He shrugged, went closer until he was standing inches in front of her. “I'm getting the hang of it.”

“It's very freeing not being tied down to the physical world.”

Chance frowned. “I hope you're not getting any ideas about checking out again.”

She shook her head. “No. I'm sticking around. I've been told I'm needed down here, that my work isn't done yet.”

He released the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, reached out, and caught her hand. It still surprised him that he could touch and feel her skin against his when neither of them was in the corporeal world. Was what they were experiencing similar to the phenomenon of cellular memory in transplant patients? Did their souls remember what it felt like to touch and be touched, and the sensations he felt were all memory rather than actual sensations?

Chance didn't care how it happened. He was just glad he could feel the warmth of her, know that she still existed on some plane that he could contact.

"I still don't know how I'm supposed to get back into my body. I've tried melding with it, but it's like falling into an endless void. There's no activity, no light, no sound, no life, just..." She choked on a sob, and Chance pulled her close, rubbing her back as she cried in earnest.

After several minutes she pulled away and searched his face. "How is it for you? How do you get back into and meld with your body when you leave here?"

He shrugged, wished he could make this easy for her, but he couldn't. "I just concentrate, think about what I want to do, and it happens."

"Easier said than done."

"It'll happen when you're ready."

"You don't think I'm ready now?"

"Are you?"

She looked at him but didn't say anything, and Chance answered for her. "You sounded perfectly content being where and how you are right now. I believe your exact words were, 'It's very freeing not being tied down to the physical world.' Sounded like being in your body was a burden you didn't want to carry anymore."

"Sometimes it is. But I didn't mean I want to die."

He wrapped his arms around her again. "I know things get difficult sometimes on the physical plane. There's grief and pain,

disappointments and regrets. But there's also pleasure and triumph too. There're also the people who care about you, the people who love you."

"My parents and Angela were here a little while before you, visiting in shifts. It was so hard not being able to communicate with them, tell them I was here and could hear everything they were saying to me, that I could feel them. It was so hard watching their grief and not being able to alleviate it." She looked at him, her eyes glossy and moist with tears. "Right before the attack, I was feeling so good, almost like I was on a high. I was optimistic and filled with plans of the things I wanted to do, the things I wanted and needed to tell you and Russ. And all I could think about as those kicks and punches were raining down on me was that I would die and never have the opportunity to tell you and Russ how I felt about you."

Chance looked at her, his heart pounding as he waited.

She reached up to cup his face, an electric current traveling from her fingers to his cheek. "I love you, Chance."

He caught her hand and pressed it closer to his cheek, his eyes closing as her life force suffused him, comforted him. "It feels good to hear you say that."

"It feels good to say it and know that you can hear me."

He smiled and opened his eyes.

"I'd like to be able to tell Russ too."

"You will. You'll come out of this coma, back to the people who love you, and we'll be waiting here for you when you d—" A chill ran through him, and Chance jerked away from Donna to glance back toward the door.

The policeman was gone.

"What is it?"

"Something's happening in the ER."

"Something's always happening in the ER."

"No. This is different. He's here."

"Who's here?"

“The guy who did this to you.” He pulled her close and kissed her hard on the lips. “Hang tight. I’ll be right back.”

“Chance.” She caught his hand and squeezed it in a crushing grip. “Be careful.”

“I will.” He rushed out of the room, floating back to the ER and back to his body in seconds. He sat up in his bed with a rush of exhaled air, panting as if he was breaking the surface after being held under water for several minutes.

Chance darted his gaze around the room before he pulled the IV out of his arm, released and lowered the bedside rail, and flung his legs over the side of the bed.

His legs were shaky and weak when his feet hit the floor, but he forced himself to stand, getting his bearings before he made a move toward the threshold, holding on to the bed and the walls to make his way.

Chance instantly found the source of his earlier alarm and caught the commotion down the hall where Russ was wrestling with a man on the floor as a uniformed cop rushed in to cuff the man’s hands behind his back.

The rest of his ER was similarly in chaos, staff and patients ducking for cover, screaming and cowering behind chairs and desks as the policeman dragged the suspect to his feet.

Chance stared at the face of the man who had been haunting his dreams for the last couple of weeks, Naomi’s husband.

Morgan shouted and struggled against the cop holding him. “You got me now. But I’m going to get that bitch if it’s the last thing I do! That’s a promise. I’m going to kill her!”

Chance watched his face, flushed and mottled with color, twisting with rage as the cop led him to and through the pneumatic doors and outside.

He saw Russ get to his feet and dust off his pants and shirt as Suzie and Kim rushed over to him, both talking at once, asking if he was okay.

Russ hugged them both to him, asking if they were okay before assuring them he was. Then he looked up and past them to catch Chance's gaze.

"What are you doing out of bed?"

"I heard the commotion."

"And thought you could help?" Russ chuckled and released his women, making his way toward Chance.

"What happened?"

Russ draped an arm around Chance's waist and walked him back to the treatment room. Suzie and Kim followed them as Russ ushered Chance back into bed before he answered. "Morgan came, just like we thought he would. Asked for information on Donna, what room she was in. When the staff at the desk balked and questioned him, he pulled out a gun and started waving it around, demanding to know where she was."

Chance shot up his eyebrows. "And you jumped him?"

"I wasn't reckless or anything. I waited for the right moment, before he had a chance to hurt anyone. I held him until the policeman made it here from another part of the hospital, and that's where you came in."

Chance nodded, his heart suddenly dropping when he realized what part of the hospital the policeman had come from and that their work wasn't done.

Morgan wasn't the only man who wanted Donna dead. There was someone else, and he was already in the hospital.

* * * *

He was a chameleon, blending into his surroundings, moving like he belonged and knew exactly where he was going.

He'd earlier waylaid a doctor with a similar build and coloring as him and borrowed the man's outfit and ID. This helped him merge into the comings and goings of the staff.

He'd made sure there hadn't been much pain for the man, taking his life with a quick thrust and twist of his knife blade into the young man's abdomen before he left the body in a deserted, seldom used area of the hospital.

Either way, he planned to be done with what he needed to do and out of Belfiore long before anyone found the body.

He found the heifer's unguarded room, thankful to whoever had started a commotion in the emergency room and pulled the policeman away from the door. He knew, however, that he couldn't dawdle. He wouldn't.

He stepped across the threshold of the room, comforted by the feel of the knife nestled against his leg in the side of his boot. He wouldn't use it, though he was sorely tempted and wanted to spill the bitch's blood.

No, this would not be actual wet work.

She was unconscious, probably in a coma. She was helpless. All he had to do was put a pillow over her face and hold it down hard to snuff out her life—no struggle, no muss, no fuss.

Deep down he thought he would miss the struggle, like when he'd killed his mother and watched the light leave her eyes, saw the realization in her expression that she had brought her death on herself, that her end was all her fault and no one else's. But he would just have to make do, be happy that the bitch would be gone and wouldn't be around to interfere with his pursuit of Russ anymore.

He walked across the room and slipped the pillow from behind her head.

She didn't stir.

He just stood at her bedside for a long moment, glancing down at her serene face, holding the pillow in front of him like it was a shield before he lifted it and moved closer.

He had just lowered the pillow and pressed it against her face when he heard a feral growl behind him right before someone shouted his name.

“Derek!”

* * * *

Russ sprinted across the room toward his employee.

He crashed into Derek’s abdomen headfirst, wrapping his arms around the other man’s waist as he slammed him back into the wall.

Equipment went rolling and crashing to the floor around them, and Russ was vaguely aware of Chance running into the room behind him and going to Donna.

He straddled Derek and felt flesh and bone crunching beneath his knuckles. He punched Derek in the face several times before the man got in a couple of kidney punches of his own.

“Russ, he’s got a knife!”

Russ instantly reacted to his brother’s warning, jerking back a second before Derek bucked him off and wielded a hunting knife.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Russ. I *love* you.”

Russ’s jaw dropped. “You *love* me?” This wasn’t happening. Was Derek *insane*? *Love*? Why would he think it was okay to have the same feelings for Russ that Donna had for Russ? Derek didn’t even *know* him like that. And even if he did, Russ just didn’t go that way—never had, never would. Not that he had anything against anyone who did. *He* just didn’t. He loved women.

Scratch that. He loved one woman, and she was in this hospital room not two feet away from a knife-wielding mad man.

Russ peered into Derek’s eyes, saw his obsession and wondered how he’d never recognized it before. How had he not noticed the man sinking into the depths of madness because of what he felt for Russ?

For the life of him he couldn’t remember what he had *done* to bring on Derek’s passion.

“She was getting in the way. They both were,” Derek spat, haphazardly waving his knife in Chance and Donna’s direction.

Chance covered Donna's body with his as Russ made a move toward Derek.

Derek got into a fighting crouch and slashed the air in front of him, nicking Russ across the abdomen.

Russ gasped, avoiding a deep cut, feinting back before dropping into a fighting crouch of his own.

"Drop the knife!"

Derek glanced behind Russ at the cop who had just arrived.

Russ hazarded a glance over his shoulder to see the cop with his gun drawn.

"I don't want to hurt you," Derek repeated, circling closer, "but I'd rather see you dead than with the two of them!" He lunged for Russ, his knife outstretched.

"Drop it, or I'll shoot!"

Russ dodged to the left and just missed taking a thrust to the ribs from Derek's knife.

He tumbled onto his side as a shot rang out behind him, the bullet striking Derek in the chest dead-center.

Derek crumpled to his knees, clutching his chest with one hand and reaching out for Russ with the other.

The knife dropped out of his hand, and the cop came over, pointing his gun down at Derek with both hands as he kicked the knife across the linoleum.

Derek coughed, blood gurgling from the hole in his chest and from his mouth. He looked up at Russ as Russ got to his knees. "I only wanted you to love me. I needed you..."

Russ shook his head, backing away from the dying man and reaching behind him to grab hold of the bedrail. After a couple of tries, he managed to lift himself to his feet.

Chance rushed over to him just as several hospital staff rushed into the room in front of Donna's parents and sister. He put his arm around his brother's waist and helped him to a chair.

"Let me look at you."

“It’s just a scratch. I’ll be fine. What about Donna?”

“She’s alive.”

“She’s going to be okay,” Angela whispered.

Her parents, Russ, and Chance all looked at her.

She returned their stares and smiled. “A little birdie told me.”

Chapter 34

Derek Crawford was dead and buried at Potter's Field on Hart Island. His death, while tragic, brought relief to several who appreciated that his passing meant one of the main threats to Donna's life had been erased. His death could not be appreciated by the most important person, however.

Donna's condition didn't change. She didn't open her eyes or show any signs that she would ever regain consciousness, languishing in a deep coma at Belfiore two weeks after the shooting in her hospital room.

Nothing the doctors did helped. Not even Chance's abilities and unconventional remedies could bring her around, though he'd put the finishing touches on the surgeons' efforts and worked on further healing her internal injuries.

Russ was beginning to wonder if she ever would wake up, if maybe Angela's little birdie had been mistaken about all of them—him, Chance, and Donna belonging together. He was beginning to wonder if she *wanted* to wake up.

He wouldn't give up hope, though, couldn't, and every day after work, he made the trek to the hospital to visit between the shifts when her family visited with her.

Today when he arrived, however, everyone was crowded in her room all at once—her parents, all her brothers and sisters, and in-laws gathered around her bed and made a fuss.

Standing just inside the doorway, like a cop in charge of crowd control, was Chance.

“What happened?”

Chance turned and threw his arms around Russ. “Donna came out of her coma.”

“Really?”

Chance pulled away and nodded, his smile tinged with sadness.

“Why do I feel a but coming on?”

“She doesn’t remember what happened, and she doesn’t remember me, at least not our personal relationship.”

“She remembers her family.”

Chance nodded. “It’s not uncommon for the memory to come back in fragments, if at all, and for the oldest memories to come back first.”

“So she probably won’t remember me either.”

“That’s a possibility.”

Russ raked a hand through his hair. He couldn’t say that his happiness wasn’t colored by disappointment. He shook it off and clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Hey, as long as she’s alive and well. That’s what’s important, right?”

“More memories could still come back. She only just woke up an hour ago. She’s got a lot to catch up on.”

“Yeah,” Russ agreed, trying to sound upbeat. But it was hard when all he’d been thinking about for the last two weeks was what he would do when she woke up, how they would celebrate her recovery.

Now it looked like she might not even know who he was.

“I just wanted you to be prepared before you go in,” Chance said.

“Thanks.” Russ watched as Chance hustled Donna’s family out of the room so that he could examine her.

The gang of them reluctantly filed out, greeting Russ in passing as they all headed en masse for the waiting area on the floor.

Russ waited at the door jamb as Chance pulled the curtain around Donna’s bed.

Was he going to try to make her remember him? Russ didn’t want that. He wanted her to remember them naturally, if at all. He had to

trust that she would, that after all they had been through, they were meant to be together.

Several long minutes later, Chance pulled the curtain back and met him at the door with a smile, this time one not tempered with grief.

“She remembered you?”

Chance nodded and took him by a hand, but Russ pulled back.

“You didn’t do anything to her, did you?”

“Other than heal her injuries? No. Her memory came back on its own. I told you it would.” He smiled as he tried to drag Russ into the room, but Russ held firm.

“What if she still doesn’t remember me?”

“If she doesn’t now, she will. Have some faith.”

Russ wanted to, but couldn’t remember the last time he had entrusted his happiness into the hands of another, especially not some higher being that had been ignoring his pleas for help and mercy pretty well so far.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He thought of Angela’s little birdie and her faith and belief in soul mates.

He could do this. “Okay.”

“Good. Come on.”

Russ opened his eyes and followed his brother into the room to stand by Donna’s bed while Chance stood on the opposite side.

She smiled up at him, and his heart skipped a beat until he noticed the blank look in her eyes and realized she didn’t recognize him. Russ knew it before she opened her mouth to ask, “Who are you?”

He closed his eyes and tried to swallow down the bitter taste of frustration and sorrow that rose to his throat.

“Are you okay?”

He opened his eyes at her touch on his hand as he gripped her bedside rail.

“I’m fine,” he croaked.

“This is my brother, Russ, Donna.”

“Russ.” She said it as if she was trying his name out on her tongue for the first time and enjoyed the taste of it. “Hmm, very rugged.”

Russ smiled, seeing shades of his smart-ass Donna behind the unfamiliar, soft-spoken woman before him. He clenched his hands at his sides to keep from reaching out to grab and hold her against him, as if he could force her memory back with his will and touch.

“Have we met before?”

“In a past life maybe,” he murmured and gazed across the bed at Chance. He might have felt better about his next move had Chance wore a smirk or gloatingly smiled, but his brother didn’t. Both sort of displays were beneath Chance.

Russ reached across the bed to grip his brother’s arm and smiled. “The better man won.”

“Russ, it’s not like that, and it’s not over.”

“It’s okay, Chance. If I had to lose her to anyone, I’d rather it’s you.”

“Russ...”

He turned to leave, his heart pounding harder with each step toward the door until he reached it and heard Donna’s shout behind him.

* * * *

Donna watched Russ walk away, feeling bad for him and not knowing why. She felt like she was losing a part of herself. She just didn’t know which part. She didn’t like hurting him. The man had saved her life, after all, in more ways than one and—

Wait a minute! How did she know he had saved her life, and how dare he talk about her like she wasn’t there and had no mind of her own? He’d practically handed her off to Chance like she was some trophy to be lost or won.

“Damn it, Russ! Get back here!”

He peeked back in the room, eyebrows raised as he gawked at her.

“Oooh, you’re going to get it now,” Chance teased.

Russ made his way back across the room and again took the spot opposite Chance beside Donna’s bed. “You bellowed?”

She put a fist on her hip, trying look as fierce as she could in a flimsy hospital gown, laid up in a hospital bed after coming out of a weeks-long coma.

She watched his lips quirking into a smile, the sight making her pussy pulse with desire and her heart pump with righteous indignation at his high-handed behavior. “I have a mind to forget I know either one of you right now.”

“What did *I* do?” Chance asked.

Donna ignored him, directing all her anger at Russ as she glared up at him. “Who in hell do you think you are to transfer ownership of me over to Chance like I have no say?”

“I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“Since when do you let me have what I want, when I want it?”

“You didn’t remember me, Donna.”

“Didn’t. Past tense. Am I allowed a little recovery time after what happened to me? Sheesh!” She peered up at him and shook her head. “Come here.” She reached for his T-shirt and balled a bunch of the front of it in her fist. “I remember a lot more about you than you can ever imagine.”

“Yeah? Like what?”

“Like the fact that I love you, Russ.”

He gasped, shock clearly written on his face, and Donna liked that she had the ability to catch him off guard as much as he caught her off guard.

“You love me?”

“Very much,” she whispered, drawing him forward. She closed her eyes, and when his lips met hers, the taste of him infused her with emotion and purpose, filling in all the gaps of the last several weeks and before, like when she’d watched Chance come back into the room after her family had left. Everything just fell into place.

Russ ended the kiss, reaching to push a tendril of hair behind her ear. "I love you too."

"I remember exactly who you are."

"Do you, slave?"

She shuddered at the familiar term and the memories it evoked, her body surging with warmth and electricity. "I do."

He smiled, caressing her face so softly his touch totally belied the weight of his next words. "Then you remember that the sort of flagrant misconduct and disobedience you exhibited just now can't go unpunished."

She lowered her eyes for a moment as heat spiraled up from her core to make her nipples harden and swell. Finally, she lifted her gaze to meet Russ's.

"I'm ready to take my licks."

"As soon as you're healthy enough and out of here then."

"I can hardly wait." She slid her hand down from his shirt to take his hand in a strong grip. She reached for Chance's hand with her other and held on tight, comfortable between them and finally feeling like she had come home again.

"How could either of you think I would forget what you both are to me?" She looked from one to the other and smiled. "My Healer and my Master."

Epilogue

Wantagh, LI, Beltane, Ten Months Later

Angela stood several feet behind the circle that Russ and Chance had drawn around themselves and Donna with the custom athames, ceremonial knives that Angela had given both of them as a wedding gift. She stood witness as the triad prepared to take their handfasting vows, guided by the priest and priestess that she had engaged especially for the rite.

It was the first pagan ceremony that the entire family was taking part in, and Angela thought that she couldn't have been happier to see all of her siblings, in-laws, kids, nieces and nephews, and even her parents present to see the triad bound to each other.

The triad joined together in the circle in front of the priest and priestess, and the priest opened with a monologue advocating a new relationship enriched with wisdom and love. He wished the partners well in their voyage of discovery as they realized new directions that their relationship would take.

“But most importantly, we are here, in the presence of the Gods and every well-wisher present, to share in the happiness that Donna Vega has found with Russell Merrick and Chancellor Novak...”

Angela listened as Donna spoke next, remarking on the enormous transformations that she, Russ, and Chance had undergone in the last year and that she welcomed each man into her life and her family with eyes and heart open.

The priestess stepped forward to drape the first cord across the bride and two grooms' hands and led the triad in their promises to share in each other's laughter and look for the good in life and the positive in each other.

The priest stepped forward to drape the second cord across the triad's hands. "Will you share your loads so that your souls may grow in this bond?"

"Yes," the trio chorused.

After the final vows were delivered and the final cords were tied, the priest and priestess stepped back behind the stone altar and raised their voices as one to pronounce the final invocation.

The trio exchanged rings and shared kisses at the priest and priestess's behest. Then the priestess addressed the gathering to say, "In celebration of your union, let the party begin!"

Partying was something the Vega and Calminetti clan knew how to do all too well.

* * * *

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes," Evelyn said, sipping champagne and watching Donna dancing around the maypole with her two new husbands, the three of them all laughing and frolicking like little kids. "Donna the Man-eater hitched, to two men no less. You're a miracle worker."

Angela laughed. "She was definitely a tough nut to crack. But in the end, she finally just realized what the rest of my baby brothers and sisters all realized."

"That there's a soul mate out there for everyone."

"Only some people get two soul mates." Emilia came over and plopped on the chaise lounge beside her sisters, and Angela poured her a flute of champagne. "I think I want a recount."

Angela and Evelyn both laughed at Emilia's pout. They knew how much their sister loved her husband, Ramón, and that he was the only man for Emilia.

"So, now that you've fixed us all up, who are you going to turn your matchmaking schemes on now, Mrs. Calminetti?"

"I may just put up a shingle like you all suggested I do a long time ago and go into business. There are a lot of lost souls out there looking for their match." Angela smiled and turned to follow the gazes of her two sisters as they stared past her shoulder.

Bearing down on the trio on the chaise was Donna, Nick, and EJ.

They paused before the chaise as Evelyn and Emilia stood to join them, passing each new arrival a flute and pouring champagne into each glass.

"We just wanted to thank you for seeing what we were too blind to see," EJ said.

"And believing in us when we didn't believe in ourselves," Nick added.

"And loving us when we weren't always lovable," Evelyn and Emilia chorused.

"And fighting for us when we stopped fighting for ourselves," Donna said and bent to kiss her sister on the cheek. "Thanks, Angie. I'm glad you're my big sister, and I'm glad you didn't give up on me."

Angela felt Freddie standing behind her, tears forming in her eyes and blurring her vision as he settled his hands on her shoulders, gently massaging while she watched her sisters and brothers form a circle in front of her.

The five of them lifted their glasses in a toast.

"To Angela, our matchmaker, our sister, and our light!"

"Here, here," Freddie whispered and leaned in to kiss her throat.

Angela had no words, just smiled up at her sisters and brothers as the tears freely flowed down her cheeks.

“This is a first. She’s been rendered speechless,” EJ teased, and the rest of his siblings joined in his laughter.

But Angela knew she didn’t need to say anything more.

Her brothers and sisters had said it all.

Their hearts were open and free to love their soul mates. And that’s all Angela had ever wanted for all of them anyway.

They had taught her well.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gracie McKeever is an author from the Bronx and aside from several side trips along the way has lived and worked her entire life in the New York City area. She has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience for various short story readings and performances.

An eclectic and voracious reader whose audience has grown outside of the supportive family members, she's had the great fortune of being able to incorporate two of her favorite passions and talents – reading and writing – as a book reviewer for several online e-zines both as a regular staff member and freelancer.

In 2001 Gracie caught the erotica bug, sinking her teeth into her first erotic romance e-book for a review, and hasn't looked back since. An instant affinity for the genre spawned her first erotic romance title, **BENEATH THE SURFACE**, published in 2006 by Siren Publishing, Inc.



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