

PHOENIX



MILDRED GAIL DIGBY

Phoenix

By
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Quest Books by Regal Crest

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I'd like to thank everyone at RCE for giving my novel a chance, and for all their help, patience, and support along the way.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife, who kept my butt in front of the computer and believed I could write a half-decent novel, even when I didn't.

aishiteiru

Prologue

SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

"Jessie, I know you're in there! Open up!" Ashe slammed her fist on the door one more time. No response came. The houses on either side were just as silent. Ashe didn't care if anyone thought it odd that a frantic woman in a crisp suit was shouting and pounding on Max Edward's front door. The door that remained solidly closed.

Ashe was nauseous with worry. She had to get into that house. It was the last place that Jessie should be but the most likely place she was. Ashe bit off a curse and made a decision. She grabbed the baton from her belt and extended it with a sharp downward flick. With it, she smashed the glass panel and reached through to unlock the door.

Once inside, the first thing Ashe noticed was the smell. Coppery, thick, and evil. Ashe's stomach lurched. She couldn't be too late. It was inconceivable. She staggered forward into the darkness and fell to her knees. The floor was awash in blood. Jessie lay in the middle of it. With a cry, Ashe grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a shake. Red spattered over the starched cuffs of Ashe's shirt and soaked through her trousers. Her breath came fast and hard.

Ashe ripped her jacket off and wrapped it around the girl's body. She was already cold. Her eyes stared glassily into nothing. Ashe had failed. She had a single job and she failed.

The word *no* thundered through Ashe's mind. She was still staring at her bloody hands when the sirens filled the air.

Chapter One

THE SUBLIMINAL HUM of the fluorescent light over her head bothered Ashe Devon to the point where she was seriously considering making a trebuchet out of the elastic bands in her drawer and shooting paper clips at the flickering glass tube until it shattered. She tried to ignore the teeth-itching sensation and slumped over her desk as the line of figures on the printout faded into blurs of boring nothingness. Ashe rubbed a hand over her face and blinked until they came back. Her butt started to go numb from the long hours she'd spent in the unforgiving office chair and she tried to shift her weight without making the chair squeak.

The phone two desks down from hers rang but nobody made a move to pick it up. It abruptly cut off and the room was once again filled with dead silence punctuated only by the rustling of papers and the occasional cough. The figures hadn't changed into anything even remotely meaningful and Ashe was beginning to get an ache between her brows in addition to the one in her rump. She knew she had to finish the production schedule but she couldn't wrestle her sluggish brain into any kind of condition to deal with it. Ashe bent down to grab a highlighter pen from the tray in her desk drawer when she felt a visceral prickle behind her. She shot to her feet and spun around to come face-to-very-surprised-face with her supervisor Kevin Macleod.

"Holy hootin' Herby!" he said. "Jumpy much?"

"Sorry," Ashe said. She bent down to retrieve her wheelie chair, which had toppled over with her leap. Her long legs strained the back seam of her office-standard skirt before she caught herself and drew her knees together in an attempt to retain a bit of decency. At least she'd quit trying to mince around in high heels, which made scaling walls on her lunch break much less death-defying. A jet-black curtain framed her vision and she blew her overlong bangs out of her face with an annoyed huff. "What can I do for you, Kevin?"

His eyes rested on her chest for a moment too long and Ashe's fingers itched to clutch at the front of her blouse. She'd gotten a bit too used to the constant drafts that came from a life with a camisole instead of an undershirt and never bothered to check if the crappy, cheap buttons had come undone yet again.

Kevin's lack of height and Ashe's abundance of it also put him at the perfect level to boob-gaze. Ashe weighed the satisfaction of roundhouse kicking Kevin's head off his shoulders against the benefits of continued employment. She hadn't come to a decision when he spoke again.

"Actually, I'd like to see you in my office for a moment."

"Sure thing, boss," Ashe said. Perplexed, she followed him. She thought she'd been doing pretty well that week. She'd kept a low profile and had gone about her boring office tasks without bothering anyone. Then she saw Pam, whose florid face was sporting a mean smirk and Ashe got a sour feeling in her

gut. She'd made the mistake of interacting with Pam a bit more than usual over the past few days and that was going to come back to bite her in the ass. Do not engage. The same rule held for both stalkers and bullies and Ashe had ignored it. She should have known better.

The bad feeling increased tenfold as Kevin closed the office door behind them and motioned Ashe to the least comfortable chair across from his desk, which was cluttered with random office flotsam. The late afternoon sun streamed through the blinds and hurt her eyes like strips of lasers. Ashe shifted until the shadow cast by the plastic potted tree fell across her face.

"Pam said you threatened her," Kevin said. He shoved his hands into his pockets and rested one buttock on the edge of his desk. He did a passable impression of a concerned yet not-to-be-messed-with person.

"No I didn't," Ashe said. She didn't want to shake her head in case the movement brought her out of the shadow. "She misunderstood. I was just being friendly and joking with her."

"Pam told me you said, ahem." Kevin's eyes went to a printed-out email lying on top of a drift of memos. He picked it up with an exaggerated movement and read aloud: "If you don't stop spewing your filthy biohazard all over the place I will fucking throttle you."

This time Ashe did shake her head, which swished her blunt just-past-shoulder-length hair in an annoying way about her face. "That's wrong. I didn't say 'fucking'. Swearing indicates a loss of emotional control." She folded her arms and wished she could prop one foot up on her knee without giving Kevin a good view of the bicycle shorts she always wore under her skirt. "And I was just trying to communicate that if you have a cold and are constantly snorting and hacking you should go home. This office is a closed environment and she is trying to turn it into a plague ship."

"Pam also said you racially discriminated against her by offering her a 'cracker'."

Ashe barked out a laugh before she could stop herself. She leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees as she fixed her supervisor with an incredulous stare. "What? Okay, now she's just being delusional. How about the time she asked if my mother was a 'geesha-girl'?"

"It's a valid question. Not everybody's an expert on east Asia."

Ashe snorted and said, "I believe Pam called it 'The Orient'. Come on Kevin, you know she's just dreaming up issues to make her pathetic life seem more meaningful than it is. Racial discrimination? Please! White people complaining about racial discrimination is pretty funny."

"White is a race too, you know," Kevin said. He pulled his butt off his desk and plopped it into his chair. The fake leather made a dangerous creaking noise. "Look, do you want me to make you attend sensitivity training again?"

"No thanks," Ashe said with a grimace.

"I'm not going to write you up to HR this time. But try and be more tolerant."

"Yeah, okay." Ashe forced her shoulders to drop, her pose to relax. Refuting Pam's entitled whining was not the hill Ashe wanted to die on.

"Now get back to work. I want to see that production schedule on my desk by five o'clock tonight."

"Sure thing," Ashe muttered. She stomped back to her desk where she found a note and a banana placed on top of the halffinished schedule. The note read: "Your too skinny. Eat a Banana." In front of the B from banana was a crossed out D.

Very subtle. Ashe paused to admire Pam's gift before she picked up the offering and gave a brief salute with it in the direction of where Pam and her group of flunkies were pretending not to be staring at her.

Ashe bent her head over the figures once again with a satisfied grunt to herself. Just what she wanted right at the moment was a nice fruit snack, too. Potassium was good for concentration. Ashe was finally making some headway in her task when the persistent buzzing from her bag annoyed her enough that she abandoned her task and dredged up her phone. She nearly dropped it when she saw the name Tomohiko Yamaguchi on the screen. The phone and Ashe had a staring contest that Ashe won as the buzzing stopped. Her pulse thundered in her ears.

Yakkun wouldn't just call her up randomly to hang out. Not after the way she'd ditched his company. Not after the way she'd messed up with Jessie Gardener. With a hand pressed to her forehead, Ashe fought the memories. She bit down hard on her lower lip and shoved the phone into the bottom of her bag. That chapter of her life was over. She had a job to do and a production schedule that wasn't going to make itself.

For the rest of the afternoon, Pam made an effort to cough extra loudly and she blew her nose extravagantly whenever Ashe passed her desk. It was well past five by the time Ashe managed to finish her work, and she was more than ready to leave. After chucking the production schedule into Kevin's inbox, Ashe slouched out of the office with her hands stuffed into the pockets of the horrible puffy green coat she'd found at the local thrift store. The coat looked even more tacky and shabby with Ashe's black leather Armani Express flight bag slung across it.

On her way to the company parking lot, Ashe passed a few more sprawling buildings similar to the one she'd just left. Located just outside of Vancouver, the industrial town of Genesee was home to several automobile manufacturing companies that drove the local economy and employed most of the population in one form or another, including Ashe, much to her inner disappointment.

She was preoccupied with digging her keys out of her bag and didn't notice the man leaning against the hood of her truck until she was right in front of him.

Ashe stepped back with a quick intake of breath as she fell into an instinctive fighting stance, hands up and muscles tensed. The man stepped into the wan circle of streetlight. His cheerfully round face and spiky bleached hair were friendly and familiar. He was wearing the embroidered stadium jacket he loved and baggy vintage jeans that were way more expensive than they looked. She didn't ask how he'd found her. He could find anyone.

"What are you doing out here?" Ashe said. She dropped her hands and unclenched her fists. "Yakkun, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry about that, but you weren't answering your phone." He spread his hands and didn't look a bit repentant.

"That's because I was working. You know, that thing some people have to do from nine to five in order to get money?"

She shifted uneasily as Yakkun studied her. He might look young and harmless, but that was only a front for a laser-sharp mind that let no detail go unnoticed.

"What?" Ashe felt exposed, flayed and raw under the scrutiny.

Yakkun leaned back against the truck. "It's just, holy shit, Ashe. What happened to you? It looks like the pretty princess fairy paid you a visit. I never thought I'd see the day when Ashe Devon would be prancing around with long hair and in a skirt! And are you actually wearing nylons? Are you sure you're not going undercover?" He laughed in the bright, unaffected way he always had. His words were without malice but they stung just the same.

Ashe made a move as if to shove him off her truck and he obediently stepped away. She glared at the dark green of the hood. If he'd left his grubby paw prints on it, she'd leave considerably larger and deeper prints on him.

Ashe said in a tight voice, "Please just leave me alone. I don't have time for this."

"Why? Someone waiting for you?"

"Only a nosy pain in the ass who should leave well enough alone," Ashe shot back.

"In that case, how about letting that pain in the ass buy you a drink?"

Ashe sighed. "Look Yakkun, whatever you came here to say, I'm not interested. I told you six months ago I quit and I haven't changed my mind. Let me live my life in peace, okay?"

"Just hear me out. I'm not going to beg you to come back, but there's this one potential client I need to talk to you about."

"Not listening. Don't care."

"She's in real danger," Yakkun said. "And you're the only one who can help her."

Ashe froze with her hand on the door. Her head went down. "I can't help anyone."

"I know you're thinking about Jessie. That wasn't your fault! She didn't listen and went behind our backs letting that crazy guy know where she was and keeping in contact with him. Letting him control her."

"I should have known she was lying," Ashe said. "I should have accounted for that. No, Yakkun. I'm out of the business. It's over."

"Give me five minutes. That's all I ask."

It seemed like he wasn't going to give up until she'd at least let him give his spiel. She looked back toward the squat company building where small groups of workers were trickling out. Ashe let out a breath and made a decision. She opened the truck's door and jerked her head toward the passenger side. "Get in. I can't be seen with a lowlife like you. I've got a rep to protect."

"Great!" Yakkun hustled over to the passenger's side and buckled himself in as Ashe twisted the volume of the music down. Beethoven's *Pastorale*. Not her first choice for night listening, but it helped put her in the mood to go to work in the morning instead of floor the accelerator and try to get the truck airborne over the nearest cliff.

Yakkun looked around with an air of relief. "At least you didn't get rid of your truck. If you were driving around in one of those cute little minis or something I would've been really worried that you'd been taken over by a body snatcher or something."

"Your five minutes start now," Ashe growled.

"Hey now, not so fast," Yakkun said as he leaned back with both hands behind his head. Ashe had a momentary flashback of so many nights spent side by side like that. Ashe slouched down with a camera in her hands and Yakkun sprawled out next to her, keeping them both awake by telling jokes and rehashing the plots of those stupid B-movies he loved. "I'm not the type of guy to give away the goods without a little lubrication. I'll buy you a beer at Rosie's and we can discuss this like civilized people."

"Fine," Ashe said. She felt like she'd already lost the battle as she steered the truck out of the nearly deserted parking lot.

The downtown pub was the same as she remembered it—the battered menus stuck in the home-made wooden racks were unchanged, the owner known fondly by everyone as Rosie was still standing behind the bar with a silk scarf thrown casually over his massive, ripped shoulders that strained the material of his Hawaiian-print shirt. Ashe slipped into one of the booths while Yakkun stood in front of the ancient jukebox. He fed a handful of quarters into it like he always did whenever they came there to discuss business in case somebody was listening who shouldn't be.

The one thing that had changed was Ashe. She shrugged out of the ugly, frumpy coat she hated and propped her bag up against the wall. Behind the menu, she surreptitiously checked her buttons to make sure there'd be no encore of the camisole show. While she knew Yakkun understood he had a snowball's chance in hell with her, she didn't want to elicit any more comments. Ashe yanked her hair into a painful ponytail, using that as an excuse to avoid Rosie's gaze even though she felt it on her until Yakkun came back with two bottles of Alexander Keith's in his hands.

Ashe ignored Yakkun's attempt to clink the neck of his bottle with hers and took a pull of her beer. After taking a sip of his own, Yakkun hitched himself forward and rested his elbows on the scarred table. He knit his fingers together.

"I'll get right to the point. The client I mentioned? Her name's Mystral Galbraith and she's a DJ. Goes by the stage-name Phoenix. Most of her gigs are club events like Wild Aphrodite, Chestnut and Squirrel, Venus Flytrap. Things like that. Get it?"

For some reason Yakkun was looking at her with expectation. Ashe rubbed a hand through her bangs that made them gap in the middle in an unflattering way.

"Are those names supposed to mean something to me?" she asked.

"You mean you haven't been to any of them? Or even noticed the posters in the bathroom at my mom's restaurant?"

Oh. Those kinds of events. Suddenly Ashe understood. "If you need a female, what about Shauna? Isn't she still working for you?"

"Shauna? No way. Shauna is too *nonkei* for this," he said, meaning *straight*. "She doesn't know how to function in that world. She'd never get anywhere with anybody."

"And I would? Yakkun, I'm forty years old. I haven't been to a gay club in years. I'm sure the rules have changed."

"You'll get back into it." Yakkun grinned and Ashe had the uncomfortable feeling she'd given up her strategic advantage. "Actually we were contacted by Joelle Fischer. She's the one interested in hiring us. She asked for you specifically." He leaned on his elbows, winked, and asked, "You dated any Joelles?"

"Dating? Like in high school?" Ashe snorted. She shot a glare across the table and said, "I have better things to do with my time and I like my life the way it is, thanks." At least, she liked her life the way it had been.

"Okay, then how about slept with?"

Ashe increased her grip on the beer bottle until she was certain it was going to shatter in her hand. Only Yakkun could get away with asking her something like that, but that didn't mean she was going to give him an answer.

"You're the super-sleuth," Ashe said. "You tell me."

"So the name doesn't ring a bell at all?"

"Nope." Ashe forced herself to relax and swirled her beer in the bottle. The ring of bubbles caught the dusty golden light. "Can't say it does. What's her interest then?"

"She owns a bar downtown and runs a bunch of the events Mystral plays at. She's kind of Phoenix's unofficial manager and seems to feel responsible for her. When she called she was pretty upset. She said things have been escalating lately and both of them are scared."

"What are we talking about?" Ashe concentrated on breathing. She could only pray it wasn't a stalker. She couldn't take a case like that. Not again.

"It started out pretty tame, just a few letters, like a fan would've written. Then it moved to posters getting vandalized, then there was a phone call with a threat. Seems they're wanting her to quit, whether it's DJ-ing or something else, it's not super clear. But the turning point seemed to be when Mystral got followed after a gig the other night. They tried to run her down."

Ashe's gut clenched. She couldn't help but ask, "Is she all right?"

"Shook her up a bit. Could have been worse," Yakkun said with a practiced shrug. "Unfortunately they high beamed her and she didn't get a good look at the car."

Ashe rubbed a hand through her hair again only to get her fingers caught in it and rip out a bunch of hairs from her ponytail. Instead of cursing, she said, "I hope she wasn't stupid enough to lead them to her front door."

"No, she seems to have her head on straight," Yakkun said. "Look, you can

ask her yourself. They're coming by the office tomorrow evening. I'm sure even with your important nine to five job, you could manage to swing by. I'll respect your decision but just meet her and hear what she has to say in person."

Ashe tapped a finger against the glass bottle. "All right." She held up a hand as Yakkun appeared to be on the verge of making some kind of victory gesture. "I will agree to meet them, but that doesn't mean I agree to take the client. I still have a regular job to do, you know."

"Yeah, I was surprised when I found out you were working there. What does Infra BC do anyway?"

"The same thing every company this side of Vancouver does – they make some kind of car parts," Ashe said.

"And what parts are those?"

"Something to do with the suspension. I'm in the Production Planning Department and they've got me putting together schedules that everybody bitches about and nobody follows."

"Sounds fun," Yakkun said as his hand found the bowl of peanuts and rummaged around in it. "Not accounting? I always thought if you decided to go the 'straight and narrow' that's what you'd do. You've still got your certification, right?"

"Apparently they didn't have an opening in that department," Ashe said. She picked at the label of her beer in order to avoid meeting Yakkun's gaze.

"So are you interested in suspension systems and all that?"

"Nope," Ashe said. "But it pays the bills and nobody dies if I mess up." Ashe hadn't meant to say that much, and the words were bitter on her tongue. She grabbed up her jacket and bag and got to her feet. "Anyway, can I give you a lift back to your car?"

"Nah, I'm gonna hang out here for a bit longer." Yakkun stretched out with his arm resting on the seat cushion behind him. "See if Rosie's got any news or good advice."

Without a backward glance, Ashe left the bar. Her long strides caused a worrying snapping sound from the back seam of her skirt.

Chapter Two

"OOH, SOOOOOOMEBOY'S GOT a date tonight!"

At the sound of Pam's nasty, nasal voice, Ashe jerked back from the mirror. In preparation for her visit to Yamaguchi Investigations, she'd ditched her work clothes in favor of a pair of boot-cut jeans and a leather vest over a long-sleeved T-shirt. Glamorous it wasn't but it beat that damned fettering skirt and its increasingly battered back seam any day. She was attempting to make her hair in its outgrown glory into something that didn't make her look like a housewife from the 70's when Pam launched her snide remark.

Ashe threw a scathing look over her shoulder, but Pam was already trotting over to her own locker. She aimed a few coughs in Ashe's direction before she yanked the door open and dragged out her bulbous handbag. One of her cronies, a thin and perpetually nervous-looking woman named Sharlene, was with her and she snickered behind one hand.

"I heard the company's gonna be cutting a few jobs," Pam said airily. "An' we all know the last one in is the first to go. You know, the deadweights and the weirdos. Especially the ones who are both at the same time."

"What a pity," Sharlene said. "Glad it's not me!"

They whispered and tittered together for a while, but Ashe tuned them out. She'd graduated from junior high school far too long ago to let stupid things like that get her riled up. She hauled her hair back into a lopsided arrangement held in a fake tortoiseshell clip and scowled at her reflection. There wasn't a day where she didn't consider chopping off the whole sad lot of it but she kept it long more out of apathy than anything else. She hated the whole stockings and office-skirt routine as well, but she couldn't bring herself to dig out the crisply pressed shirts and tailored suits from where they were hanging in her closet.

The person Ashe had been died six months ago, along with Jessie Gardener.

She left the office behind her and started her truck. Her hands were clammy from nerves and she scrubbed them on her jeans as she drove. It was the first time she'd driven from her company to the nondescript building where Yakkun's investigation company lived, but she found herself falling into automatic mode, following the crowded streets as if they were leading her home. Home. Ashe snorted to herself, yeah right. At the most, she would help out one time and get on with her life. At the least, she'd show up for the meeting, refuse, and put it all behind her once and for all. Maybe it was for the best.

After she pulled into one of the reserved spots behind the building, Ashe checked her reflection in the rearview mirror. She mentally scoffed at the sudden attack of nerves. Yakkun showing up the way he had, seeing her in all her fake office-monkey glory had shaken her up more than she cared to admit. She pocketed her keys and unfastened the seatbelt in one smooth motion

before she got out of the truck. Ashe's long legs made the journey up the stairs and down the long hallway a quick one. The worn carpet sported a grayish path down the middle of it. Again, Ashe was hit by the utterly unchanged feeling coming around her. However it was no longer the seamless fit it had been until her life had been wrenched off course.

Don't think, just do it. Ashe didn't bother to knock before she charged through the frosted glass door into the cluttered, crowded office. They'd moved some stuff around since she'd left. It looked like Yakkun had taken her advice—the interview corner was more remote, surrounded by the backsides of their vast filing system instead of right in front of the wall of windows where anybody passing by could see who was there. Under those windows, a number of desks were pushed into a train-like formation, with Yakkun's at the head of them. Ashe recognized his guitar leaning against the wall behind his desk for those interminable days and sometimes weeks between cases. Shauna was the only one there at the moment. She got up from her pile of reports and pushed her glasses up into her thick hair that she'd kept in its natural curly glory.

She gave Ashe a wide smile as her long strides took her around her own piled-up desk and over to the reception area. A former track and field star who specialized in the javelin, Shauna was long and sinewy, and favored comfortable slacks and turtleneck sweaters, which allowed her to blend into any crowd. Ashe herself had a long history of sports behind her. She came by it honestly, though. Her mother, instead of a "geisha-girl", had been a professional volleyball player with a competitive interest in kendo, and her father had earned America an Olympic medal for fencing back in his heyday. They'd met during an international sporting event and apparently it was "love at first fight".

Gus and Kieran, who didn't appear to be around at the moment, were, respectively, a former kick boxer and an aerialist for a local performing group. Yakkun preferred his operatives to be able to be not only mentally but also physically able to keep up with their targets.

"Long time no see, girlfriend," Shauna said.

"It hasn't been that long," Ashe said. "Where are the guys?"

"Gus was here all night so he's off today, Kieran has rehearsal, and Yakkun's off getting toilet paper 'cause we're in danger of running out. Wanna coffee while you wait?"

"Sure, thanks." Ashe was used to getting her own coffee, but she felt too ill-at-ease to attempt it. Instead she hovered in the so-familiar but strangely different office. While Shauna clinked around mugs in their galley-like tea corner, Ashe went over to her old desk. It was the only one not sporting piles of papers, assorted photos, and memorabilia among various discarded snack containers.

Shauna came over with a mug and Ashe wrapped her chilled fingers around it. She sipped the coffee and grimaced as the super-bitter brew hit her throat.

"Nice and strong, just the way you like it," Shauna said with a brilliant grin and a laugh.

"You could strip a car with this," Ashe said as she took another cautious mouthful. "Or dissolve a body."

"Hey now, don't go finding out all our secrets."

Heralded by a blustering noise at the door, Yakkun came in with giant packs of toilet paper under each arm. After he stashed them in the supply closet by the door, he jogged across the room.

"Glad to see you made it, Ashe."

"So when's this meeting happening? I don't have all night you know."

With a glance at his watch, Yakkun said, "Joelle said they'd be here by seven."

Ashe went over to the interview corner to wait. She sat down on one of the ancient sofas. The battered leather was worn into buttery softness and the cushions indented by generations of backsides. Ashe propped one foot up on the table and tapped one finger absently against the armrest. She heard the door open and jumped to her feet as Yakkun ushered two women into the little cubby. The first one was apparently Joelle, a slightly top-heavy, middle-aged woman with professionally streaked hair that was swept back into a sleek chignon. It complemented the burgundy pantsuit she was encased in. Seeing her in person brought back a very foggy recollection of spending an evening pouring her drinks and listening to her array of troubles and opinions at a gay bar several years ago while enthusiastically bad karaoke renditions of ABBA tunes echoed around them.

The other one – Ashe caught her breath. She was beautiful. More than that. She radiated an energy that was impossible to ignore. The sheer force of it hit Ashe in a way that nothing had in years, calling to something long buried in her soul. The young woman looked to be on the cusp of thirty and possessed a fierce vibrancy that shone in the proud tilt of her head, the quicksilver grin she was sporting. Flame-red hair with yellow highlights was pulled into a braid that trailed over one shoulder. Proud profile and expressive eyes. She had to be Mystral Galbraith. Phoenix. A fitting name. She stood casually, calm and put-together in a black leather rider's jacket and understated stylish clothing that belied her wildly dyed hair. She held herself with graceful poise like a dancer and looked as if she could transform into something much different than what she was at that moment if the situation called for it. Ashe didn't realize she was staring until Mystral turned her head and their eyes locked. A jolt of something hot and electric shot through Ashe.

Desperate to regain her poise, Ashe twitched forward and introduced herself to the group.

"Nice to see you again," Joelle said at once while Mystral just nodded. "It's been a while since that night at Watchman's, hasn't it? I think I owe you a bottle of Canadian Club for drinking all of yours while talking your ear off and crying on your shoulder. Just so you know, you helped me out a lot. Anytime you're out and about, feel free to visit my bar to collect. There are always a lot of nice single ladies coming in, and I would be pleased to introduce you around if you like."

"Thanks for the offer," Ashe said as they took their seats around the low table, "But I don't go out anymore. I'm not looking to meet anyone right now either."

She didn't miss the sudden, knowing look Mystral threw in her direction.

Their eyes met once more and Ashe fought a sudden heat rising within her, stunned by the shock of fire the direct gaze brought. She also realized she'd just been outed. Although Ashe had to admit it was inevitable. Yakkun had always teased her about being a "walking coming out". In fact, Joelle had saved her the trouble of finding a way to bring it up herself.

"So how about getting us all up to speed," Yakkun said, all business as he faced Joelle. "You said Mystral was followed the other night, what else has been going on?"

Joelle started to speak, but Mystral silenced her with a quick glance. She put an envelope on the table and flicked it toward Yakkun.

"I'll start from the beginning," Mystral said. Her voice was unexpectedly low, smoky and sweet. The sound of her speaking alone sent a finger of warmth trailing down over Ashe's chest. She fought the feeling off as Mystral continued. "About three months ago I started getting letters. Not mailed but left places I was DJ-ing. I've put all of them in there. Also somebody was going around ripping up posters and scribbling things on them. Posters advertising events and stuff I was appearing at. I'm sorry, I didn't save any of those. They were just – wrecked."

"And then there was the phone call," Joelle said, her face drawn.

"Calls," Mystral said and hunched her shoulders. "There was another last Saturday night." Her head went down, her gaze lowered under the weight of fear. Ashe got a flash of absolute rage at the person responsible for doing this to her. Calls could be traced, letters could lead clues, particularly if they had some kind of identifying mark. If they were hand-delivered it could be a way to get the perp. Already her mind was working over the counter plan. Like it or not, Ashe was already committed to the case.

"All right, we'll get the details later," Yakkun said. "But right now I'd like to go over our service package and prices and all that. If it's all right, then we'll start making a plan."

"I'd like to know who's doing this," Mystral said. "This stalking bullsh—uh, stuff can stop right now. I'm sick of always looking over my shoulder."

"You've come to the right place, then," Yakkun said. He got out the usual forms, contract and payment terms. Ashe had seen it hundreds of times before so she tuned out as he went over the details. He didn't specifically say that Ashe would be working with them, but he left that open to interpretation. After the explanation, with a practiced ease that hadn't faded in her long absence, he and Ashe got up as one and went into the tea corner, leaving the two women alone in to discuss the terms with each other. Yakkun never wanted to take a case where the client felt pressured. There were too many things that could go wrong when they didn't have complete trust.

"So what do you say?" Yakkun fixed her with a long look. "You think you can take this?"

Ashe pressed her lips together and gave a quick nod. "But it's going to be on my terms."

"Fine. Anything you want."

"Good, because I have one stipulation," Ashe said. "I don't want to be paid for this. I'll let you know what I'm doing and all that. But I'm not a P.I. anymore and I shouldn't take money for acting like one. Besides, my other job gets salty if we have any additional income on the side and it will mess up my taxes."

While Yakkun's eyes widened in surprise, to his credit he didn't try and talk her out of it.

In the tea corner, Ashe pattered around with packets of sugar, which coincidentally put her just within earshot of the discussion. Mystral was speaking, the sweet, husky alto of her voice hushed and intimate.

"Look at the hourly rate, Joelle. Holy crap, if I'm going to pay that much for an hour of something, it's going to involve lube. Maybe fuzzy handcuffs."

"That's all right. I won't go bankrupt."

"But I don't feel right asking you to pay for this. It's way too expensive. I'll figure out something to do about the creepy stalker-dude. Or maybe I should just quit. My brother's always telling me I'm making myself a target by being, you know, conspicuous."

"No, quitting isn't the answer. I am not going to let you live like this for another day. Don't worry about the cost. Your safety is worth it."

"Why don't we just call the police?"

"Honey, you know they can't do anything until—something happens. We're going to do this our way, okay?"

"All right. Thanks, I owe you big time, Joelle."

"Oh no, it's the least I can do. I want to see the end of this as much as you do. You're the most popular DJ we have. I won't let anyone mess that up."

It was time to move. Yakkun gave Ashe a slight nod and she hefted the tray decorated with coffee-filled mugs and the incongruously delicate ceramic bowl that held their collection of sugars and creams. Pink and looking like a fancy flower basket, it had been a fixture in the office for as long as Ashe could remember.

"We've decided to hire your agency," Joelle said as Ashe put a mug down in front of her.

"Great," Yakkun said. "I'll get you a pen"

The explanation and necessary signing of things didn't take long.

"That's pretty much everything," Yakkun said. He folded up Joelle's copy of the contract and stuffed it into an envelope. "Do either of you have any questions before we call it a night?"

"I do," Mystral said. "What happens when you find the stalker? Would you go to the police?" She clasped her hands and edged closer to the table. "I mean, sending notes and stuff isn't really a crime. There doesn't seem like much they can do. The other night with the car, that was the first time things got—physical." Mystral shivered. Her fingers knit together and in a split second, Ashe wanted to reach out to her. Just as quickly, she crushed the desire.

"If a crime is committed," Yakkun said, "then we will definitely take the perp to the authorities. If we catch them before they've crossed that line, or if it looks like they're going to get away with a slap on the wrist, we'll bring them here for a little chat." He leaned back in his seat, face dangerously calm. "You

don't need to be present. In that talk, we'll discuss the error of their ways and have them sign a contract, complete with all ten of their fingerprints. They will leave with several rather good reasons not to bother you ever again. In the past, it has proven quite effective."

"That's a bit scary," Mystral said with a worried look on her face that spurred Ashe to speak.

"We don't threaten them," Ashe said quickly. "And we don't just toss them in the direction of the police station and forget about them. They'll get referred to a decent therapist, one that will let us know if they start skipping sessions."

"Yeah," Yakkun said. "Our job isn't finished until the threat is eliminated. Sometimes that means getting them the help they need."

"Sounds like you guys know what you're doing," Joelle said. "Yeah, we're pros," Yakkun said. "Anyway, is there anything else I can help you with? Any more questions?"

"Not right now," Mystral said. She glanced over at Joelle who shook her head.

"All right then. How are you two getting home?" Yakkun asked.

"I came on my motorcycle," Mystral said. "Joelle drove here too. We're parked in the lot behind the building."

"Motorcycle?" Yakkun asked. He sat up ramrod straight. Ashe raised an eyebrow and gave Mystral a long look, impressed that the rider's jacket wasn't just for show.

"What kind?" Yakkun's butt rose off the sofa as if he was slowly filling with helium.

"Kawasaki Ninja 400," Mystral replied with a proud grin. "My pride and joy. She's got a custom paintjob and everything."

"You know, I may have to inspect it." Yakkun edged out of the circle of conversation before he pelted toward his desk and rummaged around in it. He trotted back with his cell phone in his hands. "And maybe, oh I don't know, take my picture with it?"

"Sure thing."

"Okay, I'll go down with the two of you and see you off." Yakkun stuffed his arms into his jacket. "And Mystral, I'll follow you in my car, just to make sure you get home all right."

"Thanks," Mystral said.

"All right, see you later!" Yakkun said to Ashe as he herded the two women out of the office. Ashe could hear his cheerful voice echoing in the hallway as he lightly chatted with them.

Her part in the transaction over, Ashe backed out of the meeting cubby, feeling shaky and somewhat breathless. Without conscious thought, she slouched in the chair at her old desk. Shauna was busy at her computer and Ashe let her gaze rest on the reflection of the room in the windows, not seeing anything other than the troubled fog of her thoughts. That lasted all of three seconds before she decided to look over the evidence Mystral had given them.

Ashe retrieved the envelope and spilled the contents over her desk. The

summer had been full of Pride-related events and Mystral had been quite busy with appearances every weekend. Sometimes more than one a day. The calls and letters had all been tied in with events she'd appeared at. Whoever was doing this knew her schedule, but apparently not where she lived. That alone was a saving grace.

There were quite a few letters, white letter-paper folded in threes with a small message typed in the middle of them. A paper clip held a scrap of paper to them with scribbled memos of the date and time on them. The first several, all scattered through June and July were pretty tame, mostly compliments on the music she'd played. Most of the early letters mentioned that the sender was aware of some secret message Mystral had apparently communicated through her song selection with a lot of "I know you picked that song for us" kind of thing.

With a snort, Ashe leafed through them. It was starting to look like they had themselves a lonely delusional who saw something where nothing existed. The note that caught her attention had been received on August 15th, placed in the VIP room of the event Mystral had been working at. It read:

The spotlight doesn't deserve you.
There's a warmer place for you to be.
Walk away, leave it all behind.
There's a destiny waiting for you.

Due to perhaps Mystral's schedule slowing down, the next letter hadn't arrived until almost a month later, on September 10th. That one had been found in Mystral's bag after an event.

No matter how loudly they cheer,
the masses in front of you don't understand you.
They don't see what I do.
They would be fine with pennies but you give them diamonds.

Ashe took a break from delving into the mind of a stalker to rub a hand across her forehead where a headache was lurking. She leaned back in her chair to stare out of the window. She idly studied the streaming lights from the expressway and clasped her hands behind her head. She understood the reluctance to call in the authorities. Law enforcement didn't have the authority to arrest a person who hadn't yet committed a crime. The most they could do was issue a restraining order, which was difficult to do without knowing who exactly needed to be restrained.

Sitting up with a sigh and a squeal of the old chair, Ashe picked up the final letter that had arrived last Saturday, the 18th of September. According to Joelle, she had found it before Mystral did and held onto it until she was finished her set. Ashe shook out the paper and scanned it. Her lips twisted with distaste.

The lights blind and dirty you.
You don't see what's right in front of your face.
Step back, step away.
And take your rightful place in heaven.

The dull throbbing at her temples only got worse as Ashe studied the words. No spelling mistakes or obvious threats, but still something about the messages gave her a crawling feeling. Why did the stalker want Mystral to quit? Obviously they were fixated on her to the point where they saw some romantic connection or whatever, but why was it important to take Mystral away from the world she was such a part of? It could be a trap to lure her away from her friends and support system, Ashe guessed. As for the destroyed posters, Mystral had mentioned there were quite a few, but it was impossible to tell which ones were specifically related to this case and which were the work of random idiots.

After the letters, Ashe turned to the transcripts Mystral had provided of the phone calls. There had been two of them, on September 10th and 18th. They had both taken place at around 7:30 pm, before the events started and were quite short. The first one had been, "Don't go on tonight. You need to quit before it's too late." The second one was, "What did I tell you? Vanish before I make you." Now those were a bit more threatening-sounding. Mystral was positive the person calling had been male, but the only men allowed in the women's-only events she'd played at were drag queens hired to perform there and organizers, and all of them had their names and addresses on record. Even the bouncers were female. However, Mystral had played at a few gay-mix events and had appeared during the outdoor Pride festival and parade where anybody could have attended.

Ashe leaned back in her chair, which elicited a metallic creak and considered various scenarios. The stalker could be female but enlisting the help of a man to place the calls—someone who could either be implicitly trusted or was under some other form of coercion. Or the stalker could be male with a connection to the clubs. He could have bribed a bouncer or someone so he could sneak into woman's only events and leave notes for Mystral. With a grimace, Ashe discarded that idea. The events were pretty strict at keeping guys out, some of them even going so far as to bar any trans men who were no longer able to pass as the gender they'd been assigned at birth. He could be a drag queen with a fixation on DJs? Ashe mulled the idea and found it more amusing than anything. They could be working as a team, but as far as Ashe knew stalking was more of a solitary activity than a group sport. People with the ability to make friends rarely needed to resort to anonymous letters and threatening phone calls. It could even be a rival DJ, wanting to edge out the competition and giving it a weird, obsessive spin. There were too many possibilities.

Ashe shoved the letters away. She'd have to talk it over with Yakkun after they got some more leads and see what he thought; however, Mystral's safety was her first priority.

Lost in her thoughts, Ashe was startled back to the present by Yakkun dragging over a chair and plunking himself across from her. He'd obviously just returned from seeing Mystral home and radiated the sharp scent of the chill autumn night. The inner office was silent and Shauna was absent, probably getting herself a late dinner.

"I was thinking," he said without preamble, "that I would take over the investigative part of this case. Go through phone records, dig up stuff, and find out who's stalking Mystral from this side of the desk. Our ultimate goal is to find the perp and put an end to the issue, hopefully before any of this gets worse. Obviously, I'll also take care of all the billing, progress reports, and stuff like that."

"Good plan," Ashe said. While her P.I. license was still valid, she wasn't technically an employee of the company and wanted to keep her involvement removed from that aspect as much as she could.

Yakkun continued, "You'll take over with the day-to-day stuff. Escorting Mystral to gigs and making sure she's never a target. Keeping a shield between the perp and her. We know they've crossed the line into physical violence and it's our job to make sure they don't do it again. It might be a good idea to keep someone with her if she's going to be out and about."

Ashe processed that information in silence. She kept herself very still and willed herself not to think about Jessie. About what had and could go wrong. The only thing she should be concerned with was putting herself between Mystral and whoever was threatening her.

"I'd also like you to do any scouting we need behind the lines. You know, check around town and get into the nitty-gritty, behind-the-scenes details. Figure out all the players in this game."

"So I'm really going to have to play the dyke card, then."

"Ashe, you don't have to play it, you *own* it," he said with a grin. "Anyway, I'll send you Mystral's contact details. Give her a call and set up an appointment. While I did a quick check tonight, I want to do a thorough sweep of her place as soon as possible. See if it's bugged or anything. They didn't think the perp knows where she lives, but you can never be too careful about these things."

Ashe folded her long fingers around each other while she fought an irrational burst of excited nerves. She was not some love-struck teenager. The assignment was not personal. It was professional and she was going to make sure it stayed that way. With a brief farewell to Yakkun and Shauna, who had reappeared with a Styrofoam container from the deli across the street, Ashe left the cloying warmth of the building and shivered into the sudden chill of the night.

Chapter Three

THE NEXT DAY at noon, Ashe broke formation from the clumps of people heading toward the company's cafeteria and found a nice spot under a tree where she was out of the line of sight from the pair of buildings that made up Infra BC. She hiked up her skirt and revealed her black bicycle shorts to the world as she sat down cross-legged. Once comfortably ensconced, she dug out her cell phone, swiped in her code, and forced her fingers to make the call before she could think about anything other than the case.

"Hello," Mystral's voice said in her ear. Ashe gave an involuntary shiver at the intimacy of it.

"It's Ashe. I'd like to meet up and discuss some details."

"Sure. When's good for you?"

"Whenever you're free."

"Okay. How about tonight? I'll be done work about five and I don't have anything on after that. Is that all right with you?"

"Yeah, that's fine." The conversation wrapped up with a time and place for a meeting that evening. After she ended the call, Ashe realized she hadn't given herself time to go home and change. She'd have to show up to meet Mystral in that increasingly battered skirt and unflattering blouse. She squashed the dismay with a quick shake of her head. Ashe got up and impatiently batted bits of grass from her skirt. She muttered under her breath as she realized she'd somehow managed to get a run in her nylons. Ashe was surprised at her reluctance to go as she was, instead of what she had been. It wasn't like she needed to impress Mystral or cared what she thought. At least, that's what she assured herself.

The remainder of the lunch break was spent on the long set of concrete stairs behind the employee parking garage where Ashe jumped them three and four at a time and practiced landings until her annoyingly narrow-banded watch told her she was in danger of being late. After she yanked her skirt down to cover her shorts, she fed herself a granola bar en route back to the squat prisonlike building that housed the administrative division of the company.

Only a few more hours and she would be with Mystral. Thinking about the young woman, remembering her smile and the way she looked at Ashe, made the idea of going back into that building not as dismal as usual, and Ashe didn't feel too bad at all as she joined the last stragglers coming back from their after lunch cigarettes.

That evening, Ashe strode through the old shopping arcade toward the meeting place. The setting sun cast the scene into a golden pink glow, and Ashe felt like she'd stepped into an old movie. Some of the shops that lined the main promenade were already closed with their shutters down, but here and there enterprising businesspeople took advantage of the post-office crowd and

remained open. The lights from their shop windows cast yellow squares over the tiled pedestrian avenue. Ashe checked the scribbled memo in her leather-bound notebook before she turned and headed down a side street. She found Mystral sitting next to a man in a wheelchair in front of a small building. The words "Helping Hand" were posted on the window. The man's arms and legs were stunted and doll-like in his child-sized jeans and sweatshirt. Behind his glasses, his eyes were kind and he looked to be about the same age as Mystral. Ashe wondered what their connection was. For an irrational moment, the possibility of a romantic interest sent a jarring burst of something resembling jealousy through her.

Both of them held cans of beer and as Ashe approached, Mystral turned to her and waved. A big smile broke over her features. The expression filled her face with light, making it impossible not to respond. Serious, she was nice-looking, but smiling she was absolutely stunning.

Ashe fought the shock that rippled through her at Mystral's transformation and found herself smiling back. She forgot about the nasty, snide comments Pam had muttered behind her back all day and the hopeless futility of a job that was wearing down her soul like the bottom of an old shoe. She almost forgot about the ugly fettering skirt she was wearing too until her loping strides nearly ripped the remaining stitches of the back seam out in her eagerness to close the distance between them.

"Hey Ashe," Mystral said and slid over on the bench in a tacit invitation as Ashe came up to them. "I hope you don't mind if Thomas is here. When that crazy stalker was chasing me he let me hide out in his shop, incidentally saving my butt. So I decided to repay him in beer. I brought enough for everyone if you want one too." She indicated a cooler at her feet.

"Sounds good," Ashe said. She looked over at the man and held out her hand. "Ashe Devon. I assume Mystral told you why I'm here?"

"Yes she did. Thomas Griffen at your service," he said and grasped Ashe's hand in a firm grip. "I'm not on the clock right now. Just thought I'd get that cleared up right away.

"That's all right, I'm not the fun police," Ashe said.

"Good to know. Don't be a stranger, pull up a chair. Or in my case, just pull up." He waved his beer as Ashe folded her long legs and sat down beside Mystral.

In the cooler, several cans were nestled between reusable blue icepacks and Ashe helped herself to one. She took a swallow of her beer and savored the taste. It was very nice, a locally brewed stout. Not too heavy and left a clean, slightly sweet aftertaste behind. Like summer molasses.

"Should I leave the two of you alone?" Thomas asked. He started to roll his chair over to the front door of the building.

"If you don't mind," Ashe said.

"Here, take one for the road." Mystral passed Thomas a can from the cooler.

"Don't mind if I do." He tucked it between his thigh and the arm of the wheelchair and took his leave.

"Before we go any further, these are the rules," Ashe said in a hard voice. "You follow them and we're in business. Don't, and there's nothing I can do for you. Got it?"

With a nervous expression that sent a shock of sympathy through Ashe's chest, Mystral said, "Got it."

"First, don't engage the stalker." Ashe had to steel herself to get the words out. "Don't try to talk to them if they call. Don't answer any letters and for God's sake, do not ever agree to meet them anywhere. Let us make any contact that has to be made. Okay?"

"No problem there."

"Second, let me or Yakkun know the moment anything happens. If you get a note or a call or think you're being followed. Even if you have a creepy feeling. It doesn't matter how small or how stupid you think it is. Trust your gut."

Mystral nodded, her face set and back straight. The nervousness was gone. In its place was a pillar of strength.

"Finally, this can get pretty deep. We may have to shine lights into places you don't want anyone to see. It may be hard, but you're going to have to trust us. Be honest and don't hide things from us and we'll get you through this. Can you do that?"

"Yeah," Mystral said. She didn't waver as she spoke, "I trust you."

"All right, talk to me," Ashe said. "Any idea who's stalking you? An ex-boyfriend? Ex...girlfriend?" She looked up and met Mystral's gaze.

"Oh God." She leaned back against the wall with a wry grin. "I honestly have no idea who could be doing this, but yeah, I do have a few ex-girlfriends."

"Let's take a walk." Ashe put her can down and stood. Mystral followed her as they wandered through the mostly deserted arcade. "Tell me about them. Any you dumped?"

"The last one," Mystral said. She stuffed her hands in her pockets.

"When was this?"

"About four months ago." Mystral took a deep breath before continuing, "She told me her name was Lily, and no I don't know her last name. Or if her name really was Lily. She was a fucking liar and I was just a gullible mark." She spat the words out with force.

Even though Ashe sympathized, she continued in a businesslike tone, "Do you have any way to contact her? Do you know where she lives?"

"I know which bus stop is close to her home. We would meet up there and she'd drive us somewhere," Mystral said. "She never invited me to her place."

"Any reason for that?" Ashe gave Mystral a sideways glance. "She's married. I knew that from the start. She told me the marriage was a sham. It was in name only and there was nothing physical going on. She also told me her husband drank and gambled and that he had a piece on the side too. I believed her and I felt sorry for her being trapped in that situation." Mystral shook her head and let out a long sigh. "I was okay with it all until this one day I went out to meet her, like usual, and she shows up with these two kids in the car. I think they

were like three and five. Lily was so cool about it, laughing and acting like it was the most normal thing ever. She made some excuse about her mother being sick so she couldn't take them." Mystral stopped and faced Ashe squarely. "I know I'm a horrible person for going after someone else's wife, but I never wanted to wreck anyone's family. It was my fault for not asking straight out, just taking what she told me at face value. I was a complete idiot."

"Trusting someone isn't idiotic."

"It's water under the bridge now," Mystral said. "Sexless marriage my ass, unless that was the second coming of the messiah. And third."

"It's possible, but not likely," Ashe said.

"It was so surreal," Mystral said with a humorless laugh. "We went to this Italian place and I'm trying to choke down my spaghetti when all I want to do is puke it up. The littlest one is just so happy with her ravioli but the five-year-old is looking at me, like he's trying to figure out what my deal is. All I can think of is: will this kid remember today being the day he met his mom's 'special friend'? Is this going to be one of those incidents that eventually add up to make him realize his entire life is a fucked-up game of pretend? Is this going to be one of those things that he's going to have to deal with or turn into a psychopath later on?"

"So you broke it off?"

"Yeah. I put on this normal façade until she dropped me off at the bus stop and I looked her right in the eye and said, like in a conversational way so hopefully the kids wouldn't get weirded out, 'It's over. Don't ever contact me again.' And that was that."

"Are you in contact with her now?"

"No. I think eventually she got it that I never wanted to have anything to do with her again. She was a bit smothering sometimes, a little obsessive but I thought she was over me. Maybe I was wrong." Mystral turned to Ashe with haunted eyes. "Honestly Ashe, I don't think it's her. I know the ending was pretty bad, but we had some good times. I really," she faltered, "I really thought I was special to her. We were, you know, special to each other."

Unable to explain the sudden sharp pain that lanced through her chest, Ashe kept her expression neutral, her voice steady. "How did you meet her?"

"Through this online community called 'Babysteps'. I, um, I guess you've heard of it?"

Ashe nodded. She'd never used it, but she understood the site was a way for women to meet each other for discreet rendezvous and that kind of thing. She took note of the username Mystral gave her for future reference. She'd have Yakkun do a search and see what he could dig up. Exes were obvious suspects. Exes' husbands even more. However the letters and the transcript of the phone calls didn't fit the profile of a jealous partner and logically should have stopped with the end of the relationship.

Mystral rubbed a hand over the sheepish look on her face. "I don't usually do the online dating thing, but you know how it is. Sometimes you just..." She

trailed off.

"That's all right. You don't need to justify anything to me," Ashe said in her best professional tone. She paused before she added in a soft voice, "Because I get it." And she did. That had been the most honest thing she had said to Mystral until that point. Sometimes the emptiness got too much. The tiny, incestuous community too suffocating. Sometimes you wanted to meet someone who wasn't your ex's ex.

At Ashe's words, Mystral looked up and their gazes locked. The world around them slowed and stopped. The bottom dropped out of her belly and Ashe's breath caught in her throat. The spell was broken by Mystral glancing away.

Mystral's voice was dull and emotionless as she said, "After we split up, Lily sent me a bunch of messages on the site."

"What kind of messages?" Ashe struggled to regain her composure even as her heart pounded.

"Just the usual, begging me to rethink my decision, wanting to meet up and whatever. I didn't respond after the first one and after a while the messages stopped. Kind of petered out. I haven't logged in for ages, though, so I don't really know what she's doing now. I hope she's doing okay, though." Mystral shook her head with a sigh and gave Ashe a quick glance. "Lily deserves happiness, and I really hope she finds someone who can give her that." A change came over her face. Mystral took a quick step forward that was almost a skip. She turned around and gave Ashe a grin with a playful light in her eyes. "But I am over married women. No more of that for me. I don't wanna share, and sneaking around is too stressful. Give me a single, smoking hot, unashamed woman-lovin' woman anytime. Gold star respected but not required. Know someone who fits the bill?" Mystral's eyes were dancing, her smile infectious and compelling. She leaned in close to Ashe and almost brushed up against her arm. Ashe stepped back to shut down the electric thrill of possibility Mystral's words and proximity stirred up.

"Does anyone else come to mind?" Ashe asked. "Like a persistent fan? Someone who comes to your events, who you see every time, maybe front and center. Or maybe hanging around the back?"

"I don't know," Mystral said. "I can't really tell who's out there. When I'm on the stage, the lights make it hard to see much more than just what's right in front of me. Also, I get into this headspace I like to call the zone and everything else just disappears. Of course nobody takes down names or anything. They only check IDs for people who seem really underage, and sometimes not even then."

"How about people trying to give you things? Flowers or whatever."

Mystral hummed to herself for a moment before she replied, "I get some gifts and stuff sometimes, but not really all that often and just from people running the events. Like, every time I do a gig at a club called the Trench, the club owner gives me a bouquet. Last time it was this gigantic pink thing, like a cotton candy factory exploded." She laughed. Ashe's stoic mask slipped and

she was unable to resist smiling along with Mystral. "His boyfriend is a florist and always goes way overboard. I made Joelle load it into her car and take it home with her. She's more into that girly shit than me. A couple times people have offered to drive me home or something, but I always refuse. Nobody's really asked more than once though."

"When's your next event?"

"Next Saturday. It's a women's-only event called Diamond Virgins." Mystral stopped and rummaged around in her bag. She pulled out a promotional postcard and handed it to Ashe. "Here's the info. It'll have rockin' tunes courtesy of me, a drag show, and a raffle too." She looked up with a quick, unaffected grin that sent a shot of heat through Ashe's chest. "Want to go?"

"Yes, I think that would be a good idea," Ashe said. While she was uneasy at the thought of braving a gay club event after her long absence, she was interested in seeing Mystral in action. Hopefully she'd also get some idea about who was stalking her and why. Drag queens were notorious for knowing all the ins and outs of the scene and maybe one of them had noticed something Mystral hadn't.

"You know, Ashe, I've never seen you around," Mystral said as they turned and began heading back to Helping Hand. "I take it you're not really into clubbing."

"No, not for a long time," Ashe said in a guarded tone.

"Any reason for that?" Mystral used Ashe's words on her. Her voice was soft and gentle. "Is it too loud? Too many people squashed into too-small space?"

Ashe found herself without her usual barriers.

"No, I just got tired of it all," Ashe said with a shrug. The two of them fell into a comfortable rhythm as they walked side-by-side down the long arcade. "I was tired of the lying, the secrecy. The way people just appear and vanish so easily. I was looking for something that can't survive in an environment like that."

"Things have changed Ashe, even over the past few years. And things are still changing," Mystral said. She paused before she continued, her sweetly husky voice low, "So I take it you don't have anyone special in your life?"

The words took Ashe by surprise and she stopped in her tracks.

As her arms flapped around, Mystral blurted out, "Uh, I mean if that's all right to ask. I take that question back. Actually I was just trying to see if my foot still fit in my mouth and yes it does."

Ashe bit down on the urge to laugh. "It's all right and I don't."

"Okay, good to know that. I was asking not for personal reasons but because I wanted to know if I had to get two passes to Diamond Virgins that's all. Really."

They had returned to the starting point of their journey. Ashe picked up her warmish beer and held the can loosely.

"Are you going to finish that?" Mystral asked her. "If not, I can dump it in the sink."

"I don't want to waste it," Ashe said weakly. "But I am driving."

"No problem," Mystral said. Her eyes danced as she took the can from Ashe. With a look of enjoyment that did something odd to Ashe's belly, Mystral swiped her tongue into the line of beer Ashe's sip had left before she fastened her mouth on it and chugged the rest down. Mystral lowered the can with a happy sigh and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand as Ashe boggled at her. "Waste not want not!" she sang out.

Ashe was still blinking in shock as Mystral collected her cooler and poked her head into Thomas's office, where he greeted her with a corny joke.

"Come on man, have some class," Mystral groaned. "Or at least tell a joke that's funny."

"It is funny!" he protested as he wheeled over to the entranceway. "You need to get your sense of humor tuned up is all."

"Yeah, right! Anyway, I just wanted to leave these beers here," she said. "The cooler's heavy enough as it is without all these cans in it."

"It's my pleasure to lighten your load," Thomas said. He rolled back to let Mystral into the small office. "The fridge's in the back there. Just shove the milk over and stuff them in anywhere."

Ashe came in as well and had a look around. The room was taken up mostly by a long table loaded with boxes of pamphlets and the walls were decorated with posters from community outreach events and flea markets. As Mystral made happy clattering noises in the cubby that served as a combination of kitchen as well as general administration space, Ashe leaned back against the wall and fixed Thomas with a long look.

"About what you did for Mystral," she said. "Thank you."

"It was nothing any decent person wouldn't've done." He shrugged. "I was working late when Mystral came knocking at my door with that car barreling down on her."

"Did you get a look at the car?"

"No," he said. "It shone the high beams right into my eyes before going away. I want to say it was a light color, and not sporty or anything, like a regular car or a sedan, but I can't really be sure. Sorry I can't be more help."

"That's all right," Ashe said. She made herself relax her posture. "So what do you do here?"

"This?" With a proud gesture, Thomas indicated the room. "Like the sign outside says, this is a volunteer center. People who have some extra time and want to help out come here and we figure out what they can do. I basically match people up with volunteer opportunities. It's a registered NPO and I have six parttimers who come in and help out during the day. I'm mostly here alone, though. I keep odd hours, which I guess is a good thing."

"It certainly is," Ashe said. Her phone buzzed and she held up a hand to excuse herself as she ducked out of the front door. It was Yakkun. "Hey, what's the news?"

"Not much, are you with Mystral?"

"Yeah. I was getting some background info and have a lead for you."

"Sounds good. Are you at her place?"

"No, we're outside. Why?"

"I thought I'd do the bug sweep tonight and I want you to be there too," he said.

"Sure. I'll let Mystral know and see you there in half an hour or so?"

"Okay, later!"

She ended the call just as Mystral came out of the building. "If it's all right, Yakkun wants to check out your place tonight."

"Tonight?" A worried frown furrowed her brow as Mystral said, "Well, it's kind of a mess but all right. He did say he wanted to do that right away. And I want to make sure there's nothing there too. Not that anything of interest ever happens at my place, but still."

"How are you getting home? If you drove, I'll walk you to your vehicle and follow you from there. It's pretty dark and you've got luggage."

"Thanks, but I actually took the bus here. I wasn't sure how many beers I'd end up drinking," Mystral said.

"Fair enough. I'll give you a lift then."

Mystral paused as Ashe began to walk away. "Do you think it's dangerous to go out by myself?"

Ashe slowed her steps so Mystral could keep up with her.

"It depends on where you're going and how late you'll be there," Ashe said. "Of course you can request an escort at any time and I think it would be better if you did. If you're out alone, try to keep an eye open, looking for anybody who seems suspicious. Use evasive tactics. Wait until the light is about to change and then dash across at the last second, looking both ways of course." Ashe gave her a sideways glance. "See if anybody on the other side gets uppity and tries to cross as well. Things like that."

"Very secret agent," Mystral said. She stopped to boost the cooler in her hands with one knee.

Ashe fought the instinct to offer to take the load. She needed to have her hands free in case anybody got in their way and needed to be taken out. They got into Ashe's truck and soon Ashe was pulling onto the road. Mystral had the cooler balanced on her lap. She folded her arms on the lid and rested her head on her crossed wrists. She looked alert and hauntingly beautiful, her clean profile illuminated by the passing streetlights. Her lips were softly full and looked like they would taste like heaven.

With a guilty jolt, Ashe killed that last thought and concentrated on the road. She followed Mystral's directions and left her truck in one of the visitor's spots on the first floor parking garage of Mystral's apartment building. Ashe approved of the auto-lock system but not really the bank of labeled mailboxes that stood outside the doors. Ashe looked around for security cameras and found none. En route to the stairwell, she took a brief detour to find the back entrance to the bicycle and scooter parking area, which Mystral assured her was only accessible with a key given to each resident. Ashe surveyed the mismatched collection of two-wheeled vehicles ranging from collapsible bicycles to scooters with one sleek, powerful motorcycle parked at the far end

of the line. The streamlined body was a deep, burnished blue emblazoned with silver and purple streaks. Mystral trotted over to it and draped herself over it in a proud and possessive way.

"This is my baby," Mystral said from her pose on the padded seat. Ashe drew in a breath. She had to admit the machine was a fine piece of engineering. Beautiful, powerful, and unique. Just like its owner. The thought dawned before Ashe could stop it.

"Very nice," Ashe told her. "I bet Yakkun got a kick out of this."

"He sure did," Mystral said. "I thought your boss was going to blow a gasket when I introduced the two of them. He made me promise to let him take Midnight for a spin someday. And he made Joelle take about a hundred pics of him posing with it. I would have, but I was busy laughing."

"Sorry about him," Ashe said with a grimace. "Yakkun gets a bit carried away sometimes."

"That's okay, I understand. I was the same way when I first brought her home." She ran a hand over the shining body with a tenderness that brought an unaccustomed heat to Ashe's face. Mystral straightened up and said, "Anyway, I'm up on the third floor."

After Mystral took one more long, loving glance at her motorcycle, she closed and locked the door behind them. Ashe mentally filed away the layout of the building as they walked up an open stairwell to the third floor. It overlooked a small garden in the center of the building, green and lush with bushes and a flowering berry-like plant.

"The owner lives here too and she takes care of the garden," Mystral said as Ashe paused to peer over the railing. "I think that's the real reason she keeps this place."

"It's nice," Ashe said.

When they reached the third floor, Mystral led them over to a sturdy door marked 302. It didn't have a letter slot, but it did have a peephole, Ashe noted.

"Home sweet home," Mystral said. She put the cooler down and unlocked the front door.

"Let me go in first," Ashe said, already jumping into 'bodyguard' mode although it was most likely unnecessary given the secure nature of the building. She didn't want to take any chances. "Don't worry, I don't care about the state of the place." Mystral hung back as Ashe opened the door and went into the dark room.

Thin orange light filled the room from the streetlights outside the windows and Ashe waited until her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Once she had a hazy idea of the layout, she found a light switch and flipped it on. The room was bigger than she'd expected. She paused in the entrance hall to kick off her uncomfortable low-heeled work pumps before she stepped into the room. Inside, Ashe made a quick tour. The walls were bare concrete but plants and posters gave the room a warm feel. The apartment was on the top floor of the building and the ceiling was high and sloped with a skylight facing south. It was a studio with a door leading to what Ashe assumed was the bathroom. The

kitchen was in one corner, open plan with an island. A single stool was pulled up to the island, which evidently served as Mystral's table. The counter sported a vintage-looking red toaster flanked by a plastic-wrapped loaf of bread in a wicker basket and a little tray loaded with jewel-like jam jars of all different colors. She could picture Mystral perched there, making herself a nice stack of toast and sipping coffee from the potbellied mug in the drain-board.

A sofa took up most of the middle of the room with a crocheted blanket thrown over it that looked handmade. One side of the sofa held a mountain of books, the other a flattened pile of cushions that looked like a lovely place to pass a lazy afternoon reading. Across from the sofa was a sleek turntable on a table loaded with an array of sound equipment that Ashe assumed was related to Mystral's DJ activities. A shelf full of records behind the table was also a testament to Mystral's musical interests. The bed in the far corner was low and unmade, and the room had a comfortable, lived-in feel. Quite different from Ashe's own, sterile apartment.

"Is everything okay? Can I come in?" The soft voice behind her made Ashe jump.

"Sure. Just wait in the entrance. I'll be done in a minute." She finished her check by quickly opening the door and finding it did in fact lead to a compact but well-kept bathroom. A single toothbrush and tubes of facewash and toothpaste stood in a little glass jar by the sink. It had shells glued to it and looked handmade as well. The curtain to the bathtub was pulled back and Ashe saw that Mystral favored a kind of shampoo that declared itself both organic as well as cruelty free. A vine sprouted from a pot on the sill of the frosted glass window over the toilet and trailed down the wall. A few postcards of faraway places and retro-looking pinup girls decorated the walls and a rack held a selection of reading material ranging from music magazines to a few publications Ashe was certain would not be found in any but the most progressive of libraries.

Something about being in Mystral's personal space made Ashe feel close to her. This was her own safe place, and it seemed as if she didn't let many people into it. Ashe knew what that was like, and she hoped Mystral didn't resent the intrusion. The intimacy was both compelling and unnerving.

Ashe returned to where Mystral was hovering in the doorway and said, "Sorry for keeping you waiting. It's all right to come in."

"Great." After she locked the door behind herself, Mystral put down the cooler and sank into the sofa. She kicked off her shoes and gave a stretch that had Ashe twitching to look elsewhere. "Oops, where are my manners, do you want to sit down?" Mystral jumped up and started moving the pile of books to the coffee table. "Can you tell I haven't really had guests in a while?" she joked. "When's Mr. Yamaguchi getting here? Can I get you a coffee or something while we wait?"

"You can call him Yakkun. He won't be much longer I think," Ashe said. She hovered by the door with her hands stuffed in her pockets, unwilling to surrender herself to that soft, inviting spot on the sofa next to Mystral. "And

I'm fine, thanks. Go ahead and get yourself something if you want to."

"Nah, I'm all right." Mystral poked the tip of her tongue out as she tried to make a large book stay on the tottering pile on the table, but it kept tipping over. The cover was gold-embossed and looked expensive.

"What's that?" Ashe couldn't help but cross the room.

"The Perverted Adventures of Horny McSluttybutt," Mystral said deadpan. "Volume two of the illustrated edition."

"A very good book," Ashe said in the same vein. "Actually, I'm a fan of the entire series." She leaned forward and looked at the cover, which was showing a gorgeously decorated cake. The title read *Champion Cakes and Confections*. On further inspection, it appeared that most of the books stacked on the coffee table featured cakes. With that, Ashe did sit down on the sofa. "Are you a baker?"

"Cake decorator," Mystral said. She waved a hand around, "Do you think I could afford to live in such gorgeous accommodations on the peanuts a DJ makes?"

"How does decorating balance with your gig schedule?"

"Not too bad, actually." Mystral curled up on her half of the sofa and looked most comfortable. The lingering anxiety that had clouded her face was gone and she spoke with ease. "I don't actually bake the cakes, even though I studied and can do it if I have to. Pierre Gallant's the baker. He owns a shop downtown and takes orders for weddings and parties and things like that. He lets me know the deadlines and does the prep work. I can't work until the cakes are cooled anyway so I have a bit of leeway. I go into the bakery whenever I want and he's got a little room set up for me in the back and lets me keep all my stuff in there."

"Do you often work at night?"

"Not too often, but when we're busy or have something big like a wedding I do."

"Let me know your schedule then," Ashe said.

"Okay." Mystral leaned her body off the sofa to rummage around in her bag and came up with her cell phone. She tapped at the screen then put it down with a grin. "I sent you my schedule. I've only got two orders this week so far, so I'm not going to be going in every day unless something last-minute comes up."

Ashe felt her phone buzz. "Thanks. What time does the bakery usually close?"

"Pierre tries to get everyone out and cleanup done by five. He usually starts super early in the morning so he doesn't like staying late. I'm pretty much always there until six or later."

"In that case, I'll meet you there when you finish and see you home. If possible, I don't want you moving around too much after dark. At least not alone."

"Yeah, good idea."

"How about the people you work with there? Anyone giving you a strange vibe or anything?"

"Pierre has a bunch of college kids in doing part-time work. Mostly students from the Culinary Institute in Vancouver. They're all good people," Mystral said, face drawn and brow furrowed. "Busy, too. I can't imagine any of them having enough free time to stalk anyone, let alone me."

At the flash of unease, the shift in posture the words brought, Ashe cursed herself. Mystral had her arms crossed, hugging herself, thoughts drawn inward.

The tense mood struck Ashe. "I bet you don't get a lot of double-wife wedding cake orders," she said in as light a tone as she could muster.

"Not too many but we get more than you'd think," Mystral said. "Pierre's is pretty much the only place in town that has an 'anything goes' policy. Plus, I personally give a ten percent discount for non-traditional weddings. Doing my best to assist the winds of change in any way I can." She flashed Ashe a mischievous grin, the fear banished.

Ashe wanted to grin back as she settled against the sofa cushions. Almost too late, Ashe remembered to keep her knees together so her skirt wouldn't go riding up. She felt more relaxed than she had any right to be. It was nice, being there with Mystral's warm presence beside her. A beeping sound from the intercom at the door jolted her out of her musings and back to the present. Mystral rose with a graceful motion and crossed the room and pressed the button.

"Hey folks, it's me!" Yakkun's voice came over the intercom. "Let me in."

"Sure thing. Come on up."

Mystral buzzed him in and soon there was a knock at the door. Ashe recognized the particular rhythm Yakkun favored as his signature knock. *Shave and a haircut...* Ashe first checked through the peephole then opened the door to find Yakkun and a compact scanner in his hands.

"Sorry I'm a bit late," he said. "There was a traffic jam on Route 1 into Burnaby. Cows crossing."

"At this time of night? You should've taken the Victoria Way," Ashe said, hands on her hips.

"Hey Yakkun, how are you doing?" Mystral looked up from the cake book she was leafing through and waved.

"Hey right back at you. And don't mind me, I'll just be checking things out," Yakkun said. "The building looks pretty secure from the outside, but you can never be sure some dumbass isn't going to be fooled by a fake deliveryman."

"That's true," Mystral said with a grimace. "Any cameras in the entrance?"

"No," Mystral said. "Most people in the building are kind of out there and want to keep off the radar as much as possible."

"Got it," Yakkun said. He looked as if he didn't really like that information.

"Keep your deadbolt locked when you're here," Ashe said. Mystral nodded before she turned her attention to her book.

She absently wound a long strand of flame-red hair around her finger as she read. Yakkun wandered around the apartment and waved the antenna of the scanner around. It made a few chirps and at one point gave out a kind of electric squeal.

"I hope that's not a perv-o-meter," Mystral called out, not looking up from the memo she was writing in the margin of her book. "Because you'll have to stay away from the bedroom corner over there. It's got my unlawfully-

acquired panty collection. Don't mind any of the girl-on-girl porn stash either. And no, you can't borrow any of it."

"I thought I was getting a spike in the readings," Yakkun said over his shoulder. "Damn, girl, what have you got stashed in here? I'm about to order an exorcism."

Ashe stifled a snicker with her hand and allowed herself to focus on Mystral as she sat with her sock feet curled up underneath herself, engrossed in her book. Cool one minute and cute and funny the next, Ashe was finding it hard to think of her as just another client. But she had to. She took a breath and stilled her thoughts. She had to shut down that compelling whisper before it could breathe life into the emotion rising within her. Mystral *was* just another client.

"Have you had any work done here lately?" Yakkun asked from the kitchen. "Any plumbers or electricians?"

"Besides the, er personal massage girls I order for myself," Mystral said, "Nobody's been in here since I moved in. I go down to the front door for any deliveries. And just so you know, I was joking about the massage girls."

"Yeah, I thought so," Yakkun's voice came from the echoing depths of the bathroom. He poked his head out and said with a grin, "Why pay for something when you can do it yourself?"

"Exactly. And if you want to be like, on a date, you can use your left hand."

"I'm already left-handed," Yakkun said, looking downcast. "I guess I've graduated to 'married' by now."

"Use your feet then," Mystral replied airily. "God, do I have to teach you everything?"

Looking from one to the other, Ashe suppressed the urge to laugh outright. Was Mystral really joking with Yakkun about what she thought they were? They interacted with a casual ease like they were old friends instead of private investigator and stalking victim.

"Thick walls," Yakkun said. He tapped his knuckle on the nearest one. "How come?"

"Soundproofing. With the conservatory just a block away, most people here are musicians," Mystral said. Her lips quirked into a mischievous grin as she said, "It's kind of a waste for me because I'm always here alone, but at least I get to play my tunes without bothering anyone."

"Nice. Who knows where you live?" Yakkun asked.

"Besides the bakery where I work and the pizza delivery place, pretty much nobody else," Mystral said. "I don't give out my address and I prefer to keep my apartment date-free if you know what I mean. I don't have to bother keeping it presentable. Or hiding all the incriminating evidence of my diseased mind."

"Yeah, those are pretty good reasons," Yakkun said. He adjusted something on his scanner and gave a nod. "Done. Good news, the place is clean, but keep a lookout for any new plugs or if someone's been messing with the outlets. That's where bugs usually get put." He came over and hovered over the cluttered coffee table. "And just to be safe, I wouldn't let anyone in

here who isn't us for the time being."

"Not a problem." Mystral closed her book and sat up. "I don't really have any plans for wild Tupperware parties slash orgies or anything like that. Not this month anyway."

"We're good then." Yakkun wrestled his scanner into the bulky canvas bag.

Ashe got to her feet and said, "We won't bother you anymore. Have a good night."

"Actually, um." Mystral jumped up. The motion brought them far too close to each other. If Ashe just reached out, she could take Mystral in her arms. Their breaths mingled and Ashe took a step back. Her blood sang in her veins even as she fought against the electricity that raced through her. Seemingly unaffected, Mystral continued, "I was planning to go out shopping on Friday and I was wondering if I could ask for one of you guys to come with me. I mean, it's not like I'll be in a super-deserted area but I don't want to tempt fate."

"Good idea. I'll escort you." With a curt nod, Ashe dug out her cell phone in preparation. Friday. That was two days away. Of course she was supposed to be at work, but Mystral took priority. The company would not go bankrupt if the least capable scheduler took a day or two off. "What time should I pick you up?"

"I don't know, how about nine-ish? There's this place that sells used records and I want to be there early so I don't miss out on any good stuff." Mystral tilted her head. "Actually how about meeting me at the Book and Browse coffee shop? There's no need for you to come all the way out here. It's on Ridgeway and Wallace."

"I'll be there," Ashe said. She wasn't able to meet Mystral's gaze but still felt its weight on her. Ashe forced her shaking fingers to make the entry. She stuffed the phone back into her bag. "I'll see you on Friday then. Make sure you lock the door behind me," she said.

"Sure thing!"

Ashe let herself out and found Yakkun already in the hallway. She paused long enough to hear the deadbolt slide into place behind her before she followed Yakkun's clattering footsteps down the stairwell.

Chapter Four

THURSDAY WAS SPENT faking an oncoming cold and Ashe wrangled a few days off to “recuperate” with a promise to resume her usual schedule sometime into the next week. However, if the situation called for it, Ashe was prepared to come down with pneumonia. If that failed to buy her the time she needed, she could always get struck by lightning. Luckily Yakkun was brilliant at forging doctors’ notes.

On Friday morning, Ashe rose with the sun. Unable to stay still, she dressed and headed over to Yamaguchi Investigations where she found Yakkun nursing a big mug of coffee and tapping away at his computer. Kieran was yawning by the door and froze with his mouth wide open. His face went as red as the curly mass of hair on his head. She ignored him and slung herself down in front of Yakkun’s desk.

“How’s the investigation going?” Ashe asked.

“Not too bad,” Yakkun said. “Gus is following up on the phone numbers. Seems to be from two different pay phones in the same area. If we can narrow it down a bit more I’m going to put him on a stakeout to see if we can get the perp that way. Maybe ask around a bit and see if anybody’s noticed anything.”

“Sounds good,” Ashe said. “Let me know if Gus needs any help.”

“Will do. Plus, I made an account at Babysteps and found this Lily person. Looks like she’s still trawling for fresh meat. Hopefully she likes me.”

“You’re not posing as a gay woman online, are you?” Ashe choked.

“It’s the easiest way to get to her, see if she’s the stalker,” Yakkun said. He leaned back in his chair with that air of casual innocence that said he was up to no good. “Besides, I’ve always thought I was a lesbian trapped in a man’s body.”

“What happens if she wants to meet up in person?”

“Well, that’s where you come in,” Yakkun said with a grin. “Don’t worry, I’ve added all of our messages so far to the group so you can know what we’ve been talking about. Get into character for long enough to get her to drop her guard.”

With a disbelieving shake of her head, Ashe picked up her phone and logged into their secure group. She scanned the back-and-forth conversation and had to admit, Yakkun did have a knack for getting into people’s heads. He was a consummate bullshitter.

“Why am I a surfer?” Ashe asked in disbelief. “Couldn’t you have thought up an easier hobby?”

“See I wanted her to be thinking of you in a bathing suit,” he said. He grabbed up his mug and slurped from it. “Or a wetsuit, I guess. Get it? Wet! Oh, by the way, do you happen to have any nice photos of yourself? Nothing X-rated, but between PG-13 and R would be great. Just send them to my account here. I promise I won’t use them for...personal reasons.” He wagged his eyebrows at her.

Ashe groaned. She didn't bother to answer as she stalked away from his desk. She headed over to her old one without thinking about it.

"I heard you were back." Kieran's voice behind her caused Ashe to jump.

"Just for this one case," Ashe said. She forced her fingers to relax before she hit something—or someone. "Don't bother changing the letterhead or anything."

"That's too bad," Kieran said. "You were always a damn fine investigator."

"Not the last case," Ashe said. There was a thick bitterness in her throat. She stood and shouldered past him. "Anyway, I've got an early appointment taking Mystral shopping today."

"Later tater," Yakkun called from his desk, already immersed in his work.

ASHE ARRIVED AT the coffee shop early. She got a cup of coffee she didn't really want to justify her presence and had only taken two sips when a shadow fell across the table. She looked up from the magazine she wasn't reading and Mystral greeted her with a smile and wave. She was wearing a cheerful purple knitted cap which clashed with the subdued colors of her outfit. Bright strands of hair stuck out from under the cap, framing her face and giving her a sweet, tousled air.

"Do you want a coffee or anything before we start?" Ashe asked although she was already shrugging into her jacket, a slim-fitting leather fencing-style that she'd worn into a comfortable fit. Annoyed by her outgrown hair as usual, she'd stuck it into a clip. Already a bunch of stray hairs had escaped and were determined to get into her mouth.

"No, that's all right," Mystral said. "The record store's opening soon and I want to beat the crowd. I've got a coupon and everything! Oh and I did that green light dash thing you told me so I'm pretty sure nobody's following me. I also fell off the back of the bus and ran the wrong way up a downscalator but that wasn't on purpose."

Ashe peered up and down the street before they left the coffee shop. At that time of the morning, the downtown area of Genesee was still waking up. As they walked down the sparsely populated sidewalk, Mystral kept up a steady stream of chatter. She pointed out various places of interest and expressed her opinion on a number of different matters. Ashe was content to let the words flow over her. At times she gave a short answer but mostly kept a sharp eye on their surroundings. The record store was down a short flight of stairs under a vintage clothing shop. It was decorated with old posters and a glass case behind the register held an autographed T-shirt from some long-forgotten singer. The proprietor was sweeping the black and white tiles when Mystral bounded into the store.

"You're open, right? We're not too early?" Her head swiveled as she scanned the long cases of records.

"Yup, take your time and have a look around. If there's anything in particular you're looking for, give us a shout." He ducked behind the counter to fiddle with the turntable. Soon the shop filled with a golden jazz melody.

By the time Ashe entered the shop, Mystral was already digging through one of the cases, her face alive and bright.

"Oh, look at this, Ashe!" Mystral gestured excitedly with the album in her hands. "Yamaguchi Momoe! And Aikawa Riko too. I love her voice!" Doing a little dance, she sang, "Got to walk down the loonely roooooad! Eiiiiien niini-!"

Ashe peered over Mystral's should and had to admit she was impressed with the selection. Each record was encased in a protective plastic cover and the prices ranged from a few dollars to over a hundred.

"Is this for your DJ work?"

"Nope, these are just for me," Mystral said. Her hands didn't stop their relentless pawing through the records. "There's not really a lot of demand for Showa-era idol remixes in the club scene these days. Which is too bad because there are so many good tunes that I would love to mix the heck out of."

"Why don't you start something then?" Ashe said. "Someone's got to be the first, after all."

"You've got a point there," Mystral said. She dug out a Seiko Matsuda album and studied the back thoughtfully. Suddenly she looked up and caught Ashe's eye. "I just like this kind of music, don't think I have an Asian fetish or anything. Oh my -!" She jumped up and bounded over to a wall full of posters featuring groups of tuxedo-clad women, stunning in their androgyny. "Okay, maybe I do. Oh my God, for Yuki-gumi's Asahi Miya anyway. I lost my virginity to her." She gave Ashe a quick, impish look over her shoulder. "Or at least my fifteen-year-old self imagined I did."

Mystral seemed immune to the awed stare Ashe graced her with as she went back to her rummaging and random snatches of singing to herself. Soon she had a good amount of records beside her, piled haphazardly on the floor. Ashe watched her with an indulgent smile for a few minutes before she came over with a wire basket. Mystral was down on her knees, leafing through a box of ancient Bollywood soundtracks. When she noticed the basket, she chirped a thanks and dumped her treasure into it before she sat back on her heels with a satisfied sigh.

Ashe felt awkward towering over Mystral, so she hunkered down next to her and sat cross-legged on the cool tile floor. She was more relieved than ever she wasn't in her awful work skirt. Mystral abandoned her task and fixed Ashe with a long look. The recipient of that look fought the blush that threatened to rise to her cheeks.

"What?" Ashe asked and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I don't want to assume anything," Mystral said. "But what's your ethnicity? If it's all right for me to ask."

"Don't worry about it. Japanese mother, Irish-American father. I'm what some people call a 'haafu'." Ashe took her Private Investigator's ID card out and passed it over.

"Ashleigh Akane Devon," Mystral read aloud. Ashe fought an irrational shock of joy at the fact that Mystral managed to pronounce her middle name correctly.

"My mom's the only one who can get away with calling me that," Ashe admitted. "And only when she's mad at me for something."

"I like it. My parents were hippies, you could probably tell," Mystral said with a wry grin. "They named my older brother Chinook."

"Ouch," Ashe said while tucking the card back into her wallet.

"Yeah, for some reason he prefers to go by his middle name, which is Brady."

"I can't see why he would do that."

"Yeah, I know." Mystral mimed an exaggerated shrug. "Some people, eh? By the way, *my* middle name's Jaina." She looked up with a quicksilver grin on her face that sent an unaccustomed spear of heat through Ashe's chest. "It used to be Buttercup but I changed it when I was in junior high."

"Seriously?" Ashe choked. "Jaina? As in Jaina Solo from the books and not the movies?"

"Yup. I was hooked on Star Wars as a kid. Becoming Mystral Jaina seemed like a good idea at the time, and well, okay I guess it still is. I mean, who doesn't want to be Han and Leia's kid, right? And you just outed yourself as a geek," Mystral said with a laugh.

Ashe shrugged and said, "I don't suppose I'd be able to hide the truth from you for too long. And for the record, I prefer the Alien series."

Still grinning, Mystral turned back to her perusal of the record shop's treasures. She flipped through a number of albums before she said, "So, do you speak Japanese then?"

"Sure. That's actually how I met Yakkun. We went to the same Japanese school. The Jewish kids went to Hebrew school, the rich kids learned Italian and every Saturday we were stuck writing out *kanji* until our arms wanted to fall off." Ashe found her expression softening as she remembered. "He was a mouthy little shit back then. Still is. We got into a massive argument at recess this one time and my mom dragged me to his place to apologize. She brought this giant box of ham and stuff and made me invite him to my birthday party."

Looking up from her digging, Mystral gave a laugh. "I can see my mom doing that too."

"After a while I realized he was all right," Ashe said with a shrug. "His mother's actually quite an amazing lady. I hope you get a chance to meet her." Ashe stopped, shocked. What was she saying?

"I hope so too," Mystral told her, without any indication she noticed anything amiss. "You know, I think it's great to have a second language. It comes in handy if you want to travel, and I guess have secret conversations in public. I pretty much forgot all the French I learned in school. Everything except the swear words." She moved to the next box and sorted through the albums with practiced efficiency. "Have you ever been to Japan?"

"Lots of times. My mom shipped me off to her hometown to stay with her parents in Kagoshima every summer until I went to college," Ashe said. She leaned back on her hands. "So don't let me teach you Japanese. I speak it with a horrible old-person-from-the-countryside accent even though I've tried

to train it out of myself by watching NHK news broadcasts. Yakkun's always making fun of me."

"Oh and I'm sure he's so perfect too," Mystral said. "Well you don't have to worry about me making fun of you. Anyone can speak bog-standard. I would love to have an old-person accent. You know, I taught myself Japanese when I was in high school."

"Really?" Ashe raised her eyebrows, impressed. "So how far did you get?"

"Let me put it this way, learning a language is like sex." As she spoke, Mystral leaned close to Ashe and nudged her arm. "You can practice a fair amount on your own, but eventually you find yourself wanting another person to join in."

Ashe drew in a breath at the sudden contact, the warmth of Mystral against her. Ashe had let her guard down, lulled by the easy comfort of the conversation and the joking tone that may or may not have been flirtatious. Ashe banished the thought from her mind. She was not there to be Mystral's friend and most certainly not anything more than friends.

With a twitch, Ashe pulled away from Mystral. "I'm going to check the entrance."

Mystral's eyes went down at the brusque tone and she fell silent. The moment broken, Ashe roughly got to her feet and strode across the shop's floor. Behind her, she felt more than heard Mystral gathering up her basket and vinyl treasures. Still somewhat shaken, Ashe waited as Mystral went over to the register to pay. She proudly produced the coupon and received a stamp-card in return. It was already half-filled just from that day's purchases.

"Come back anytime," the shopkeeper called after them.

"Sure will," Mystral said over her shoulder while bounding up the stairs. In the time they'd been in the record store, the sidewalks had filled with shoppers and Ashe found herself keeping close to Mystral, almost pressed up against her in the crowd. More than deserted roads, crowded areas were dangerous. Movement was slow, vision was limited, and it would be all too easy for someone to strike and melt away into the confusion.

"Is there anywhere else you need to go today?" Ashe kept her voice low and professional even as her heart kicked into high speed.

"Not really. I have to get ready for the event tomorrow night but that's about all. Figure out my playlist and stuff like that."

"All right. Can I take you home?"

"How about lunch?" Mystral turned to give her a grin. "I know a little place that makes awesome paella. My treat of course. After making you hang out in that old dusty record shop for ages it's the least I can do."

They reached a wide area and the crowd thinned. Ashe stepped back and caught her breath. She needed to put a stop to that right away. No matter what she felt, they were not on a date. "That's not necessary. It's my job to be here."

"Even the hardest workers get a lunch break." Mystral persisted and Ashe lost the will to fight her.

"All right," Ashe said.

"Great!" Before Ashe knew what was happening, Mystral took her by the arm and pulled her down a side-street. "Starting from now and ending in one hour, you are officially off duty. There it is."

Any protests she had died in her throat as Ashe followed Mystral's cheerfully bobbing toque up a wooden flight of stairs and into the restaurant. The air was warm and carried a rich, spicy fragrance. It was lovely after the chilly wind outside. The décor was simple, with terra-cotta brick walls and deep green tablecloths. The waiter made a move as if to seat them at a table overlooking the street, but Ashe directed them over to one in the corner with a good view of the entire room as well as being close enough to the emergency exit to make a dash if need be.

Ashe scanned the room once they were seated and their orders taken. She couldn't relax. Mystral excitedly spoke at great length about the vinyl loot she'd scored when she suddenly stopped and dug her phone out of her pocket. A flash of unease crossed her delicate features. Ashe was already halfway out of her seat by the time Mystral slumped back with a sigh of relief.

"Hey Joelle," she said with the phone at her ear. "What's up? Yeah, she's here. Just doing a bit of shopping. I was getting cabin fever being stuck inside all day long." Mystral looked across the table and said, "Joelle says Hi."

Ashe gave a quick nod in return, even though it wouldn't translate through the phone.

Mystral idly played with a corner of the menu as she held the cell phone with her shoulder. She listened silently for a while and gave a few uh-huhs from time to time. At one point she made a list of what sounded like equipment. Soon she thumbed the phone off and put it into her bag.

"Sorry about that, just some preliminary details for this event Joelle wants me to do in the spring. Kind of a pre-Pride women's event. They've got a pretty good policy at the club about trans people, which is something I always check. I won't play anywhere that's not inclusive." She swept her hands wide, without any sign of the reserve Ashe always found herself plagued with when discussing things of that kind in public and declared, "Once, present and future women, we're all pieces in this great queer quilt together."

"So basically the only people not allowed in are...?"

"The cis-guys," Mystral said with an unapologetic shrug and a dazzling smile that caused Ashe to draw in a breath. "Sorry dudes, but that's the way the fortune cookie splits."

Ashe clapped her hand to her forehead but chuckled in spite of herself.

"Anyway, sorry about dragging business into our off-duty time. I've turned off my phone so we don't get any more interruptions."

"That's all right, you're more than allowed to take calls at any time. Don't feel obligated to change your regular activities on my account. In fact, I want you to just do things as you normally would."

"Great! Then you won't mind driving the getaway car when I go and rob a bank tomorrow?"

"Not at all," Ashe said. She stifled the grin that was threatening to crack

her professional veneer. "I've always wanted to put my stunt-driving qualification to the test. For some reason, Yakkun gets uppity if I try and reenact certain scenes from the Death Drive arcade game series."

"That's not very cool of him!" Mystral said. She pounded the table with the flat of her hand. "I don't see why he should mind." She paused and cocked an eyebrow. "Unless you're using his car?"

"That could be the reason. After all, why should I risk scratching my truck's paintjob when I can just hotwire that little Miata of his?"

Mystral let out a hoot of laughter and Ashe let her gaze roam over the restaurant. Everybody was calmly eating and chatting, most of the customers were young couples, but there were a few amicable groups of seniors. Ashe fixed Mystral with a low, piercing gaze. She was reluctant to break the easy mood but needed to bring up the topic.

"How well do you know Joelle? What's your history with her?"

"We never dated if that's what you mean," Mystral answered with a shake of her head. "I've been going to her bar for a couple years and she really helped me get started with gigs and that sort of thing. But I don't know her all that well personally. I know she lives within a reasonable taxi distance from her bar because she doesn't want to drive home at nights but that's about it."

"She's never expressed an interest?"

"No, never," Mystral said. "To be honest, you're more her type than me. But she's in a long-term relationship and they live together. At one point she was married to a gay guy. I'm not sure if she still is. Anyway, she and Lorna have the cutest beagle ever and are always going on trips together and stuff, so I think they're pretty solid."

"You never know. Sometimes things look different from the outside."

"Do you really think Joelle could be behind this? I mean, she's paying for the investigation after all. Why would she be trying to make me quit and helping me at the same time?"

"Just making sure we explore any possibility," Ashe said. She fought the irrational relief that came with the knowledge Joelle's interest was purely professional. "No matter how small."

"That's okay, I understand, you've got to check everyone out and that's all right with me," Mystral said.

Their waiter came over with big plates of seafood and rice. "Enjoy," he said and whisked away.

Ashe sampled her lunch. It really was the best paella she'd ever eaten. She nodded and hummed her appreciation.

"See? I told you." Mystral chewed happily as she studied the dessert menu.

"So are you a Bollywood fan?" Ashe glanced at the large package Mystral had tucked protectively between her chair and the wall.

"Not specifically. I love all sorts of music," Mystral said. "Those records are actually to help with this new project I've been working on. I really like to use non-English lyrics, because you have to make up your own meaning, respond emotionally to the music instead of the words. Recently I've been

working with a Bengali singer, Cherie, and she's made some absolutely kickass vocal tracks. I used to have to record my own vocals, but now I've got a bit more experience and of course money, I can hire people with actual talent to do it." She waved her spoon around as she got into the topic. "Indian music is really complex so I don't want to make anything that sounds like a shitty rip-off. I want to put my own spin on it without seeming like I'm just trying to be a dumb wannabe. I mean they have the Tabor drums, which are the most difficult instrument in the entire world. Did you know there's no written music for them? It's not something you can just pick up on the fly. Anyway, I've been really focusing on the beat, the percussion aspect of the music, so I can complement Cherie's vocals. It's been a pretty steep learning curve but hopefully I'll have something awesome ready for my next event."

The meal progressed in a leisurely way. Ashe leaned her chin on one hand and studied Mystral. The vibrancy with which she spoke, the love of her craft that danced in the depths of her eyes intrigued Ashe. Before her thoughts could start going down an inadvisable path, Ashe straightened up and looked at her watch. It was the one she'd gotten for work and she hated how the ugly pink strap clashed horribly with the cuff of her shirt. "One hour's almost up."

"Already?" Mystral shuffled around and pushed the empty shells on her plate around with her spoon. "Sorry, I didn't mean to blather on for so long. How about a drink or dessert for the road? They make this amazing coffee with cream on it that's pretty much a dessert in itself. It will ruin you for any other fancy coffee-like beverage. I guarantee it."

Even as her instincts told her to move, to break free from the easy rhythm she had fallen into, a deep whisper from a secret place urged her to stay. What harm could it do? the whisper urged. Mystral was smiling, relaxed and free from care. It was so good to see her that way, Ashe had to admit. She reasoned that anything that put Mystral at ease was part of her duty. Ashe allowed herself to relax a fraction and sank back against the carved wooden chair back.

"Since you put it like that, I don't think I have the power to resist. Let's see if this fabled coffee lives up to its reputation."

Mystral immediately waved the waiter over and ordered. Soon Ashe was presented with a towering confection in a sleek glass mug. Even though she was not a big one for sweets, she had to admit it was delicious. As she listened to Mystral telling a long, involved story about some kind of cake-related incident from her work, Ashe allowed her gaze to soften, her mind to wander. What if her path and Mystral's had crossed another way? If Ashe had attended one of Mystral's events, or had sat next to her in one of the crowded, noisy bars, would she have noticed what a rare treasure she was, or would she have overlooked the young woman, dismissed her as another insignificant waste of time? But that was moot, and it was dangerous to even consider anything other than the reality of the case. All too soon their mugs were empty and it was time to head out.

With her purchases in her arms, Mystral picked up the tab. She waved off Ashe's protests.

"After all, you were on a break at my insistence. It's not like we can charge

it to Joelle." As they left the restaurant, she turned back to give Ashe a mischievous look over her shoulder. "Or can we?"

Mystral's sudden stop put her back flush with Ashe's front. Even though her body tingled with the brief contact, Ashe kept her voice professional as she said, "It's allowed, but I wasn't planning on it. Thanks for lunch. It was very good, and that coffee was incredible. I don't think Brewer's Cup is going to be able to satisfy me any more after this."

"Yeah, that burnt bean water they make there's got nothing on real Spanish coffee," Mystral declared. She pattered down the remainder of the stairs. They paused on the sidewalk as people swirled around them in bustling eddies, the only calm spot in a river of humanity.

"Where can I take you after this? Are you going home?"

Mystral checked the time on her phone's screen. "Yeah. I want to ditch my stuff and then maybe head over to the bakery. The orders I need to finish aren't due until next week and I don't think Pierre has even made the cakes yet. I just need to decorate a few for tomorrow." As they threaded their way down the busy sidewalk, Ashe kept alert. She glanced all around them as Mystral continued, "Today's work is just for the cakes Pierre likes to keep on display for same-day sale. He gives me a bunch of fruits and whatever to use, but otherwise lets me have pretty free reign with them. Sometimes I go a bit overboard but it's all good practice and nobody's complaining. Once I made a three-layer dark chocolate and raspberry fondant with gold swirls and a whole crapload of sugarcraft and marzipan dragons with this giant sugar crystal topping. I thought Pierre would have a conniption when he saw it, but somebody actually bought it!"

"Impressive."

"It wasn't terrible." Mystral preened. "But I usually try to stay on the normal side."

"Probably a good policy," Ashe said. "All right, let me take you home then. I'll meet you at the bakery around six tonight to walk to your ride and make sure you get home all right."

"Sounds like a plan."

The drive to Mystral's place was quiet and as Ashe stood outside the door to her apartment, waiting for Mystral to drop off her purchases, she let out a long breath. Spending time with Mystral had been much too easy. She had nearly forgotten her job, let herself dream about something that could not and should not happen. Ashe needed to put some distance between them, but she didn't know if she could.

"Sorry to keep you waiting." Mystral's voice roused Ashe from her inner thoughts. In addition to her helmet, she had a neatly folded white package in her arms which Ashe assumed was a baker's uniform.

"That's all right."

They started down the now-familiar hallway and stairwell.

Ashe walked with Mystral to where her bike was parked.

Mystral held the helmet in her hands but hesitated before putting it on. She

turned and leaned back against the bike, once again catching Ashe off guard with her closeness. "I know you were working today." Mystral's voice was soft, her expression unguarded.

Against her better judgment, Ashe found herself unwilling to draw away as Mystral said, "But I just wanted to say it was really nice being with you." Mystral gave a self-deprecating laugh and broke eye contact. She kept her head down as she stuffed her uniform into her bag and settled the strap securely across her chest. "I mean, um, you know, in a professional way. Dragging you here and there and all that. You were very patient and I appreciate that. So I just wanted to say thanks and hope I'm not annoying baggage or a pain in the butt."

"You aren't," Ashe said. She schooled her expression into one of calm, even though she was feeling anything but. There was so much she wanted to say but couldn't. Mystral had enough to deal with at the moment. Ashe swallowed hard and said, "See you at six. If you think you're going to be later than that, let me know."

"Okay, will do. See you tonight!" Mystral pulled the helmet on over her bright hair and flipped down the visor. With a quick, graceful motion, she straddled the bike and revved the engine before pulling away with a cheerful backwards salute to Ashe.

Left with nothing to do and a strange, empty feeling, Ashe drove around aimlessly. She mulled over the nagging uneasiness of the mismatch between the letters and phone calls. Eventually, she swung by the office and hung out there as she scrolled through the reports Yakkun had compiled so far, poring over them until darkness fell and the promised time loomed.

She parked in the lot in front of the wide, well-lit window of the business that proudly proclaimed itself "Pierre's Bakery and Custom Cakes". She pulled her jacket around her body and got out of her truck. Ashe leaned against the cooling hood until she saw Mystral's characteristic silhouette against the bare display cases inside the bakery. She spoke to a white-clothed man who Ashe assumed was Pierre before she turned and pushed the door open. Mystral had a box in her hands and her uniform was slung over one arm. The stark white was spattered with purple and green dots. Ashe ignored the jolt that went through her chest at Mystral's brilliant smile as their eyes met. She didn't move from her casual stance as Mystral crossed the deserted lot in a few sure steps. Her breath steamed in the cold night air.

When she reached Ashe, Mystral's fingers came over Ashe's as she gently handed over the box. Startled by the contact, Ashe's breath went and her brain froze. Ashe jolted back from Mystral's touch, crumpling the sides of the box in the process.

"Pierre let me have a bunch of day-olds for you and the people at your office."

For an instant she thought Mystral was referring to the shuffling masses at Infra BC but then shook herself back to sense. Of course she meant the other investigators. Mystral didn't know about her actual job, the fact she was not exactly currently under the employ of Tomohiko Yamaguchi.

"Thanks," Ashe said. The box was suspiciously heavy and she thought she detected a rich, sweet smell coming off of it even in the late September chill. "I'm sure Yakkun and the rest will make short work of these."

"Make sure you get something for yourself too," Mystral said. "I recommend the pear tart. It's not too sugary and absolutely to die for. It's kind of a miracle there was one left over because the dailies always sell out right away. In fact, the waiting list for one of those babies is six weeks long." She tilted her head and blinked. She looked entirely too innocent to Ashe's calculating eyes.

"All right, I'll take that under advisement." Ashe shivered, not entirely from the cold. She set the box down on the hood of the truck. "Where are you parked? I'll walk you there."

"Around back," Mystral said.

The parking lot was boxed in by a chain-link fence and a few scrubby bushes. Ashe didn't like the darkness and cover of the area. She was about to say something about it when a bright motion-activated flood lamp threw the scene into harsh relief.

"Pierre installed that last winter," Mystral said with a nod in the direction of the light fixture. "After someone busted his window and stole his collection of vintage Billy Joel CDs. You should have seen him, he was so pissed."

Mollified, Ashe waited until Mystral's tail lamp was fading down the street before she got into her own truck. She carefully placed the bakery box on the passenger's seat and followed at a prudent distance. She tried not to notice the dashing figure Mystral made astride her bike as the streetlights stroked over her slim body.

They entered a long, straight stretch of road, bordered on both sides by nondescript buildings and factories. Traffic was practically nonexistent and Ashe's attention went to a boxy light grey Reliant that suddenly shot out of an empty parking lot and pulled up behind Mystral. Ashe's truck caught up with the two as they were waiting at a stop light. The light changed and Ashe got a frisson of nerves as the Reliant came up beside Mystral and paced the bike. The car got closer until Mystral was forced to edge dangerously near to the shoulder while Ashe held back. Her helmeted head flashed in the streetlights as Mystral looked over at the car. She swerved as it crowded her. From her vantage point behind both of them, Ashe tried to make out who was driving, but the windows were tinted almost black. The fact that the license plate was covered with something that looked like a garbage bag sent her instincts into full alert. Ashe floored the accelerator and ate the distance that separated them. Her mind raced as she spun various plans and scenarios. She had to get that car to back off. In front of her, Mystral's bike wobbled and almost fishtailed as the Reliant relentlessly tailgated her. Mystral tried to pull away but the Reliant swerved and blocked her attempt. The car was almost up the bike's tailpipe. Ashe had to keep her foot down on the accelerator just to keep up.

With an alarmed glance at the speedometer, Ashe realized the car was

pushing eighty kilometers an hour. Hitting the pavement at that speed would be deadly. Ashe stomped on the gas and came up hard on the inside of the road, goading the Reliant into easing over to one side. She kept a steady hand on the wheel and pulled up right behind the bike. She knew she'd put Mystral in a bad position but she needed to block the Reliant before it could force Mystral off the road. The move also meant Ashe had given away the fact that Mystral wasn't alone, but she didn't care.

She wanted the stalker to know she was not going to let anybody near Mystral without going through her first. The Reliant didn't back down. Ashe was having none of that. She twisted the wheel in a violent motion and slammed her truck into the side of the car. She caught it across the bumper and managed to urge the car back into the middle lane. One more slam knocked the breath from Ashe as her seatbelt grabbed her and half of the rear bumper came off. It dragged behind the car like a jagged bread crust.

Ashe glanced toward Mystral to check where she was and bore down on the Reliant. She used her truck's weight and superior power to edge the car over so they were both clear of the bike. Along the way, she managed to get a few good hits in, not caring about the dents in her own truck. They were nothing compared to the damage the Reliant was taking. In addition to the bumper, the entire back side door was caved in. Cracks ran through the safety glass. Under the battering from Ashe's truck, the Reliant slowed and allowed Mystral to zoom clear. When Mystral's motorcycle was a safe distance in front of them, Ashe flipped on the truck's array of deerstalkers and flooded the Reliant with brilliant white. At the same time, she leaned on her customized horn and unleashed an operatic chord straight from hell. The Reliant swerved under the assault and Ashe bared her teeth in a cold grimace of satisfaction.

The Reliant banked sharply and braked so that Ashe had to yank her truck onto the shoulder. The car juddered into the oncoming lane and narrowly missed colliding with a postal van. Suddenly the car jolted ahead with a roar of the already-overtaxed engine. It clipped Mystral's bike across the rear tire and roared past her even as the bike fishtailed across the road. The front wheel of the bike caught on the soft shoulder and sprayed gravel in the instant before both bike and rider skidded into the scrubby grass at the side of the road.

A cry of agony exploded from her lungs as Ashe slammed on the brakes. She gave the steering wheel a savage yank as she brought the truck to a halt. The bakery box was upside down on the floor, but Ashe didn't care as she fumbled with the door's handle, unable to catch her breath. Blind with panic she threw herself out of the cab and pounded over to where Mystral lay in a heap in the ditch.

Chapter Five

THE RELIANT WAS long gone but Ashe didn't care.

She staggered through the knee-high scrub until she got to the place where the bike had ripped a trail of churned ground. When Ashe reached Mystral's crumpled form, she dropped to her knees and whispered half-formed prayers mixed with curses while she fought to breathe past the crushing fist of pain that had seized her by the heart. Ashe nearly cried out with relief as Mystral lurched into a sitting position and her hands pulled ineffectively at her helmet. Still unable to speak, Ashe gently took the helmet off. Mystral's hair spilled over her shoulders. With a groan, Mystral fell bonelessly into Ashe's arms. Acting purely on instinct, Ashe gathered Mystral up and cradled her against her chest. Without any thought other than for the woman in her arms, Ashe lowered her face to Mystral's fiery hair. She clung to Mystral with every bit of strength left to her.

"Open your eyes. Come back to me," Ashe whispered, her throat tight with panic. "Please, sweetheart—" With a jolt, Ashe bit the word off, hoping desperately that Mystral was still too out of it to have heard.

Mystral stirred. She drew in a breath and let it out with an "Ouch!"

"Where does it hurt? Can you move your fingers and toes?" Ashe fought the wild joy that returned to her at the sight of Mystral's deep eyes looking into her own. She was at once aware of the intimacy of their position. She had Mystral slung across her lap, molded together as if they were lovers. She didn't want to let go. Something inside herself that Ashe had tried to keep frozen for a long time cracked and started to melt. Startled, Ashe squashed the wave of hunger the resilient feel of Mystral's body against hers called forth and swallowed it down with vicious discipline. She held herself still as Mystral leaned her head against Ashe's chest. Mystral's eyes drifted closed and Ashe bit off a cry of panic.

"Stay with me," Ashe said.

"I'm okay," Mystral whispered. She nestled against Ashe. "Just don't let me go."

Once more able to breathe, Ashe felt her shoulders drop. She allowed herself to bask in the heady feel of Mystral's slender form in her arms for just a second longer before she said, "I'm afraid we're going to have to move. The side of Cowley Road isn't the best place for a nap."

She released Mystral and coaxed her into a sitting position. With her arms empty, Ashe felt at once cold and infinitely alone. She got to her feet first and made an effort to keep her expression neutral while she held out a hand and helped Mystral to stand. Ashe didn't let her fingers remain on Mystral's arm any longer than she had to. She pulled away as soon as Mystral was up and followed as Mystral limped over to her fallen motorcycle. The wheels were clogged with grass and streaks of dirt covered the sleek body.

"Fucking asshole wrecked my Midnight," she spat as she ran her hands over

her bike.

Ashe fought the urge to lay a comforting hand on Mystral's shoulder. She looked like she was on the verge of crying or cursing. Most likely both.

Instead, Ashe whipped out her cell. A flash of rage stole her breath for an instant. Mystral had almost been killed that night. Ashe's fingers tightened on her cell. She made herself relax and said in a tight, clipped voice, "After I report this to the police, I'll give Yakkun a call. He's got a buddy who's a mechanic. He can come out here with a wrecker. Don't worry, he'll take good care of your Midnight, and I'll take good care of you." Ashe hadn't meant to say the last part, but she couldn't take the words back. She squared her shoulders and tried not to notice the flush that stole over Mystral's cheeks.

"Thanks Ashe," Mystral said as she got to her feet. She dusted off her hands before she yanked off her scuffed leather gloves and stuffed them in her pocket.

ONCE BOTH THE police report and the damaged bike had been taken care of, Mystral was back in the passenger's seat of Ashe's truck like she had always been there. Ashe gripped the steering wheel and concentrated on the road. She refused to think about what could have happened, or remember the feeling of Mystral in her arms.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Ashe glanced over at Mystral, who was hugging her helmet to her chest. The black and purple decal sported a long scrape and Mystral herself was quite grass-stained and dusty. The rescued bakery box sat between them like a complacent barricade. "I can take you to the emergency room if you want."

Mystral met Ashe's gaze with a quirky, cheeky grin and said, "Nah, I'm cool. I've wiped out a bunch of times before. Tonight's spill wasn't even the worst of them. Thanks to those, I've had lots of practice learning how to fall. I think my jacket and helmet took the worst of it."

"That's good to hear." Ashe let out a long breath.

The drive back was short and silent. Ashe parked the truck and resisted the courtly urge to go over and open Mystral's door for her. She fell easily into the ritual of going up to the third floor behind Mystral and doing a quick check of the room, Ashe confirmed the time she would come by on Saturday before she said a brief goodnight.

"Lock the door behind me," Ashe told her. She got a quick smile and nod in reply before the door clicked shut. The metallic sound of the lock put Ashe's mind at ease. The autumn night seemed colder than it had been just a few minutes ago. Ashe pulled her coat close around herself as she trudged back to the parking lot.

She sank into the quiet sanctuary of her truck and shook off a lingering flush at the memory of Mystral's hands covering hers, warm and soft from the heat of the bakery. The electric energy that had begun to ripple though Ashe as she'd held Mystral's body against her own still jolted through her as she sat in

the silent cab.

With a quick glance in the rearview mirror, Ashe saw the warm yellow skylight and pictured Mystral curled up on that comfortable sofa, maybe listening to one of her newly acquired albums or poring over a cake book. The scene in her mind was warm and homey. Appealing in its simple pleasure.

As she reviewed the events of that evening, Ashe found a deep anger building up within her. She couldn't keep still. Ashe let the purring truck take her to Yakkun's office where she met Shauna and Gus.

"Where's Yakkun?" Ashe said as she shoved her way into the room.

"Home and probably asleep," Gus said. He used his feet to roll his chair over to where Ashe was standing. "What's up? You look like you want to bite the head off something."

"The stalker tried to force Mystral's bike off the road tonight." Ashe fought the red wave of rage that threatened to choke her. She chucked the bakery box down on Yakkun's desk and dug out her phone.

Gus muttered a curse. Both he and Shauna focused on Ashe, their expressions grim. She ignored them as she got down as much information about the car as she'd could, though not nearly enough to track anyone down without more leads. Ashe glared at the scant lines before she posted it to their group. It would have to do for now. Ashe stowed her phone with an impatient shove.

She closed her eyes, and in an instant she was back on the road, her arms full of Mystral's body, the soft weight pressed against her, her own body alive with panic and something else she didn't want to name. Her knees felt like they were about to give out so Ashe folded herself into a nearby chair.

Ashe said, "They ran off before I could get a look at the driver or the plates. I had to take defensive action, and now whoever is out there knows Mystral's got backup. Hopefully that's not going to escalate the situation further."

"Some people would find that a good reason to back off," Gus said.

"They left with some damage," Ashe said with grim satisfaction. "Unless they've got a spare car or a really understanding Uber driver, they're going to have to think up a new way to get in my face."

"Good one, Ashe," Gus said.

"They better not try anything tomorrow at Mystral's event," Ashe said in a growl. She unconsciously clenched her hands into fists.

"I'm sure even if they do, you'll have no trouble taking care of it." He wandered over and poked at the box. "What'cha got there?"

"Some day-olds from Mystral's bakery," Ashe said. She gave it a push in his direction. "Help yourselves. Dibs on the pear tart."

"Nice!" Gus peered into the box, which contained a lovely selection of treats including a number of delicately topped cupcakes, sumptuous-looking chocolate confections and even a small bag of airy meringue cookies studded with candied lemon peel. The abrupt journey to the floor of her truck had jostled them around a bit, but everything was still quite edible.

"Wow, Mystral made all this?" Shauna asked as she surveyed the bounty.

"I think the guy who owns the bakery did," Ashe said. "Mystral probably decorated some of them."

"Either way, these are really good," Gus said with half a pink petit four clutched in his meaty paw. "It's not every day we get a windfall like this. This has to be the best cake I've ever eaten. Prettiest too!"

"Leave something for Yakkun," Ashe told him. She stashed her tart in her bag, carefully wrapped in a pilfered paper towel. "Or else he'll put you on 'cheater-stakeouts' for the rest of the year."

"How about he doesn't have to know about this little incident? You know, keep it just between us."

"And give Shauna a reason to blackmail you, possibly forever?" Ashe mulled the thought. "Good idea."

"I agree," Shauna said as she peeled a slightly flattened cupcake topped with deep mulberry-hued frosting. "Go ahead, buddy. I might or I might not have just snapped a pic with my pocket cam of you stuffing your face with all those little cakes. Would you care to wager on which one?"

"Be a sport, Shauna," Gus whined. "I was just joking, you know that."

"Sure we do," Shauna purred. She patted his bulky shoulder.

"All right, I give up!" With his hands up, he backed away from the box. "There's plenty left for both Yakkun and Kieran so you can get off my case, right?"

"Consider the matter settled and put in the past." Shauna came over with mugs of coffee for herself and Gus. "Want one Ashe? Or are you going home to sleep now?"

"I'll pass, thanks," Ashe said. Impatiently, she blew back a long piece of hair that fell into her face. "Yeah, I'm going to call it a night. I have a lot on my schedule tomorrow."

Back at her place, she braved the windy outside spiral staircase until she got to her floor. She shut the door behind her and leaned back against it. She closed her eyes in the darkness for a moment before she heaved herself upright. A flip of the light switch illuminated the spare contents of the room. Her bare sofa felt both inadequate and empty as she slouched into it. For the first time she thought a handmade throw would make a good addition. She dug out the pear tart and bit into it. The treat was still cold from being outside. Ashe closed her eyes, the better to savor the taste. Mystral hadn't been exaggerating, it was excellent. The pastry was light and buttery, the soft cheese filling was fragrant with vanilla and complemented the sweetly crisp fruit.

The silence of her room gave Ashe's troubled thoughts the upper hand. Something had happened that night. Something had woken up within her that she'd thought would remain sleeping forever. Her heart ached to reach out to someone—and that someone was a client who was under her care. Ashe had slipped, called Mystral by a term of endearment she had no right to use. It had just felt so natural to call her that. With a resigned mental sigh, Ashe accepted the fact that she'd made one mistake and resolved not to make another. She couldn't.

For the rest of the evening, Ashe stared at the television before she stumbled into her bedroom. She lay in bed with the blankets pulled to her chin, unable to find peace.

Chapter Six

ASHE HESITATED FOR a second outside of the squat brick building and ran a hand through her hair. The gelled spikes felt stiff and dry against her hand. Her ears were cold in the late afternoon breeze but she didn't mind. For the first time in months, she felt like she fit in her own skin. Once more, she was able to hold herself with pride. The long trenchcoat billowed around her legs as she took the few steps up to the old wooden door and slid it open.

A rush of warm air met her, carrying the homey scent of smoky roast chicken and sweet steamed rice. A number of large platters decorated the long counter that hemmed in an open kitchen. Away from the counter were two small, low tables on a raised section of the floor. The interior of the small establishment was dark and reminiscent of a cluttered and cozy living room, the air sweet with the cloying fragrance of a past era. The wall behind the counter was lined with bottles that had mismatched nametags hanging from them. The woman behind the counter was busy peeling a huge daikon radish and as the door clattered shut, she looked up with a smile that turned into a gasp. She reached out and slapped at the man who was sitting in front of her, absorbed in his plate with his back to the door.

The man turned around. Yakkun's face went slack with surprise before exploding into a huge, happy grin. "Look who we have here! Ashe Devon is back in the game!" He waved around a gnawed chicken leg and said, "Take a sit stranger. Today's special is chicken. Your favorite."

She took off the trenchcoat and folded it over one arm as she came over to the counter. She took up her usual perch on the stool in the corner with her long body folding into it like she'd been there just yesterday.

"Looks good," Ashe said.

"Not as good as you, honey," the mistress of the little eatery said. She trotted out from behind the counter and circled Ashe while looking her up and down. Born Meiko, she'd been going by May for as long as Ashe had known her. May stopped her perusal, hands on her hips. "Mm! Mm! Mm! Were you always this fine, or am I just getting old?"

"Haven't any of you seen a person in a suit before?" Ashe said with a brazen drawl as she lounged back against the counter. She had to admit, that first moment when she'd faced herself in the bedroom mirror had been a staggering one. After having gotten unwillingly used to the uncomfortable, alien reflection over the past half year, once more the person in the mirror was someone she could look in the eye. She wore the slimly elegant trousers and vest that had been tailored specially to flatter the long, slender lines of her body with ease. She'd opted against a necktie and instead left the top two buttons of her starched white shirt open. The simple silver chain at her throat caught the subdued potted lights. She'd ditched the cheap, shitty watch she'd bought on sale at the local Sibby's department store and her Tag Heuer was reassuringly heavy on her wrist, the cool beads of her quartz juzu bracelet

nestled against it. Yakkun was right. She was back, and it felt damned good.

"Nice trim," Yakkun said. He mimed scissors in the air.

"Yeah, I got tired of having it in my face all the time," Ashe said. "So I went down to Fanny's and told her to chop it."

"You know we only keep these bottles for half a year," May said, her face mock-serious as she came over with a bottle. A tag with Ashe's name on it hung from the neck. "Yours was close to being dumped. What'll you have with it, water or tea? Or just straight up?"

"Thanks for keeping it," Ashe said, genuinely surprised it was still there. "But not right now, May. I'm driving tonight so I'm okay with just green tea. Why don't you have a beer or something with me?" She fell into the automatic habit of buying the proprietor a beverage. May didn't accept tips, but she was more than willing to share a drink with anyone who came by.

"All right, but the *shochu* will lose its flavor if you leave it too long," May said, while she filled a small glass from the tap at the end of the counter. With her beer in one hand, she passed over a cup of steaming tea, then clinked her glass with Ashe's teacup and took a long drink. She sighed happily and set the glass down on the counter before she went back to stirring a bubbling pot on the tiny gas-stove.

A low whistle sailed through the air and Ashe turned to see a heavysset, gray-haired woman standing frozen in the entranceway. She had a cardboard box in her arms. A spray of leaves and a plastic-wrapped package of fish peeked out of it. Her face was halfway between joy and shock.

"Not you too, Vic," Ashe said.

With a grunt, Vic put the box down. May came over for a quick kiss, which Vic gave her most willingly. Once freed from her marital duty, Vic leaned one hip against the counter. She crossed florid arms over her chest and examined Ashe with a satisfied expression. "Long time no see, eh? So, what brings you to these parts tonight, stranger?"

"I'm going to Diamond Virgins tonight," Ashe said. She held up a hand as Vic and May exchanged gleefully knowing looks. "For work, that's all. Yakkun may have told you about our latest case. I'm just trying to blend in."

"Uh huh," Yakkun said. "Well, it's good to see the old Ashe back."

"You need to eat before you go," May said. She already had a dish and a pair of bamboo chopsticks in her hand, the latter of which she set down in front of Ashe. "I made some *shiro-ae* salad and there's *oden* left over from last night. Of course we've got roast chicken and some lasagna I can heat up in a jiffy."

Ashe hoisted herself halfway off the stool and surveyed the various dishes decorating the counter. "I'll have some of that *shiro-ae*, then."

"Coming right up! I made too much of it the other day. If I leave it another day I'll have to trash it," May said. She went over to where an industrial refrigerator was holding dignified court in the corner of the open kitchen and pulled out a plastic container. In her cheerfully communal way, she spooned neat piles of the stewed spinach and tofu mixture into three bowls and passed

them out before she dropped a dollop of it onto a little plate for herself.

"Thanks," Ashe said. A bowl of rice also arrived in front of her and Ashe dug in. She barely held back the happy groan as she took the first bite. The food May made wasn't gorgeous, but it was filling and good and reminded Ashe of home. After half a year of surviving on her own dismal attempts at cooking, Ashe was in heaven.

A couple came in and May greeted them with warm cheer and showed them to one of the tables. With a glance back over her shoulder, Ashe recognized the young woman as a worker in one of the so-called companion bars that had sprung up in the area of recent years. She often brought potential customers and regulars to May's for a quick meal and chat before going on to the second stage of the evening, which was conversation and most likely karaoke in her bar. Anything more than that was up to the girl herself. A *do-han*, or tag-along they called it, and it was a necessary part of the business of running an establishment where advertising was mostly done by word of mouth and it was impossible to get in without an introduction.

After she finished her dinner and settled the bill, Ashe shrugged into her coat and headed back into the cool evening. Her pulse quickened as she drew near Mystral's apartment. With a wry shake of her head, she told herself firmly this was business and she had a job to do. Still, some small part of her wondered if there would be a reaction, or if Mystral would let her transformation go in silence.

The strange, electric feeling didn't fade as Mystral buzzed her in. It reached a heart-stopping peak as Mystral opened the door. All other thoughts leaving her mind, Ashe tried not to gape. Mystral had transformed as well and Ashe could only stare as her brain refused to work. Her hair, normally more-or-less tamed into a braid stood in a flaming deathhawk which made her seem like a mythical being. She wore a bustier over a sheer top that hugged her slim figure and drew a gasp of admiration from Ashe before she could stop it. Nestled between the curves of her breasts, a set of rainbow-colored Pride rings on a long silver ball-chain caught the light. Clomping boots, fishnet stockings, and a punky blue and black plaid skirt completed the outfit. More than her appearance, Ashe was captivated by her aura. Mystral radiated a fierce energy, the force of her charisma was inescapable. Ashe's breath caught in her throat and she stood mute. Phoenix had awoken and she was spectacular.

With a twitch of her lips, Mystral graced Ashe with a languid and piercing once-over that sent a shock of fire through her.

"Not bad, not bad at all," she purred. "You're looking quite fine tonight."

Ashe felt like a base jumper standing on the ledge of a skyscraper with nothing other than open air and the promise of infinity before her.

She leaned forward and pitched her voice low. "I'm not the only one." Ashe's daring was rewarded with a quick gasp of laughter from Mystral. Before the moment could blossom into something altogether inadvisable, Ashe drew back and said in a no-nonsense voice, "Come on, you've got an event to get to. Are you feeling okay?"

"Never better," Mystral said. She shrugged into a red and black striped cardigan. "It must be the company."

While Ashe puzzled over the last remark, Mystral bent down and slung a bulky sports bag over one shoulder. She hugged a pile of records to her chest in a loving embrace as she scrambled to lock the door, then followed Ashe down the stairs. They came to a stop flanking Ashe's truck.

"Are you going to be drinking tonight?"

"Probably a beer or two," Mystral said. "The venue always gives me a few bottles of water but people buy me drinks from time to time."

"Don't accept anything unless it goes through me first.

Sealed bottles are all right, but anything else is suspect."

"Got it. How about you?"

"I'm on duty, and driving." With another glance at Mystral, Ashe allowed herself an instant to drink in her wild charisma, then she released the door locks and swung into her place behind the wheel. She felt more than heard Mystral get into the passenger's seat. Ashe glanced over and did a double take. Beside her, Mystral was protecting her fiery deathhawk from brushing the ceiling by slouching down in the seat and looked uniquely adorable. Her seatbelt caused her cardigan to bunch up under her arms and she wriggled around while emitting little curse words. Ashe had to avert her eyes before her amusement broke through her carefully maintained expression of professional detachment. She didn't want to diminish the effort Mystral had put into becoming the powerful vision of free artistry embodied in her Phoenix persona.

"Trying not to bend the 'do," Mystral explained as Ashe

steered through the city. Streetlights stroked over them in soft orange bars. "I used like an entire bottle of gel on it before I got it to stick up the way I wanted. Damned 'hawk nearly made me late."

"Try egg whites," Ashe said. "I used to do that back in high school when my mother wouldn't let me buy gel. Much better hold too, just remember to wash it out with cold water or you'll end up with egg salad in your hair."

"That's a good idea," Mystral said and gave Ashe a long look. As they drove on, Mystral drummed her fingers on the armrest as if already mentally spinning melodies and merging beats. A buzzing sound filtered into the air and Mystral pulled out her phone. Her expression tightened and her face blanched.

In an instant, Ashe pulled over and held out her hand. She took the phone Mystral passed her and held it to her ear without speaking.

"Don't go to the club tonight," the voice said. While the words were muffled, as if the caller was holding something over the receiver, the tone was unmistakably male. His words were gruff and raspy as if he was pitching his voice lower than usual. "You're toeing the line. You don't want to know what will happen if you cross it."

A burst of rage inflamed her. Ashe snapped, "You're the one who's toeing the line, buddy—" She hissed a curse as the line went dead. After a moment of

glaring at the screen, she returned the phone to Mystral.

"Another one," she said with a sigh.

Automatically, Ashe checked the time on her watch and made a mental note of it.

"Whatever the game is, we'll put a stop to it."

"I hope so," Mystral said. She hugged her arms to her chest. Ashe ached with the futile need to reassure Mystral, to make everything all right for her. Her hands trembled against the steering wheel. She wanted to kill the person who was responsible for taking the carefree smile from Mystral's face. Literally, actually kill them. Ashe fought the angry scowl and forced herself to dial the emotions back a few notches. She didn't want to upset Mystral right before her performance.

"Is that all the gear you need?" Ashe wanted to know as they were waiting at a stoplight.

The topic seemed to relax Mystral and she gave Ashe a grin. "Yup. The club's got the standard setup and I just need to bring cords, a trusty flashlight, and my headphones. Plus of course my tunes. Move like a comet, pack like a bum. Woohoo!" She shimmied in her seat, which rucked her cardigan up even more.

For a while after that, Mystral busied herself with yanking her clothing into some semblance of order while Ashe pretended not to notice.

Mystral spoke again, "I did send my mixer and spare monitor there last week. Theirs got busted and while I would normally never let anybody touch my gear, the organizer Danny arranged to rent the stuff from me. I know the other DJs they have lined up so it's all right. They have a courier service for things like that, so I didn't even have to pay for anything."

Ashe filed that information before she glanced sideways to where Mystral was squirming around again. She couldn't fight the warm wave of relief that Mystral's usual cheer was back.

With her bag in her lap, Mystral rummaged around inside it. "Before I forget, this is for you. It's not very good but I just got a bunch of them made up to give away as door prizes or whatever. It's, well, I just wanted you to have it."

Ashe found herself in possession of a thin CD.

"Um, you don't have to listen to it or anything, but you know," Mystral said. "If I ever get famous or something it may be worth something. I even autographed it. Just because." With that, her head came up and she met Ashe's startled gaze with a brilliant grin, full of mischief and life.

Ashe swallowed the shiver of heat that stole through her and tucked the CD into the driver's side door pocket. "No matter how famous you get, I'll never sell it."

THE NONDESCRIPT SHOPS lining the street gave way to flashing neon signs. Ashe pulled her truck into a parking lot and tucked the ticket into the dashboard. After disentangling herself from the seatbelt, Mystral leaped out into the cold night air. Since the club would be hot, Ashe took off her

trenchcoat and slung it on the front seat. Over on her side, Mystral followed suit with her cardigan.

"Before I forget, here's your pass," Mystral said as she held out a card on a blue cord. Ashe took it and looped the cord over her head. She tucked the card into the front pocket of her vest for the time being.

They walked the short distance to the club. Even in the darkness, Ashe noticed a design on Mystral's back, a tattoo peeking out from underneath her long hair. Ashe could see something that looked like feathers on her shoulder, but it was mostly obscured by the mesh top and disappeared underneath her bustier.

The night was young, however already a number of people were milling around: club-goers smoking on the side of the road as they waited for the doors to open, callers from the various establishments of questionable repute trolling for customers, and a few late shoppers hurrying through with department store bags and apprehensive looks on their faces. Light filtered out from the coin-bars and off-key singing could be heard from an upper-level karaoke shop. A meaty, spicy aroma flowed from a nearby Turkish restaurant. The proprietor hung half out of the takeout window as he conversed with the people clustered outside.

Ashe took a breath of the cool air. It filled her with a rarefied energy. How many nights of equal parts apprehension and excitement had she haunted those streets, searching the clubs and smoky underground bars for something she'd never been able to find? Only the briefest flickers tempted her and kept calling her back before being snuffed out just as she drew close.

The sidewalk in front of the club hosting the Diamond Virgins event was crowded with unmannerly partiers, some of whom were getting a head-start on their evening out as they swigged beer out of nondescript cans and passed around a bottle of cheap vodka. Ashe put a protective arm around Mystral and led her through the crowd and down a dusty hallway where they ducked through an unmarked door. On the other side, the lights were on and the club was relatively quiet except for the heavy beat from another establishment that throbbed through the floorboards. A bartender was setting out stacks of plastic cups in preparation for the onslaught and looked up as Ashe and Mystral came in. Her eyes flicked to the pass that Ashe held up and she called out a cheerful greeting to Mystral. A basket of rainbow-colored lollipops decorated the counter in front of her. They looked like flat jewels in the harsh lighting.

A tall man in jeans and a worn T-shirt came over to them. He enfolded Mystral in a hug and gave her a peck on the cheek before he held her at arms' length.

"Glad to see you made it, honey," he said in a cheerful, singsong voice. "Your stuff is all set up on the stage if you want to take a look before we start. Cha-cha will be doing lights tonight so if there's anything you want to change on your schedule just let her know. She was just here a few minutes ago but she went out for a smoke break."

"Thanks Danny, I actually have one change I wanted to clear with her. I've

added a new song to my playlist," Mystral said. "Oh, and this is Ashe, the one I told you about."

"Girlfriend," Danny said out of the corner of his mouth as his eyes flicked over Ashe from head to toe. "You weren't lying when you said she was—"

For some reason, Mystral hurriedly made shushing motions and batted Danny on the shoulder.

Recovering in record time, Danny darted up to Ashe. Before she could draw away, Ashe found both of her hands enfolded in Danny's big ones. His soft voice crooned, "Thanks *so* much for coming. I heard all about that awful business. I hope nothing goes wrong tonight."

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

"That's good to know." He released her and pressed a line of tickets into her hand. "I know you're on duty now, but do have a few drinks on the house. The bar's fully stocked and Lee makes a wicked Bloody Caesar that I highly recommend. Don't worry, we've got mineral water and soda-pop too."

"Thanks." After she tucked the tickets into her pocket, Ashe took a look around the empty club. "Mind if I poke around a bit? I just wanted to clear what kind of security you have here."

"Go right ahead. We've got two bouncers at the door, one on the floor and another one at the dressing room area. Nobody without a pass gets in there, or backstage either." Danny nodded to the bartender and said, "Lee's also good at stopping trouble before it starts and is always on the lookout for anyone who's getting a bit rowdy. The DJ booth is over there on the stage. Nobody will be able to get on it from backstage, but sometimes people try and jump up on it from the floor. You know, when they can't deny the beat. Boop-de-doo!" He gave a little shimmy.

"I'll be there to make sure nobody does that," Ashe said. She scanned the room, mentally setting up her security station where she could have a good view of both Mystral's booth and the dance floor. She'd position herself so the hallway leading to the dressing room was behind her and she could keep it in her peripheral vision, always aware of any movement to and from that area. While most of the notes had been left either on or near the DJ booth, a few had been left in the staff-only dressing areas. One had even been found stuffed in Mystral's gear bag and came to light as she cleaned up. If anyone suspicious was sniffing around any of those areas, they would have to do it with an Ashe-sized obstacle in their way.

"We'll be opening in ten minutes, so I must be going! It's time to meet my fairy Godmother and begin the transformation. Farewell my lovelies!" Long limbs spun into a graceful pirouette worthy of an Olympic figure skater as Danny made a grand exit. He went out of the main club entrance on his way to some secret and no-doubt magical location.

Mystral grinned and said, "In half an hour or so, a lovely and most fabulous person known as Lady Wonderland will be joining us in the capacity of the grand hostess of tonight's event." She turned to Ashe, her face alight and shining. "All right, let's do this!" She held out a fist, which Ashe stared at

for an instant, not comprehending until she felt her own grin break through her calm façade.

"Bring the house down," Ashe told her as she met Mystral's fist bump. "I'm going backstage to have a chat with the performers," she said. "Will you be all right out here?"

"Sure," Mystral said. She took out her headphones and slipped them on with the headband hanging down, apparently to protect her magnificent deathhawk. "The stage is right in front of the dressing room so if I need anything I'll give you a holler."

Satisfied, Ashe turned and, after showing her pass to the backstage bouncer, she knocked on the dressing room door. Behind it she heard show tunes and a babble of chattering voices. "Enter!" A cheerful voice called out. The door flung open and

Ashe was dazzled by the rainbow explosion of feather boas, sparkling dresses, towering platform shoes, and giant candy-colored wigs of all description. Petticoats were draped over the backs of chairs and the long dressing tables were piled with gaudy jewelry and water bottles. The air was heavy with perfume and glitter swam in pillars from the light-ringed mirrors that lined the walls.

"And who may you be?" a young drag queen asked Ashe from her perch on a stool. She was bare-chested and wore lacy bloomers over pink fishnet stockings. In front of her was the largest assortment of makeup Ashe had ever seen in her entire life, displayed on a spread-open fishing tackle box. The owner of the assembly sported a hairnet with a wide band at the hairline and was in the process of transforming herself into a glittery vision.

Ashe let the door swing closed behind her and introduced herself before she said, "I'm investigating whoever is making threats against Phoenix."

"Oh thank you!" The queen who had addressed Ashe leapt off her stool and seized Ashe's hands. "I'm Tootie Tra-La-La and Mystral is a dear, dear old friend of mine. She always downplayed it, but I knew things weren't going to get better. Is she all right? Oh God, something awful hasn't happened, has it?"

"Not yet," Ashe said. As Tootie released her hands, Ashe was aware the other occupants of the room had paused in their preparations and were studying her with frank curiosity and interest. However Ashe didn't detect hostility. Nobody looked nervous or guilty. Neither did anyone try and make a run for it, so the "Stalked by a Drag Queen" theory seemed like it wasn't going to hold water. At least not with that crowd.

"If there's anything I can do, just let me know," Tootie said. "Seriously, I owe Mystral a lot. She's seen me through some tough times and she helped me get started in the drag scene. I want to be there for her in her hour of need!" With that, she sat down and picked up a pair of silicon bust forms which she expertly pressed into place before she shrugged into a shimmering green bustier. She looked back over her shoulder at Ashe, who was trying to remain inconspicuous, and Tootie called out, "If you've got a free hand honey, would you mind doing me up?"

"Sure. Give a yelp if it's too tight." Ashe pulled the garment snugly over Tootie's slimly muscled back and secured the line of hooks while she hoped her face didn't show the fact that she was fighting a blush at the unaccustomed action.

"I bet you're more used to taking these things off than putting them on," Tootie addressed their reflection in the mirror.

"Neither, really," Ashe replied. She kept her eyes down, certain her cheeks were flushed. The task finished, she backed up a step.

"Perfect." Tootie said and blinked sparkly eyes at Ashe. "All of us here are big fans of Phoenix and we're looking out for her."

"I appreciate that," Ashe said.

"Oh, sorry where are my manners! Let me introduce you." Tootie gestured extravagantly to each member, and they in turn gave variations of a grand curtsy. "These fabulous ladies are Miss Mary Christmas and Jasmine Sexilicious. Over here we have Star Spangled Sapphire and Neo-mi Beechay."

Ashe found herself inundated with a chorus of *Enchante* and pleased to meet you.

"I heard about what's been happening and I have no idea who could be leaving those letters," Sapphire said. She straightened the towering wig on her head that matched her namesake before she leaned forward to press one blue-taloned finger to the lush fake eyelashes ringing her heavily made-up eyes. "But we queens know about dealing with weirdos."

"Oh yes, uh huh," Jasmine and Mary Christmas said together and nodded in unison.

"I had this one guy follow me into the parking lot after a show!" Jasmine told the room in a scandalized voice. She stood up and flung a feather boa over her shoulders with a dramatic sweep. "And he offered to buy my panties!"

"For how much?" Sapphire asked. "Ow! Hey don't hit me! You'll rub off my glitter." Offended, Sapphire rubbed at her shoulder.

"That's not the issue here," Tootie scolded, hands on her slim hips. "Honestly!"

"Nobody's getting *my* gotchies for less than a hundred," Neomi told the room.

"Good luck finding anyone interested in paying actual money for your old dog-eared boxers, my dear," Sapphire sniffed.

"And I'm sure you've got people lined up around the block for your granny panties from the bargain bin," Neo-mi shot back, looking as if she was enjoying herself immensely. "The big beige ones with the stretch panel in front."

"Mmmrowr!" Tootie called out from her perch on her stool and mimed eating popcorn. "Cat fight in aisle three!"

"You better watch yourselves. I bite." Neo-mi bent over to stuff her head into a long, scarlet and black wig. Satisfied, she came up for air and adjusted the bodice of her fitted evening gown.

With a double take, Ashe realized that Neo-mi's 'assets' were real. She was the first female drag queen Ashe had ever met, and was just as fabulous as the others.

Jasmine leaned forward to apply yet another layer of eyeliner and said, "Well I haven't seen anyone suspicious around, but if I do, believe you me I'll give them a piece of my mind and an asskicking, not necessarily in that order."

"Reporting them to either me or Danny—uh, Lady Wonderland would be fine," Ashe said. She wondered how much more information she was going to be able to get before she had to escape. The dazzling colors and stifling air were giving her a bit of a headache.

"Actually I saw a dude hanging around the sound equipment earlier." Neo-mi came over to Ashe and leaned against the dressing table as she spoke. "I thought he was with the delivery crew or the cleaners or something but as soon as I got close, he just scrambled like a bat out of hell. Kinda weird, now that I think of it. Had his hood up too, inside, which was also strange now that I think of it."

"Could you describe him?" A frisson of tension shot through her muscles.

"Average height for a guy." She pursed her glitter-painted lips. "A bit chunky. Actually he might not have been a guy. It was like only a second that I saw him. Sorry, that's not very helpful, is it?"

"It's great," Ashe said. Her focus went inward as she processed the information. "Thanks a lot. Anyway, I won't keep you from your prep."

"No problem." Neo-mi gave her a jaunty salute and went back to her mirror where she pulled out a tube of bright pink mascara and got busy with it.

"Where are my Amazing Technicolor Dream Shoes?" Tootie called out. "I know they were just here. Has anybody seen my little darlings?"

"Are these them?" Mary Christmas trotted over holding a pair of suicidally tall platform shoes that had Ashe reeling back from the sheer force of the glittering brilliance.

"Yes! Thank you dearest." Tootie blew kisses and took her shoes. She wedged her feet into them and pranced up and down the narrow dressing room. Tootie stopped in front of Ashe, who had to look up to meet the young queen's eyes. Tootie tutted and said, "Don't worry hon, you've got all of us looking out for Mystral and if anyone tries anything funny tonight, we'll make sure you know about it. We are totally on Mystral's team and have grave issues with anyone who isn't."

"Thanks," Ashe said. As she backed out of the stifling dressing room, Ashe felt a surge of confidence. Anyone who could count on having drag queens in their posse had an advantage in a great number of situations.

After she returned to the much more breathable air of the club, Ashe wanted to follow up on the lead Neo-mi had given her. She questioned the bouncers and the bartender in turn but unfortunately, the mysterious visitor had excellent timing and the staff had been absorbed in clearing up some last-minute issues with Danny in an impromptu meeting by the lockers. Ashe took a quick look around but whoever had been there had left without a trace.

Ashe found a tall stool and pulled it over to the stage where Mystral was busily preparing. She'd put on some music to serve as background as the first groups of club-goers started wandering in. They mostly gathered around the bar and a few settled at a table toward the middle of the dance floor.

More people trickled in and the house lights lowered. The walls came alive with scattered squares of light from a disco-ball hanging over the stage. The music was pretty standard, a mix of pop and dance tunes and Ashe tuned most of it out while she scanned the room, mentally cataloguing each new person to enter the club. The girly-girls with their clubbing clothes on, hair up and hung with jangly jewelry; the butches in little clots, shoving and joking with each other; the club veterans, hanging back and comfortably aloof and a whole range of everything in-between. The air was electric, the evening full of promise.

A few bouquets lined the walls, gifts from various bars and other clubs, getting their names out. A table near the entrance was decorated with piles of flyers and postcards, CDs from the various acts that would be appearing that night, some assorted handmade rainbow-themed jewelry, as well as some kind of mysterious egg-like objects that Ashe wasn't sure she needed to investigate. A woman in a loose linen tunic and broomstick skirt oversaw the table and she chatted with the incoming people. At one point, she cracked open one of the eggs and gave a demonstration with something that looked like a white silicon mitten on one hand.

As the event progressed, Ashe realized how much things had changed since her heyday in the scene. Gone was the illicit desperation, replaced by diversity and pride. Fun, even. The gay community really had become gay.

But she couldn't relax. Joelle had said the notes always came during an event. There was a good chance that somebody in the crowd was the stalker. She had to be ready in case they made their presence known. Then she would act, swiftly and permanently putting an end to the threat and freeing Mystral from their unwanted presence.

Ashe shifted and crossed her arms over her chest. She glanced back over one shoulder to where Mystral stood in her booth with a penlight hanging from her neck. Perhaps noticing the attention, she looked up and gave Ashe a wide grin. She was in her element, calm but brimming with energy, focused and alert. Ashe felt herself responding to the mood. She wanted nothing more than to bask in Phoenix's glory. Ashe allowed herself one more lingering look before she wrenched her gaze back to the increasingly crowded room.

The house lights went down with a thunderclap from the speakers and a cheer went up from the crowd. Ashe peered uneasily into the sudden darkness. A spotlight drew her attention to the entrance. The door opened and a glittering Goddess entered. Encased from neck to ankle in a shimmering mermaid dress and crowned with a jeweled Marie-Antoinette wig, the hostess of the event made her grand entrance. Lady Wonderland held a wireless microphone in one satin gloved hand and used it to address the hooting and whistling crowd.

"Welcome to Diamond Virgins! Is everyone having a good time?"

Her question was answered by raucous cheers and a few people saying, "Hell yeah!" With a wave of one long, lithe arm, Lady Wonderland scattered a handful of glitter over the cheering crowd. While the glitter settled, she picked her way elegantly through it, making quite good time on her towering platform shoes. They were clear plastic and strappy, decorated liberally with sparkling rhinestones and Ashe was quite certain there would be fatalities if she ever tried to take even one step in shoes like those. Exquisitely made-up and moving with a lithe grace, Lady Wonderland was quite a presence. After she narrated the evening's schedule, she let a burly bouncer help her onto the riser in front of the stage. A Madonna remix blasted through the club and she launched herself into her routine. Lady Wonderland danced and lip-synched to a fun selection of songs, both old and new. While she was fascinated with the show, Ashe kept her attention on what was happening outside the spotlight.

A few more acts went on, including a lovely rendition of "Memories" by Tootie Tra-La-La. When she finished, she bounded onto the stage and gave Mystral a big lipstick kiss on the cheek. After the last glittery queen curtsied her way out Lady Wonderland once more took her place at center stage. The crowd, already excited and noisy, erupted into an earsplitting cheer. It was time for Phoenix to step into the spotlight.

Lady Wonderland waved one graceful arm over her head as she announced, "And for your listening pleasure tonight, we have the one, the only, DJ Phoenix! Give it up people!"

"Laaaaaadies!" Mystral crooned into the microphone, her voice husky and low. The timbre of it sent a thrill down Ashe's spine. "How are you all doing tonight? Having fun?"

The crowd responded with variations on the theme of "Yeah!" complete with piercing catcalls and scattered applause.

"First let's hear it for the lovely Lady Wonderland!"

Obligingly, the spotlight focused on the glittering hostess as she waved and swept a curtsy to the surge of cheering that burst from the crowd.

"Next, a public service message," Mystral's voice echoed through the club. "To all of you party people out there, HIV is no joke. Get tested often and practice safety. Okay?"

Cheers and shouts answered her.

The beat framed her words as Mystral continued, "Glove your toys and use dental dams because you know why? Yeah, because you respect your partner and you respect yourself. Now remember that all of you, 'cause the party's just getting started!" As another wave of cheering came, Mystral moved away from the microphone and a heavy beat throbbed from the speakers. The floor filled with gyrating, shaking bodies and Ashe had to scotch her stool back a bit to avoid the flailing limbs. In spite of herself, Ashe's body responded to the undeniable rhythm. A surge of electricity pulsed through her. Mystral's timing was flawless, her music original and compelling. Ashe wasn't much of an expert on the subject of club music, but she could tell Mystral was more than

just skilled. She was a genius. Unconsciously, Ashe rubbed the goose bumps from her arms.

“Anybody here with their special person?” Mystral’s smoky, intoxicating voice called out over the music. The lights spiraled to a focus on Mystral again, alive and vibrant, fully immersed in her Phoenix persona. “Even if you’re not, it’s still early. Take a chance, relax and have a good time. This next song is for someone special. Maybe you haven’t heard anything like this before, but somebody’s got to be the first.”

With an odd feeling of *déjà vu*, Ashe glanced behind herself. Her eyes met Mystral’s in a brilliant moment of clarity. Mystral gave her a sweet, mischievous smile that sent an electric thrill through Ashe. The words came and Ashe’s heart stopped.

*Kono michi aruku, hajimete no ippo
Watashi no omoi ga todoku kana?
Just to reach you*

The words echoed through Ashe’s mind. *As I take the first step down this road, I wonder if my thoughts will reach you.* She’d never heard the song before, but it called to her like a treasured memory. With one hand on her headphones, Mystral dropped her eyes for an instant before she released a wave of pounding beats. Ashe felt herself swept up in the sizzling aftermath of a Starmine finale, the last echoes of a volley of fireworks that filled the sky with the lights of a million fireflies. The sweet, female voice sang out over the top, the words that soared over the crowded dance floor sent a lance through Ashe’s chest.

*Ano hi no yoru mitai ni, mou ichido dakishimete hoshii,
Ano toki mezameta, anata no ude no naka.
You wake my dream*

With a hard swallow, Ashe fought the memory of Mystral’s body pressed against hers, the cold from the damp grass seeping through her legs. *I want you to hold me again like you did that night when I awoke in your arms.* It had to be a coincidence.

The melody lifted her and the floor dropped out from her feet. Ashe felt herself falling for an instant before the beat caught her. True, the lyrics were trite and the English was laughingly bad, but they hit her in a place where she didn’t have any armor. Did Mystral understand the meaning, or had she just selected the song because she liked the melody? And what did she mean by *someone special*? Ashe shook herself back to the present and pressed her lips together. She had a job to do and so did Mystral.

She was most likely just working the crowd, getting them into the mood of the event.

A familiar face appeared in the mass of clubbers. Ashe straightened up.

"Hello there! Glad to see you're here tonight," Joelle said. She held a plastic cup filled with some kind of red beverage that was decorated with a celery stick. Beside her was a woman in a dapper suit who reached over to shake Ashe's hand with a firm no-nonsense grip.

"I'm Lorna," she said. "Nice to meet you."

"I've brought a drink for Misty," Joelle said. "If that's all right. I just wanted to run it by you first."

Ashe looked over to where Mystral was absorbed in her task, her bright head bopped to the beat. "That's fine. Go ahead."

"No, that's all right. I'll leave it to you." Joelle passed the drink over. "I finally managed to get Lorna away from our table and onto the dance floor and she's going to have to dance with me now."

"Aww, Joelle honey, come on." Lorna rubbed a hand through her crewcut. Joelle put on a pout. In response, Lorna opened her arms and gathered Joelle up in them. Over Joelle's shoulder, Lorna shot Ashe a long-suffering look. However, she graciously led Joelle out to the dance floor and her face relaxed into a smile as Joelle wrapped her arms around her neck and settled against her. The intimacy of the moment, the completion they shared hit Ashe in the chest like a spike of ice. Ashe had to move. With the drink held aloft so it wouldn't get jostled, she turned away from the floor and gave a nod to the bouncer by the stage before she ducked into the backstage hallway. The stage was much narrower that it appeared from the floor and Ashe had to turn sideways to edge past the rigging that held the light display.

Mystral was absorbed in her task as Ashe squeezed her way into the booth. She looked up with an intensity in her eyes that practically had Ashe melting along with the ice in the drink. Without missing a beat, Mystral moved over to make a bit of space in the cramped booth, tacitly extending the invitation to join her. They ended up shoulder-to-shoulder. Ashe's heart sped up in the sudden close quarters.

"Compliments of Joelle," Ashe said as she handed over the drink.

"Thanks. Don't you want to taste it first?" Mystral held the cup out, her lips quirking into a smile. "You know, to make sure it isn't poisoned or otherwise tampered with?"

"I'm sure it's fine," Ashe said, but nevertheless she ducked down a bit and let Mystral give her a sip. It was both fishy and spicy and Ashe wrinkled her nose. "You like that?"

"Oh yeah," Mystral replied. She adjusted something on the console in front of her with one hand as she took a big gulp of the drink. "It'll cure what ails ya! You know what they say, candy's dandy but liquor's quicker!"

"All right. Glad to know you've got your priorities straight," Ashe drawled. She leaned back against the wall, strangely reluctant to leave the cramped space behind the DJ booth. Mystral didn't seem to mind her presence either as she took a few more swallows of her drink. Ashe was certain it was her imagination, but Mystral was standing closer to her than was necessary, even in that narrow space.

A small crowd had taken notice of Ashe and they gathered in front of the booth. A few of the assembled club-goers chanted "Kiss! Kiss!" and Ashe fixed them with a scathing glare.

Mystral paid them no heed as she gnawed on her celery stick and expertly switched over to a new song, one Ashe recognized as a club staple from way back. The crowd in front of the booth dissolved as they cheered and flung themselves around the dance floor in happy abandon. Suddenly Ashe felt a soft, cool pressure on her cheek and she drew back to meet Mystral's dancing eyes. Her heart kicked into an adrenaline-fuelled panic. What had just happened? Had Mystral really just done what she thought she had? Ashe fought the desire that sparked into life with the touch of Mystral's lips to her skin and sucked down a hard breath. She backed out of the booth and escaped to the safety of her stool. She had to shoo some of the hooting and catcalling dancers away from it. A few jovially drunk people pounded her on the back and congratulated her but Ashe just waved them away with a frown. Her hands shook and it was a long time before Ashe managed to get her jangled nerves calm again.

After a few more songs, Mystral's turn ended. While Mystral prepared to hand the booth over to the next DJ, Lady Wonderland started up a raffle. At Joelle's insistence, Ashe took a numbered card and half-watched as prizes were claimed to thunderous applause. The spoils included Diamond Virgins T-shirts, "safersex" kits, a bunch of CDs including Mystral's, and a bottle of whiskey, courtesy of the local liquor-mart.

Ashe kept her focus on the room, very aware of Mystral behind her. A sudden tap on her arm brought Ashe's guard up in an instant.

"That's your number!" Joelle said and pointed excitedly.

"Thanks, I think," Ashe said as the esteemed hostess presented her a life-sized door poster of none other than Lady Wonderland herself clad in a leopard-print unitard. From her station at the DJ booth, Mystral gave a congratulatory shout and whistle.

"Lucky you," Mystral said. She hopped down from the stage and landed at Ashe's side. She had her bag over her shoulder and her headphones around her neck. Her proud deathhawk had wilted a bit under the heat of the lights. Long tendrils trailed down over her shoulders. "You should put it on your ceiling. Your bedroom ceiling."

"Oh God, not there!" Suddenly aware of Lady Wonderland eavesdropping most shamelessly, Ashe backtracked. "I mean I should put this lovely poster somewhere that it can be admired by more people than just me."

"Oh my, just you, hmm?" Lady Wonderland said. She gestured extravagantly with the champagne flute she'd acquired at some point during the evening. "I'm sure there are quite a few hopeful individuals who'd be more than willing to visit the gallery of your bedroom. Even without the addition of *moi*."

"I didn't mean to say that," Ashe said, flustered. Beside her, Mystral doubled over with laughter. "Anyway, we have to go."

"Thank you for joining us and have a lovely night," Lady Wonderland said. She tilted her head and drained the glass then she waved it at the cheering crowd before

trotting off on some mission.

"I'm not losing my mind," Mystral said, wiping her eyes. "It's just, Ashe you're amazing." She whirled and threw her arms around Ashe's neck, who froze in shock as the motion brought Mystral's body up against her own. "Are you sure we have to go right now? No time for even one dance?"

Mystral's closeness made it hard for Ashe to think. A deep heartbeat thrummed through her and each breath resonated down to her toes. The crowd around them faded. Ashe's world narrowed to the small bubble including just the two of them. She ached to complete the gesture, put her hands on Mystral's hips and pull her close, cradle Mystral against her. She didn't even care to pretend they were dancing, she wanted to take Mystral in her arms right then and there. And that was the last thing Ashe could allow herself to do.

Certain that Mystral could feel the great kick her heart gave, Ashe carefully took Mystral's wrists and lowered them as she backed up a step. With a stab of regret at the hurt look in Mystral's eyes, she said, "No. I have to take you home."

The cold night air hit Ashe in the face. Her breath steamed out in clouds as she rubbed her arms against the sudden chill. Beside her, Mystral fanned herself.

"Sorry about, uh, being a bit weird just now," she said as they made their way toward the parking lot. "Lee's Bloody Caesars are pretty strong. I got kind of carried away back there. I'm better now. Anyway, I owe you a big thanks because you saved me from making a complete ass of myself." Mystral's words effervesced over them and filled the silence. "I can't dance to save my life. In fact, I've been compared to a glove on a stick, which is frankly insulting to gloves. One big reason why I got into DJ-ing is so I can enjoy the tunes without being in danger of wanting to shake my flailing bootie on the dance floor and risk traumatizing people who are unlucky enough to witness my terrible moves."

Not able to find anything to say, Ashe just unlocked the door. She shook out her long trenchcoat and whirled it around her shoulders against the chill of the night and got into the driver's seat. On the way back, Mystral was quiet as well, probably drained after the event and Ashe let her rest in silence. When they arrived at Mystral's apartment, Ashe leaned over. Mystral had her eyes closed and didn't move. Ashe reached out and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

With an indelicate snort, Mystral jerked upright. "Sorry, I kind of dozed off there. Are we back at my place yet?"

"That's right. You must be tired."

"Yeah," Mystral said as they headed into the building and Ashe followed her up the stairs. Mystral's stomach gave a growl. Sheepishly, she looked back at Ashe and rubbed her belly. "And hungry. I used up a bunch of calories tonight."

Ashe was about to reply when the stairway suddenly fell into absolute blackness. Automatically, Ashe threw out an arm and backed Mystral up behind herself.

"Stay here and if I tell you to run, you get the hell out of here." Ashe dug into her bag and passed over the keys to her truck. Then she clicked the penlight she always carried into life. She swept the narrow beam over the stairs and flattened herself against the wall. Ashe reached the hallway in a few measured steps. She held herself still, listening for the sound of an intruder but all she could hear was her own pounding heart. A quick check revealed nothing other than the closed doors of the apartments. The blind corner leading to the fire escape concerned her and Ashe gave up the safety of the wall to dart across the hallway. Her light showed her it was empty and Ashe was just about to give the all-clear signal when a jolt of awareness jerked her body into action. The subliminal frisson of nerves told Ashe someone was behind her.

Ashe dropped to the floor just as she heard the swoosh of something heavy flying over her head. With a dull clang, it ricocheted off the wall. She rolled over, penlight aimed at her attacker but all she saw was a red cylinder coming at her. The downswing caught her across the wrist and the penlight went flinging off down the hall.

"Mystral go!" Ashe shouted. She twisted her body in a frantic attempt to evade the next hit, which smashed her right across the ribs, up high under her armpit. What it lacked in strength, it made up for in sheer lucky accuracy. A momentary flash of agony drove the breath from Ashe's lungs in a barked shout. A second hit came, this one glanced off her shoulder. With practiced determination, Ashe ignored the pain that blossomed through her and got to her knees, ready to retaliate. She didn't get the chance. A solid kick landed in her gut. It took everything she had not to cry out with the impact. Ashe crumpled and steeled herself for the next attack. The second kick came and Ashe was ready. A grab and a twist, and Ashe was rewarded by a meaty thud. Scrabbling and pounding footsteps followed. Through a bile-tinged haze, Ashe just made out the sliver of light on the floor as the fire escape door opened and drifted closed again.

Sprawled on the cold concrete floor, Ashe could only move in slow motion. A beam of light blinded her and Ashe threw a hand over her face, unconsciously bracing for another assault.

"Are you okay?" Mystral's voice brought Ashe back.

Her breath came out in sharp gasps as Ashe fought the dizziness and pain radiating through her. "Yeah, I'm fine," she said, unable to make it sound remotely believable. The flash of fear ignited into anger. Ashe snapped, "Get that light out of my face. I thought I told you to run."

"Sorry. I know you did," Mystral said. In the wan darkness, Ashe saw her head come up and heard the stubborn strength in her voice as she spoke, "But that bastard got Midnight and I'm not going to let him get you too."

"Dammit, Mystral! You could have been seriously hurt!" Ashe said. She struggled to get up and Ashe felt an arm come around her, gentle and strong. A shock of heat rippled through Ashe at the contact. Startled, she waved off Mystral's unspoken offer of help and stood up, mentally cataloging her injuries.

That lucky hit across her ribs sent jolts of pain through her with each breath.

"You could have been too," Mystral said.

"I'm a professional," Ashe said. She impatiently yanked her trenchcoat into order. She brushed a hand over her forehead, surprised to find her fingers shaking. Ashe clenched her fists. She had to get control of the situation.

"Let's go," she said in a level voice as if it was all part of the schedule.

When they reached Ashe's truck, she stopped in her tracks. Something white fluttered under one of the windshield wipers. Breathless, Ashe took a quick step forward and grabbed it. The letter was typed onto white paper, like the others. The stark black words read:

The crowds and the stares
they're poisoning your heart and blackening your soul
building a wall around the innocence that only I see.

Get away from it before I need to crack you like a walnut.

White hot anger burned her face and filled her with dangerous energy. With a single motion, Ashe shoved the note into her pocket. She turned to Mystral. The frightened expression on her face gave Ashe an additional burst of emotion. This had gone too far. Ashe would not rest until she had seen the perp caught and punished. But first, she had to get Mystral out of there. Ashe opened the passenger door and ushered Mystral inside. She noticed with a calm disinterest that one of her headlights had been smashed and there were a few new dents on the front grill of her truck. A scratched and dinged fire extinguisher lay abandoned on the pavement. Ashe didn't bother getting pissed off. Her priorities were elsewhere.

Soon they were speeding down the deserted road. Mystral had her knees pulled up to her chest, looking very small and young in the orange light of the streetlights.

"How did they find my place?" Mystral's voice had a catch in it that tore at Ashe's heart.

"Don't worry, we'll find out," Ashe said. She had both hands on the wheel, her eyes trained on the road. She ached to reach out to Mystral, give her the smallest bit of comfort, but Ashe found herself locked in place.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace safe."

Chapter Seven

"I'M TAKING YOU to Yakkun's mother's restaurant," Ashe said as she thumbed off her phone after a short call to Yakkun where she'd snapped out most of the details. She left out her own potential injury, reasoning there was no need to mention anything until she knew for sure how serious it was.

At the next intersection, she looked over at Mystral. This time Ashe managed to break free from the frozen feeling that was holding her in place. She reached out to Mystral and gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder. She didn't draw away as Mystral's hand came up over hers.

"It's going to be okay," Ashe said in a choked voice. Mystral's skin was soft and supple against her own. Her warmth stole up Ashe's arm, straight to her chest.

"I'm so fucking sick of this bullshit," Mystral said.

"I know." Ashe let go of Mystral and gripped the steering wheel as if she could squeeze her shaking hands still.

The rest of the drive was quiet and soon they ducked into the small entranceway of May's Kitchen. Due to the location in the middle of the nightclub district, May kept late hours. She generally closed at around two or three am, sometimes later if there was an event nearby that brought a lot of customers. The inside of the restaurant was warm and dark. No other customers were in sight.

May ushered them inside. She paused to collect the wooden sign outside that signified the restaurant was open. May fussed over Mystral like a worried mother. She rubbed her back and brought over a glass of water and hot hand towels. From her seat beside Mystral, Ashe noted that she looked a lot better. The proud tilt of her head was back. Her quirky grin filled Ashe's body with a warm, electric feeling she didn't want to fight. Ashe's anger faded as the last waves of adrenaline ebbed. Just being in that space made Ashe's battered body relax. The throbbing ache across her ribs eased as she breathed in the good smells of the kitchen.

"You must be Mystral. Tomo-kun just called and told me you'd be over. I'm so sorry to hear about your trouble. I'm May, by the way. Welcome to my kitchen."

"Nice to meet you," Mystral said with a grin as she got comfortable on her stool. "Sorry I'm all sweaty and gross."

"Oh, don't mind," May said. "I'm used to that, it's Saturday night after all. Anyway, have you eaten? What can I get you?"

"Oh gosh, I don't know." Mystral rubbed a hand through her wilting deathhawk and looked around. "What's on the menu? Anything you recommend?"

"There's no set menu," Ashe told her. "But everything May cooks is really good."

"I'm fine with that. Whatever you have on hand would be great. I eat anything!" Mystral stopped speaking and flapped her hands around.

"Uhhh...let's pretend I didn't just walk right into a huge double entendre, okay? I really don't eat *anything*, I mean I do have standards but I am pretty easy, um like as in easy to please. Okay, how about I just stop talking now before this gets even more awkward?"

"Don't worry," Ashe said. "Everything is fine, not awkward at all."

"Good. But you know I'll probably say something else dumb in a few minutes anyway. Just giving you a head's up."

"Thanks for the warning."

As May pattered around in the kitchen, Ashe leaned back on her stool and let her gaze rest on Mystral. She had her elbows on the counter and seemed quite at ease. With a quick word from Ashe, May took down her bottle and placed it on the counter, along with two glasses filled with ice and a small bottle of mineral water with a picture of Mount Fuji on the label.

"Do you drink *shochu*?" Ashe asked.

"Not sure," Mystral said. "I'll give it the old college try."

"Two then, please May." Ashe sat back as the older woman twisted off the cap. Her movements sure from years of mixing her customers' drinks, May poured a bit of the clear liquor over a glassful of ice, added water and completed the process with a quick swirl of the glass stir-stick. With a gentle smile, she passed it over to Mystral, who sniffed at it.

"What is this?"

"*Kuro-Kirishima*," Ashe said as she accepted her own glass from May. "It's from Kagoshima. May orders it direct, on my recommendation by the way."

Mystral took a cautious sip then ran her tongue over her lower lip. "Mmm, that's smooth. What's it made from? It's kind of like licorice but with a sweet aftertaste."

"Sweet potato," Ashe said with a warm glow in her chest that had nothing to do with the liquor. "When it gets a bit colder, you can have it with hot water. Mix in a pickled plum, now that's really good." She took a long drink. The tension drained from her. The atmosphere of May's always did that to her. After a while, May came over with bowls filled with stewed potatoes topped with snow peas and chopped spring onions.

Mystral grabbed up her chopsticks like an expert and dug in. With her mouth full, she exclaimed, "Oh my God, these are the best potatoes I've ever had. Ashe, you eat here a lot?"

"I used to come here every day," Ashe said. With an indulgent smile, she watched Mystral demolish her food like she hadn't eaten for days. "If it weren't for May, I think I would have starved to death or gotten scurvy during college."

"Mf. Mfwwmfmf," Mystral said enthusiastically.

Ashe turned to her own plate and started in on her potatoes, which were admittedly delicious. More than that, Mystral being there next to her felt so right. Like it had always been that way. Ashe downed some more of her *shochu* and forced herself to back up a bit. It was not the time to get maudlin. They were in the middle of a crisis. The door clacked open and Yakkun came in. An opportunistic

gust of cold night air came in with him.

"Sorry, I got here as soon as I could," he said as he sat down at the counter next to Mystral. May put a heaping bowl of potatoes in front of him and fixed her son with a concerned expression.

"And?" Ashe leaned forward to better glare down the counter at him.

"I've lined up a place we can stash Mystral that's safe and secure. The owner's out of town today but we can get the keys tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" With a scowl, Ashe crossed her arms over her chest and propped one knee up against the counter. "But what are we supposed to do tonight? I can't just take Mystral home with me."

"Why not?" Yakkun asked. "That's actually not such a bad idea."

Ashe straightened up and pushed herself to her feet, not caring about the stab of pain in her side. "Is that your idea of a plan? What the hell, Yakkun?"

"I don't mind," Mystral piped up. "But you're gonna have to lend me a T-shirt or something. I smell like a wad of onions that's been in a hobo's armpit. And not your average hobo but a crazy alcoholic hobo who shouts at pigeons and wears one of those 'End of the World' signs."

"That's a lovely image." Yakkun grimaced around a mouthful of potatoes. "Okay then, it's decided."

"My place is not a hotel for stray DJs," Ashe grouched, but she sat back down with a resigned sigh. She had wanted to doctor herself in private, have some time alone to get Mystral out of her head, maybe even try and get rid of some of the sexual pressure building up within herself. Ashe had been sleepwalking through life for so long, even before the whole situation with Jessie had gone down, the feelings awakening inside her were unwelcome and distracting.

"How about I go back to your apartment first thing in the morning?" Unmoved by Ashe's plight, Yakkun said to Mystral, "I want to ask around, maybe your neighbors saw something. Also, I can check out your place and maybe bring Shauna with me to pick up some stuff for you."

"That would be awesome of you, thanks."

"Great. Why don't you make up a list of stuff you want us to get?"

Mystral abandoned the dregs of her potatoes as she dug through her bag. She pulled out her keys and handed them over. "How long am I going to have to stay at the safehouse?"

"Until we get this mess sorted out and your stalker put away," Yakkun said.

Obligingly, May came over with a pad of paper and a pencil and Mystral bowed her bright head over it as she wrote out elaborate instructions, complete with a few diagrams and comments.

While she was writing, Ashe dug the note out of her pocket and showed it to Yakkun.

"Crack you like a walnut?" He raised his eyebrows. "That's that best they could think of?"

"I know, how lame." Mystral agreed. She waved her half-full glass in the air. "I can do better than that! Like, how about 'mash you like a turnip'?"

A few bits of his potato blew out with his guffaw. Yakkun avoided Ashe's annoyed swat and hooted, "Dice you like an onion?"

"Mediocre," Mystral said. She tapped her fingers on the counter and furrowed her brow. "Ooh! Carve you like a pumpkin."

"Good one. Hmm...grate you like a horseradish?"

"Juice you like a tomato!"

"Squash you like a...squash!"

Ashe hid her amused expression behind taking another long sip of her drink. The contest escalated until the two of them were hunched over their phones, looking up ways to prepare things like artichokes and Brussels sprouts and if it was possible to electrocute a pineapple. In the midst of the increasingly strange conversation, May disappeared into the back and returned carrying a plastic bag, which she passed over to Mystral.

"Here's an old T-shirt of Vic's she left here. It's not Paris Collection, but it's clean and better to sleep in than your clubbing outfit. Plus, I put in one of those travel toothbrushes for you. We keep a bunch of them on hand for customers."

"Thanks." Mystral put the bag into her lap and looked down at her revealing bustier. "Yeah, I don't want to leave all this clubsludge on Ashe's sheets."

Ashe tried to contain the flash of heat the words brought. Her sheets. Mystral was going to sleep in her bed. She pushed herself away from the counter and stood up. "We've imposed on you for long enough. I think it's time to call it a night."

"Good idea, I'm pooped," Mystral said. She stood up and drained the last of her drink before she put the glass down with a flourish.

Mystral dug out her wallet and tried to pay, but May waved her off.

"I've cashed out already and it was just leftovers," she said.

"Thanks for the great meal, and it was nice meeting you, May."

"Ashe will have to bring you back when I've got some real food ready," May said and started to gather up their dishes. "Good night and take care, now."

Mouth full, Yakkun only waved at them. Then he got up, spurred to help his mother as she prodded him with the business end of a soup ladle. May urged him to hurry up with goodnatured annoyance she said, "*Hayaku shite yo, boya!*"

"*Kibai yanse!*" Ashe reached over and gave Yakkun slap on the shoulder, wishing him luck in her local dialect as he industriously stacked bowls.

Her heartbeat kicked into high gear as Ashe opened the door. Instinctively she checked for suspicious people before she led Mystral out to the deserted street.

"I live a few blocks from here," Ashe said. "Are you okay to hike it? I usually park here and walk home when I've had a few drinks. The cops don't patrol around this area much, but I don't want to risk it."

"Sure, I want to give myself a chance to cool down a bit from the club," Mystral said with a grin even as she wrapped her cardigan close around her body with a shiver. "Is it okay if I leave my gear in your truck for now? I don't

want to haul it around with me. I stuck it under the seat so nobody's going to steal it."

"That's fine," Ashe said. She paused for a fraction of a second before she shrugged her coat off and draped it over Mystral's shoulders. Without further comment, she started walking, her footsteps clipped and loud against the damp concrete.

Chapter Eight

THE COLD NIGHT air ignited the pain in her side. Ashe forced herself to hide it. The short walk to her apartment seemed to take ages. At the same time it was over too soon and Ashe unlocked the door with a burst of nerves. She forced herself to calm down. They were in an emergency situation after all. Ashe flipped on the lights and glanced around. Bare white walls and sparse furniture greeted them. The room definitely lacked personality. Never one for home decorating, Ashe preferred her living space to be functional rather than comfortable; however, for the first time she wished she'd put a bit more effort into making the place cozy.

In the entrance hall, Mystral hopped on one foot as she struggled with the zipper of her long boots before she padded into the room. With a sigh, Mystral draped herself over the sofa and looked quite comfortable.

"Sorry for invading your place," she said. "And thanks for your coat too. I hope you weren't cold."

"Don't worry about it," Ashe said. She ducked into the bedroom and grabbed a bunch of towels and some spare sweatpants from her dresser. She suppressed the groans that filled her mouth as she straightened up. Ashe went over to Mystral, handed her the bundle and said, "The bathroom's over there. I'm sure you want to take a shower after the club. Take your time and let me know if there's anything else you need."

"I'm fine, I think."

With that, Ashe went into the kitchen. She nervously plugged in the kettle and took down mugs from the cupboard. Unusually distracted, Ashe lost track of things she'd just picked up and couldn't decide which kind of herb tea to make. A flash of movement and color in the polished side of the kettle caught her eye. She took a quick glance behind her and her breath stuck in her throat. The pain from her injuries vanished in an instant. An electric rush speared deep in her belly. Mystral was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, absorbed in pulling her mesh shirt over her head, revealing her bare back fully for the first time.

As Mystral dropped her shirt to the floor, Ashe caught sight of the full tattoo that swooped over the graceful curves of her body. Stretching from her right shoulder down her entire back to her waist was a phoenix, fully plumed and poised as if in flight. The detail and vibrancy was astonishing. The sleek curves of bare flesh underneath the tattoo were graceful. Sensual. Ashe felt as if she had been dashed from head to foot with ice water. She swallowed hard as Mystral's skirt slipped down over her hips. Her perfect backside was split by a black lace thong, the firm swells luscious above the thigh-high fishnet stockings.

Mystral was stunning. Ashe had no thought in her mind other than how much she wanted to run her hands over that soft skin, crush Mystral's body to hers. The mug dropped from her senseless fingers. The clunk as it hit the counter shocked her back to reality. Shaken and breathless, Ashe lost herself in

the mindless detail of shuffling things around in the kitchen. She absently plunked tea bags into two mugs and set them down on the coffee table. As she listened to the muffled sound of the shower, Ashe dug out an extra blanket and pillow and put them on one of the kitchen chairs she'd dragged over to the sofa. She went into her bedroom where she quickly stripped the bed and put on new, crisply laundered sheets before she took out an old set of scrubs for herself and added them to the pile on the chair.

Once the few chores were done, Ashe allowed herself to drop the iron façade. Half falling onto the chair, Ashe let the pain overcome her for the first time. Her body sank into a fetal curl with her arms wrapped around herself. The movement as she straightened up yanked a hiss from her. Ashe fumbled around in her bag until she dragged out the little blister pack of pills. She popped one out and downed it with a gulp of tea. Loxonin S wouldn't cure what ailed her, but it would let her forget about it for a short time.

Ashe didn't have time to let the painkiller take effect. She struggled with the buttons of her vest before she managed to ease it off. She tried to get the flat of her hand to cover the spot on her ribs that hurt the worst, but the twisting motion sent her into a spasm of pain. For a few long seconds, she was unable to do anything other than grab at her elbows and struggle to get air into her lungs. Ashe bit off a curse when she realized she was going to have to ask for help.

She didn't look up until she heard the bathroom door open and close again.

"I feel a million times better now," Mystral said as she padded into the room, rubbing at her damp hair with a towel. She was barefoot, wearing the oversized T-shirt and sweatpants, cheeks pink and glowing from the hot water. Mystral reached the sofa in a few steps and flopped down on it as she accepted the mug of tea Ashe passed her. She wrapped her long fingers around her mug and looked relaxed and comfortable, which Ashe was grateful for.

"Can I ask you to help me with something?" Ashe rushed the words in order to get the ordeal over with as soon as possible.

"Sure, what is it?"

"I need to check if I've broken anything," Ashe said. She felt her face get warm. "I can't quite reach and I was wondering if you could do it."

"Of course," Mystral said. Suddenly she was all business as she put down her mug and scooted forward on the sofa. "What do I need to do?"

"Just press down where I tell you," Ashe said. She turned around, realizing she was going to have to take her shirt off. She bit her lip as she popped off the cufflinks and tossed them onto the table. Ashe hurried to undo the buttons before she slipped the crisp cotton off her shoulders. The cool air hit her arms as she shrugged out of the sleeves.

She heard Mystral stand, felt the closeness of her body as Mystral came up behind her.

"That's a really classy shirt," Mystral said as Ashe folded it loosely and put it on the coffee table. "With the cuffs and the way the buttons go, at first I thought it was

a guy's shirt, but it's got darts and everything. It fits you perfectly too. You must have phenomenal shopping skills."

"No, I've got a tailor," Ashe said with a sickly grin. She reached down and picked up the hem of her undershirt. She prepared to pull it over her head but gave up as a stab of pain lanced through her.

Suddenly Mystral was in front of her. "Here, I've got this."

Ashe froze. She fought the urge to recoil, to bat Mystral's hands away from her. "I can do it."

"It's okay, Ashe." The words were soft, Mystral's lingering touch sure. "How about this, just pretend I'm a doctor. Look, I'll even put on my doctor-y white coat," Mystral said. She bent down and picked up Ashe's discarded shirt, then slipped her arms into it. She tilted her head and fixed Ashe with an impish grin no good doctor would sport, and continued, "Arms up and this will be over before you know it."

Soon the undershirt was off and Ashe was sitting on the chair. She hugged her arms to her chest, feeling the single layer of cover provided by her sports bra was not nearly enough. She heard Mystral's sharp intake of breath. "How bad is it?" she asked.

"Oh my God, it's amazing. Do you work out?"

Ashe brushed a hand over her forehead as she said, "That's not the issue right now. Just tell me what you see. Besides the bruising, are there any uneven places?"

"Not that I can tell," Mystral said. She bent low over Ashe's back, her breath hot against her skin. Ashe tried not to shiver. "You said I have to press down. How about I do that now?"

"Yeah. Might as well." Ashe steadied herself and kept her breaths shallow. A humming, electric feeling prickled through her. She fought to keep the nervousness out of her voice. "Put both hands down, side by side and give a slow, even pressure. If you feel anything move or any jagged edges, back right off, okay?" Even though Ashe steeled herself, she still flinched as Mystral reached out for her.

"Don't be scared, I'm not going to hurt you," Mystral said. "You're not used to this, are you? Having people touch you."

Ashe gave a humorless laugh and said, "I've had women touch me before." She didn't want to mention that none of them had ever had such an effect on her. Ashe had always prided herself on her own restraint. That same restraint Mystral was sorely testing. "And I'm pretty used to getting my ass kicked," Ashe said, too exhausted and troubled to keep the honest admission from slipping out. "What I'm not used to is not being in control."

"Don't worry, it's only me."

With a quiet word of apology, Mystral placed her hands over the rapidly darkening bruise. Ashe sucked in a hard breath. The heat from Mystral's hands rippled through her. It started from the aching place on her ribs and shot all the way down to her toes. Ashe closed her eyes and bowed her head. Even through the ache of her injury, Mystral's skin against her own felt so good.

Ashe wanted to feel those hands all over her body, claiming her. She had never wanted to submit to anyone before, and the thought of giving all of herself to Mystral sent a tremor of longing through her. Before she could stop herself, Ashe let out a moan.

"Sorry! Did I hurt you?"

Her eyes snapped open and Ashe caught her breath. Her heart pounded. "Uh, it's all right," she choked.

"Thank goodness. You took quite a hit, but I don't feel anything broken. What do you think?"

"I agree with your opinion, Doctor Galbraith," Ashe said. She let out a sigh of relief. There was no way Yakkun would let her work with broken ribs. She straightened up enough for Mystral to get the hint and take her hands away. She immediately missed her touch. "Thanks," Ashe said. She turned around and cautiously pulled her undershirt back over her head, very aware that Mystral was still standing close to her.

"I could take your mind off it," she said in a low voice that sent a thrill of unease and desire through Ashe.

"What do you mean?" Ashe looked at her in confusion. She hoped she'd misunderstood.

"You know, give you a shoulder massage," Mystral said. Ashe felt a jolt as Mystral sank to her knees. She reached out with both hands and trailed her fingers over Ashe's thighs. "Or something else. Something...better."

Ashe's heart stopped. Mind blank, she could only gape at Mystral who gazed up at her. She held herself still and unwavering. The silence stretched painfully. The breathless spell broke when Mystral shook her head and sat back on her heels.

"Sorry, I was just kidding," Mystral said. "There's got to be a surcharge for that kind of service."

A rush of heat unfroze Ashe and she let out a feeble laugh. Her strength gave out and she fell back into her chair. The pillow tumbled to the floor. "Definitely out of Joelle's price range," Ashe joked.

Mystral picked up the pillow and cradled it in her arms. "Thanks for letting me crash on your couch."

Her expression softened as Ashe said, "You're sleeping in the bedroom. I don't mind the sofa. I end up falling asleep here a couple times a week anyway."

"Oh no, I don't want to kick you out of your own bed." Wide eyed, Mystral stood. She met Ashe's gaze and said in a low, husky voice, "I'm sure there's room enough for two."

Ashe wondered if that was another joke, but Mystral had spoken with sincerity. No hidden agenda clouded her frank words. For an instant, Ashe considered accepting, but just as quickly dismissed the thought with extreme prejudice.

"Actually I think I'd feel better out here," Ashe said. She experimentally rotated one shoulder and pretended she wasn't viscerally aware of Mystral's eyes on her. "The mattress is a bit too soft. For now, I need something more supportive." She didn't dare to look at Mystral. "I'm going to have a shower,

so feel free to go to bed. You must be tired. It's been a long day."

"Yeah, it sure has." Mystral stifled a yawn with the back of her hand. "See you tomorrow, then." She started toward the bedroom door, still wearing Ashe's shirt draped over her T-shirt. With one hand on the doorknob, Mystral stopped and turned. "Ashe, I, um, well, just wanted to say..." Mystral trailed off. She took a quick breath before finishing with, "Thanks for everything."

Ashe couldn't help the nagging feeling that wasn't what she had intended to say, but Ashe just replied, "Don't worry about it. That's what I'm here for."

BY THE TIME she was finished with her shower and changed into the well-worn scrubs, the bedroom door was closed and the apartment was quiet and dark. Ashe turned off the lights and stretched out on the sofa but sleep was hard in coming. Her mind was filled with images. What if she had taken Mystral up on her offer and had spent the night at her side? Would they have remained chastely apart or would they have found themselves drawn together, legs intertwining and bodies molding against each other? What would the weight of Mystral's body feel like in her arms? The spot where Mystral had touched her burned. She could not bring herself to think about what the "something else" could have been.

After a few fitful, restless hours, Ashe gave up on sleeping. She turned on her coffee maker and brewed up a pot of strong coffee. She filled a mug and took it out to the wide terrace. The sun hovered just below the horizon. The starry night sky slowly gave way to a washed-out grey dawn. Ashe's breath steamed in the chill air as she looked down over the dying streetlights of the city. She perched on the wooden picnic table she'd hauled up there with the help of Yakkun and Gus years ago, her thoughts in turmoil.

What was happening to her? Why couldn't she just take a step back, distance herself from Mystral? She shouldn't be having those thoughts or feelings. A headache threatened to bloom and Ashe kneaded the bridge of her nose, head down and shoulders hunched. Memories of what had happened to Jessie assaulted her mind. Ashe was Mystral's last defense against the person threatening her. She had failed Jessie, what would happen if she failed Mystral too? It would be the end of her. Ashe knew she would never forgive herself if anything happened to Mystral.

Lost in her thoughts, Ashe didn't hear the door open until she looked up to see Mystral making her way across the terrace with a mug cradled in her hands. She was bare-legged, wearing Ashe's dress shirt from the night before with the top four buttons left undone. It was not as baggy as a man's shirt and it skimmed the slim lines of her body, revealing long legs to an almost indecent degree. Ashe's mind lost the ability to process logical thought and she found her gaze frozen as she realized Mystral was absolutely bare under that shirt. Her erect nipples tented the fabric. Ashe felt her own body respond, growing hard under her thin cotton top in a way that had nothing to do with the crisp morning air.

With a cheerful, "Good morning," Mystral settled down beside her.

Ashe grunted a reply into her coffee cup.

"I hope you don't mind if I borrowed this," Mystral said. She put her mug down and shook her hands so the long cuffs fell back from her slender wrists.

Ashe's face burned. "I don't mind, but it probably smells."

"Only like you," Mystral said with an impish grin. While Ashe was busy being speechless, Mystral stretched her legs out and wriggled her toes in the chilly air. She raised her mug and said, "I also helped myself to coffee."

"That's all right," Ashe said. She moved over to give Mystral a bit more room on the table-top. "You're more than welcome to anything you want."

"Anything I want, huh?" Mystral's tone of voice was low and sultry. She leaned forward and slowly drew her tongue over her lower lip.

Ashe choked on her coffee. "Within reason," she said between coughs.

Mystral fixed Ashe with that piercing look she had, the look that made Ashe feel as if Mystral was seeing right into her soul. "So why are you out here at the crack of dawn? Was your back hurting?"

"No, it's actually not so bad. I was just thinking," Ashe said. She waved a hand to indicate the terrace. "It helps to clear my mind, coming out here."

"I can understand that," Mystral said. She shifted and leaned against Ashe with just the slightest amount of pressure on her arm. "This place is great. Is it all yours?"

"That's right," Ashe said. She was strangely unwilling to move away even as the logical part of her mind screamed for her to do so. "It's the reason why I chose this apartment." She paused, thoughts heavy but needing to speak. "Mystral," Ashe began, "There's something I need to tell you."

"You can tell me anything." Suddenly serious, she put her mug down.

"I'm not actually working for Yakkun," Ashe said. "Not anymore. I quit six months ago."

Mystral let out a surprised breath. "Why? What happened?"

As she spoke, Ashe tried to keep her voice steady, the tone neutral. "We had a client who came to us because her ex-boyfriend was stalking her. We got a restraining order and tried to keep him away from her but—" Ashe's voice broke and she paused to gather her thoughts. Next to her, Mystral held herself still. "But I messed up. I thought the danger was over and believed the client when she told us her ex had had a change of heart and moved on." Ashe gazed out over the slowly waking city, her voice flat and emotionless. "I left her alone and she met him in secret. He stabbed her thirty-seven times and then hung himself." Ashe's composure slipped away, her face twisted with pain. "Thirty-seven times, Mystral! She must have fought like a wild thing." Her shoulders fell and Ashe closed her eyes. "It was my fault. I could have saved them both but I didn't. So I quit the business. Got a regular job. Turned my back on everything I was. I thought I'd never have to do this again."

"I'm sorry that happened," Mystral said, her voice soft. "People are fucked up and there's nothing you can do about it." She clasped her hands on one bare knee and looked directly at Ashe as she continued, "I can tell you a million

times it wasn't your fault but I'm sure other people have already done that, so I'm not going to say it. What I am going to say is even if you had stayed on that girl like glue, her ex would have still found a way to get at her. A psycho who chops people into hamburger isn't going to give up because a few people get in his way. You would have just delayed him, or worse, gotten caught in the middle of it."

Mystral reached out. She didn't quite touch Ashe's hand, but she let her fingers rest on the tabletop a hairsbreadth away. "You made a mistake, not from laziness or stupidity but from trust. Your client lied to you and you trusted her. Okay, so it had a horrible ending, but the bottom line is, Ashe, you believed her. You said it yourself, trusting someone isn't idiotic. That's not something you should have to throw away your entire life for."

Shaken to her very core, Ashe couldn't speak. After Jessie had been murdered, Ashe had felt like her soul was ripped wide open, leaving her bleeding into the abyss. Mystral's sincere acceptance of Ashe's admission stanchied the flow. She had been wrong, punishing herself all this time. Ashe couldn't speak. The calm words overwhelmed her. Her mind reeled with emotion.

"If it's all right," Mystral said. "I'd like to give you a hug. I think you need one right now."

The words of refusal were on Ashe's lips but she couldn't make them come out. Instead, she dropped her head once in a nod. She let out a long breath that she felt she'd been holding for six months as Mystral's body came up against hers. Supple arms wrapped around her and held her tight. It felt so right, so good to be in Mystral's arms. Ashe didn't dare try and return the gesture. Instead, she clenched both hands onto the soft cotton of her scrubs, aware of every swell of Mystral's body against hers. She hoped Mystral couldn't feel the pounding of her heart. Just as she had after the motorcycle accident, Mystral snuggled against her and Ashe was powerless to stop the fist of heat that grabbed her between the legs. Fire shot through her belly to her knees. With a stream of mental curses, Ashe struggled to control her breathing, fighting the raw need that had woken up inside her.

"I'm sorry it's me who dragged you back after you left," Mystral whispered against her neck.

"No, it was my choice to take your case," Ashe said in a strained voice. "I don't regret that. And I promise I won't leave you alone. I will get you through this, alive and safe and in one piece."

"That's good to know," Mystral said. She released Ashe with a smile that cracked the ice around Ashe's resolve and flooded her with warmth. Ashe's entire body trembled, seized from within by a powerful force. "And don't worry, if you tell me not to go off meeting crazy stalker-type people without backup, then I totally won't. I remember the rules. And I'm glad you were honest with me. I appreciate that."

With the simple words, the trust Mystral still had in her, the self-doubt and guilt Ashe had been fighting to control lessened. The shadow overlooking her lost some

of its menacing power.

"And I want to tell you something," Mystral said and leveled Ashe with a calm gaze. "The reason I chose *my* apartment was based on its defensibility in the event of a zombie apocalypse."

"Really?" Ashe drew back. She could only stare at Mystral.

Was she serious? It appeared that she was.

"See, we can pry off the outside fire escape and seal the entrance. Pick zombies off by using the roof as a gun turret. The first floor doesn't have any windows because it's the parking garage," Mystral said. She spoke quickly and in a calm, rational voice. She took a break to sip at her coffee. "It's right across the street from a hardware store so we can loot it for hunting gear and machetes at the first sign the undead have risen. In the case of slow-zombies we'll just have to wait it out, growing food in the inner garden when our canned goods run out. If we're lucky, we might be able to snare some pigeons that fly over for fresh meat. In the case of fast-zombies we can secure a perimeter and hopefully the old-people's home down the street will lure enough of them away long enough for us to fortify the place and set up our countermeasures. There's mostly single, artsy-type people in my building. No kids to weigh us down and only a few pets, which I guess we could use as cannon fodder in a pinch. Anyway, I think I could organize a fairly effective zombie-repelling force with them. See, first we'd have to..."

Mystral outlined her zombie survival strategy in great detail until the sun rose fully and Ashe herded her back inside. Ashe stood in the simple, unadorned kitchen as Mystral watched her from the ancient Formica-topped table that had come with the apartment. She opened the fridge and surveyed the contents, mentally cataloguing them.

"How about an omelet?" Ashe asked. She pulled out a carton of eggs. "I'm no chef, but my cooking probably won't kill you."

"That sounds great," Mystral said. She stood and came up next to Ashe, who was concentrating on not dropping everything all over the floor. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Let's see..." Ashe's mind raced as she scanned the kitchen. It was feeling smaller by the second. "How about getting out some plates and stuff? Everything's over there." She nodded to the cupboard.

"Sure thing." Mystral hummed to herself and soon the table was decked out with two of Ashe's collection of plates and a good assortment of cutlery and mugs. The butter dish and a fat jar of jam Mystral had dug up from someplace completed the arrangement.

While Mystral set the table, Ashe chopped up a bunch of mushrooms and green peppers. She fried up some onions before she added the rest of the veggies. The kitchen filled with a good smell, helped a lot when Mystral stationed herself at the toaster and made a stack of toast.

"I don't cook much for myself, but I'm a toast aficionado," she declared muffledly as she hovered behind Ashe with half a piece of toast in her mouth, the other half held out as an offering. "Here, I buttered this specially for you, jam

too because I spare no expense when I'm imposing on people."

Surprised, Ashe found herself on the receiving end of a nicely browned piece of toast. She looked down at the bowl of beaten eggs in one hand and a colander filled with lettuce in the other. For a moment she tried to juggle them but stopped as Mystral put a gentle hand on her wrist.

"It's okay, just take a bite," Mystral told her. She came closer and leaned against the counter, her body relaxed and her expression unguarded. "Your hands are full. I've got this."

Ashe knew she should be feeling more uneasy, but she wasn't. It was so natural to be there, in her kitchen with Mystral beside her. The talk they'd had on the terrace had not healed, but had at least dulled the raw pain of her own failure. For the first time in half a year, Ashe felt at peace with herself.

With a quick grin, Ashe said, "That toast does look very nice. Thanks."

Extremely aware of exactly how many buttons Mystral had left undone, Ashe took great care not to look down as she leaned forward to accept the offering. The toast was perfect, crisp and warm. The butter and jam mixed together in a lovely way in her mouth. Mystral didn't move, but she watched Ashe with dancing eyes before she held the toast out again with a raised brow. In spite of herself, Ashe took another bite. She closed her eyes as she munched.

"You make a killer piece of toast," Ashe declared. She tried and failed to keep a somewhat dignified expression.

"Thanks," Mystral said. She got an evil little smirk and purred, "Just so you know, not every woman who I've spent the night with gets this special treatment."

Ashe reacted unconsciously to Mystral's amusement and went in for a third bite. "Well then, give me all you've got, sweetheart." The word slipped out and Ashe fought a flash of panic. She hoped the joking tone would remove any deeper meaning from her blundered admission.

Mystral obliged by shoving the rest of the piece of toast into Ashe's mouth. Her cheeks bulged and she felt like she'd almost taken too much. Ashe let out a "Mmf!" and chewed furiously.

"Sorry, you've got a bit of jam on you," Mystral said.

"Oops, where?" Ashe swallowed and ducked her head self-consciously.

"Here." Mystral reached out and ran a thumb over Ashe's lower lip. A sweet thrill blossomed from where Mystral touched her. The contact was at once simple and intensely intimate. Ashe hadn't meant to flinch, but she did. Mystral drew back and gave her a long look. In a low voice, she said, "You don't let too many people get close to you."

"Not really," Ashe said. Her breath hitched. "It's not something I'm good at."

"Who is?" Mystral told her with a quirk of her lips. She held Ashe's gaze with hers as she slowly licked her thumb. Her tongue trailed over the curve of the digit before she slipped the tip between her full lips and sucked the last traces of jam off. Her eyes drifted closed in enjoyment. Ashe swallowed hard as a wave of hunger swelled up at the simple but sensuous gesture. Mystral

hadn't done that on purpose, had she?

Mystral stepped back and settled down at the table. She made cheerful clinking sounds as she put the toast things back in order. Ashe used that opportunity to turn her attention back to her work. The weather report on the radio filled the silence while she put the finishing touches on the omelet. She cut it in half and slid the generous portions onto their plates. Mystral grabbed up her spoon and attacked her food with evident enjoyment.

"This is great," Mystral said between bites. She gulped at her coffee and patted herself on the chest. "I think omelets are my new favorite food."

"I'm glad you like it," Ashe said. For a moment, Ashe allowed herself to relax, to bask in the completion she felt with Mystral at her side as they shared breakfast. It was a moment of weakness Ashe knew she'd pay for later, but it was so comfortable, so right. She could imagine waking up to this every morning. But she couldn't let herself go any further into that dangerous territory.

Ashe put her spoon down and looked across the table to where Mystral was happily piling bits of her omelet onto a piece of toast. She waited until Mystral had snapped the lot of it down before she cleared her throat and said, "After Yakkun drops off your things, there's somewhere I'd like to take you."

Mystral looked up, eyes alight with mischief. "Like a date? I'll have you know, you have to at least buy me dinner and show me a gorgeous sunset before you get anywhere close to my panties. Netflix and McDonald's isn't going to cut it. Actually, okay it would. As long as you don't swipe my McNuggets and don't mind me making Mystery Science Theater-type comments during the movie."

Ashe ignored the panties comment and said, "No date. I want to take you to Jax's School of Street Fighting so you'll be able to defend yourself in case something happens when I'm not around to protect you. It's run by Jax, Jackson Holden, an old friend of mine. Have you ever taken any self-defense courses?"

"When I was a kid I did the 'stranger danger' thing, but not really anything else."

"Well Jax runs a good school," Ashe said. She leaned back in her chair, full and content. "He taught me everything I know about fighting and it's never let me down. He says the only way to learn how to win a fight is to lose a bunch. Get your ass kicked and kicked hard."

"That doesn't sound like a lot of fun," Mystral said as she fiddled with the paper towel that was serving as a napkin.

"Don't worry, you'll be the one kicking ass today," Ashe said. "I'll get Jax to show you some moves and you can practice until you've got them down. He doesn't do anything fancy, just simple, effective threat elimination."

"All right," Mystral said with a grin. "I can do that." She got up and started gathering the plates. She waved off Ashe's attempt to help. "Let me clean up. It's the least I can do to thank you for that super yummy omelet and hospitality. In my house, anybody who cooks doesn't have to do the dishes and that rule holds here too."

"What if you're eating alone?" Ashe wanted to know.

"Then you feed yourself directly out of the pan, standing over the garbage," Mystral said. She picked up a sponge and gestured with it. "At least I do, because I'm classy like that."

While Mystral was absorbed with her cheerful clattering in the kitchen, Ashe went into the bathroom and made herself presentable. She quickly changed into a pair of jeans and a buttondown shirt. She finished getting ready just as Yakkun showed up with Shauna and a duffel bag in tow. Mystral gave a happy chirp of thanks as she took the bag from them and disappeared into the bedroom with it.

"So any leads with the neighbors?" Ashe asked. "Did anybody see anything last night?"

"Not a thing," Yakkun said with a sigh. "Everyone was either asleep, out, or indulging in, ahem, medicinal herbs and engaged in communication with the greatness of all creation."

Ashe let out a breath. Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

"Everything all right here?" Yakkun asked as he slung his body onto Ashe's sofa. Shauna shooed him over before she settled herself beside him and crossed her long legs.

"Fine, Mystral's tough. She's a real trouper," Ashe said with a flash of pride. Mystral came back into the room and proceeded to hover over the sofa.

"Am I smelling coffee?" Yakkun looked around with an air of innocence.

"That you are," Ashe said. "How about a cup?"

"Sure, thanks for offering."

As if they had been doing it for years, Ashe shared an amused look with Mystral before she went into the kitchen and came back with two mugs. As she handed them over, the motion jolted her back and Ashe gave a wince that she couldn't hide in time.

"See, I told you," Mystral said. "You should have slept with me last night." At Yakkun's sudden double eyebrow raise, Mystral's face went red. Her mouth opened and closed a few times before she said, "Not like in that way, uh, in the, um, bedroom instead of here on this old uncomfy sofa and I didn't mean—" One hand clapped itself over her mouth, the other was held up to the room. Without another word, Mystral turned on her heel and darted into the bedroom. She closed the door with an air of finality. The other occupants of the room only had a few seconds to look questions at each other before the door opened again.

"Good morning," Mystral said as she breezed in. "Oh, hi there Yakkun and Shauna. Nice of you to come over so early. I hope you're not sleepy."

Ashe tried to keep the smile off her face with moderate success. "I think we've just witnessed a redo."

"I think so too," Shauna said. "Nice one, girl."

"Thanks." Mystral still looked slightly ruffled. Ashe continued, "What about the safehouse?"

"Here are the keys and a map," Yakkun said, passing over an envelope.

"Can I still go to work?" Mystral asked. "I'm not exactly wealthy enough to pass up my salary for however long this is going to take. Plus people who like my cakes would be sad."

"No problem with your job. Same deal as before, except we'll be driving you in rotating cars."

"Wow, very high security," Mystral said as she raised her eyebrows.

"We don't mess around when it comes to things like this," Yakkun said, his face drawn. With a guilty jolt, Ashe realized that Jessie's tragedy hadn't only affected herself.

"I'm taking her to Jax's," Ashe said. "Make sure Mystral can deal with anything that comes her way."

"Good idea," Yakkun said. He slurped at the last dregs of his coffee before he stood and looked over at Mystral. "Dave at the garage called earlier. Your bike just needs a few small repairs and she'll be as good as new in a couple of days. Don't worry about the bill either, Dave owes me a few favors. He'll even drop Midnight off back at your place."

"Really?" Mystral perked up. "That's great to hear. Thanks!"

"No prob." Yakkun pretended to tip an invisible hat. "Oh and Ashe, if you get a chance, swing by the office sometime today. I've got Gus working on the phone calls and he said he's got a bit of a breakthrough he wants to discuss. With Mystral too, if that's all right." He looked over at Mystral. "I think Kieran might want to run some things by the two of you as well."

"Fine with me," Mystral said.

"That's settled then," Ashe said as she gathered up the mugs. "Tell them we'll be by around noon. Maybe grab something to eat at Rosie's and have the meeting there?"

"Sounds good, I'll let 'em know." Yakkun zipped up his jacket. Shauna was already standing by the door. She shuffled into her mules and called out a cheerful goodbye.

ASHE ROUNDED UP Mystral and a small workout bag, then drove them to a rather shady part of town. The road snaked between sooty buildings and small parts manufacturers. They were close to the docks and the briny air filled the cab of the truck as Ashe opened the door and got out in front of a nondescript three-story brick building. The front of the building gave no clue about what was inside, and it looked singularly unwelcoming.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Mystral asked as they climbed the short flight of stairs to the front door.

"Yup," Ashe said. She opened the door and gestured inside. She ushered Mystral in before her. As she entered, Mystral turned her head and let out an astonished breath. Ashe knew why. She'd felt much the same way herself the first time she'd seen Jax's place. The building, instead of having separate floors was a huge, hollowed out shell. Once a sewing machine factory, Jax renovated it into a modern, airy space. The walls were decorated with pro wrestling

posters and punching bags hung from sturdy beams that crisscrossed overhead. The floor was divided into different sections. Some were roped off like boxing rings and some were bare hardwood. Sunlight streamed in from high windows and skylights. The air held a tinge of old sweat and leather. At that early hour, there were only a couple of people there. An elderly gentleman beat out a proud rhythm with his bare fists against a solid oak board and a pair of women sparred in one of the rings, geared up with gloves and headguards.

Mystral was still looking around with wide eyes when the door to the inner office opened and a man walked out. Bare arms glistened in the light, swirls of tribal tattoos covered both shoulders. When he saw Ashe, he gave a big grin and held out a hand.

"Long time, no see," he said. "Where you've been this past, what, has it already been half a year? Brawl nights haven't been the same without you."

"I've been busy, doing stuff. You know how it is," Ashe said with a practiced nonchalance. She grabbed the proffered hand and gave it a firm pump. "Anyway, Jax, I want you to meet Mystral Galbraith."

"Well hi there," Jax said. He glanced over to Ashe with an approving look before he gave Mystral a brilliant smile and a wink. "Nice to see Ashe's finally found someone up to her high standards. I was worried she'd freeze over and become like that iceberg that busted the Titanic."

Ashe shoved herself into the middle of the conversation. "She's not my girlfriend, Jax. She's my client."

"Sorry about that. I didn't mean to assume anything. I just thought you two would make a gorgeous couple," he said. He held up both hands in a good-natured attempt to defend himself against Ashe's glare. "So what can I do for you? Need to learn a bit of defense?"

"Yeah." This time it was Mystral who spoke up. "I want to learn how to kick butt."

"Well you've come to the right place," Jax said. He stood with his legs apart and arms crossed as he assessed the young woman standing in front of him. "I'll tell you right now I don't teach any of that wacka-woo fancy shmancy stuff, but by the end of the day you'll be able to keep yourself safe." He studied Mystral and she met his gaze squarely. "I know what it's like to be scared," he said. "I've been there and I want you to know you're not alone. You can do this, okay?"

Mystral nodded. She shone with stubborn strength that had Ashe catching her breath.

"First things first," Jax said. He gave a stretch and rotated his shoulder. The muscles rippled underneath the tattoos. "How about getting changed and then we can start. If you're ready, or do you want a bit of time?"

"It's okay," Mystral said in a calm and steady voice. "I'm ready."

In the changing room, Ashe dumped out the contents of the bag and handed over a T-shirt and some sweats to Mystral before taking out her own workout gear. Ashe turned her back and fought the nervous blush that rose to

her cheeks as she unbuttoned her shirt and pulled a tank top on over her sports bra. With quick, practiced movements, she unfastened her watch and rolled off the quartz-bead bracelet. She added her thin chain necklace to the pile before she stashed them in one of the little lockers along one wall and pocketed the key.

"This place is really cool," Mystral said as she shrugged into the borrowed T-shirt. "What's brawl night anyway?"

"It's a kind of free-for-all fighting event Jax organizes," Ashe said. She pulled on worn fingerless gloves and flexed her hands a few times as she savored the old familiar feel of them. "The only rule is no face-punching. Keeps people from busting their hands and saves having to explain things at the office the next day."

"That's a good rule," Mystral said. She pulled her Pride rings over her head and gathered them in one hand before she put them into the locker Ashe opened for her. "You said you quit Yakkun's agency, so what do you do?"

"Oh God," Ashe said with a bitter laugh. She sank down onto the bench that ran the length of the little cubby where she yanked off her shoes and socks. "I'm a regular Joe office flunky working for a car parts manufacturing company. I'm actually an accountant. That's how I got into the P.I. gig. I was doing corporate investigations when I joined up with Yakkun."

"So you keep the company books and that sort of thing?"

"Actually no, I'm in another department. Production Planning."

"How come?" Mystral fixed her with the calm, penetrating look that Ashe felt stripped her bare. "That seems like kind of a waste."

"I guess it is," Ashe said. She turned the thought over in her mind as she faced the question squarely for the first time. The answer came in a moment of clarity. The words sounded like they were from a faraway place as Ashe said, "Maybe I didn't want to care about the job. I didn't want to invest too much of myself in the company so I could ditch it any time I felt like it."

"At any rate, you're the hottest accountant I've ever met," Mystral told her with frank honesty.

Ashe nearly fell off the bench. Her heart gave a great lurch and Ashe mentally scoffed at herself. Mystral was joking. She had to be. With a flash of heat, she remembered the feeling of Mystral's hands on her, how the flat heat of them radiated through her body and how she'd wanted to surrender to Mystral's touch.

"You're joking, right?" Ashe managed to choke out.

"Sorry for making you uncomfortable. I couldn't help myself. You know, the whole nerdy accountant thing," Mystral said with an impish smile. "Anyway I guess it's true, what they say about the only constants in life being death and taxes, eh?"

"Taxes anyway," Ashe managed to recover enough to say. "Death, not so much, especially considering the possibility of a zombie apocalypse."

"Good point," Mystral said. She pulled her long hair back into a ponytail and secured the thick bunch of it with an elastic from around her wrist. "All right, let's do this." She ducked out of the changing room. Ashe followed her

with a frisson of electricity still racing through her limbs.

Jax was waiting for them in one of the practice areas. The thin mat was resilient under her bare feet as Ashe moved off to one side to give the floor over to Mystral and Jax. He bounced lightly on the balls of his feet and he slipped into a fighting stance where he stood in front of Mystral.

"I want to see what you've got. I want you to come at me, pretend I'm giving you trouble and getting into your face. Let's see how you deal with that. Then I'll give you some pointers."

"What should I do?" Mystral looked calm. Her hands balled into fists. She kept her stance loose, Ashe noticed, mirroring Jax.

"Whatever comes to mind," Jax said. He gave her a quick grin, saying, "Don't worry about nailing me in the dick. I took it off and left it in the other room."

With a flash of understanding, Mystral gave a laugh. "That's great. I wish I could do that."

"Actually you can," Ashe said from where she was watching from the sidelines. She perched on a bench and absently picked up a barbell and did a few curls with it. Still somewhat giddy from the exchange in the changing room, Ashe continued, "There's a shop that sells those online. You can do a custom order in the size and color of your choice."

"Thanks for the info. Very handy." Mystral said. She turned her attention back to Jax, who was weaving around her, hands ready. Like a striking snake, he reached out and tapped Mystral on the arm. She jerked back. Then he reached out and grabbed her around the wrist. With a squeak, Mystral twisted her body and managed to get away.

"That's good. Keep your hands open, grabbing or deflecting is better than punching," Jax said. He reached out again, trapping Mystral's wrist and yanking her roughly against him. "If they've got you in a hold, first distract and then escape. Stomp or kick and then use your elbows, fists, whatever. Headbutting can work too. Remember, your first and only concern is to get away."

They worked for a while. Jax gave Mystral pointers and ran through a number of different scenarios. She was a quick learner and could master the technique after seeing it only a few times.

"You're really picking this up fast," Jax said after Mystral successfully got out of a series of armholds. "You sure you never studied this sort of thing? You have excellent reflexes."

Mystral shook her head and said, "No, but when I was younger I was into gymnastics. Like, super hardcore, Olympic fast-track gymnastics. I kicked ass on the beam, but you know how it is. I turned fourteen, got tall and grew boobs and that was the end of it. Puberty sucks, huh?" With that, Mystral took a few steps away then suddenly kicked into a sprint and launched herself into a compact and powerful front flip. She landed with a proud flourish.

"Yeah, I still got it," Mystral said as she came back across the mat with a satisfied nod. "And I am so lucky I didn't land on my butt."

Jax let out a long whistle of admiration. From where Ashe was keeping an eye on the practice session, she echoed the sentiment. That certainly explained where she got her grace and power. It was one more thing about Mystral that was adding to Ashe's respect for her—and something deeper and a lot more worrying. Ashe knew she had to give it up, and soon. With a sharp twist in her gut, Ashe fought the empty ache that she wouldn't allow to be filled.

As the lesson continued, Ashe found a punching bag and went through some drills. Her body fell into the rhythm naturally. She didn't pay much attention to the proceedings until a group of young men came in. Jax called out a quick greeting and stepped back from where he was showing Mystral some foot sweeps.

"How about you take over here?" he aimed the words at Ashe. "Maybe show Mystral some takedown techniques while you're at it. I've got some ruffians to deal with."

"Sure thing," Ashe said. She moved away from the punching bag and came over to the middle of the mat where Mystral was practicing shadowboxing and looking quite competent. Ashe gave an experimental stretch and found her ribs were stiff but not painful. The Loxonin she'd popped in the truck most likely had something to do with that.

"I'm getting the hang of this," Mystral said.

"You are, but hopefully you'll never have to use it."

"That's for sure," Mystral said. "Unless I decide to gatecrash brawl night."

Ashe raised an impressed eyebrow. "Yes, that's true. Anyway, how about I show you some takedowns and control techniques?" She stood square to Mystral and reached out to her. She ignored the flash of fire that raced through her as she took Mystral by the forearms. "There are a number of ways to take a person down," she said. "From the front, you can hook their leg or take out their knee. Get them off balance and shove. It only takes a few pounds of force to bust someone's knee."

They practiced sweeps with Ashe acting as the aggressor. She landed on the mat a number of times as Mystral got familiar with the techniques.

"You're doing great," Ashe said as she rolled over and got to her feet after a particularly effective sweep. "I'm going to make like I'm grabbing you and I want you to take me down and do the wristlock we practiced. Okay?"

At Mystral's nod, Ashe got behind her. She grasped one wrist and pulled Mystral hard against her. Her heart jolted at the closeness, the familiar scent of her own shampoo in Mystral's hair. Ashe had to close her eyes as she fought the wave of raw need that filled her. The moment was short-lived as Mystral twisted in the grip. She let out a shout as she dropped her weight then she stepped back and sent Ashe flying over her hip. The world came to a stop and Ashe blinked up to see Mystral fall to her knees with the force of the throw. She kept hold of both of Ashe's wrists as she did so and Ashe found herself flat on her back with both hands immobilized over her head. Ashe gave a gasp and struggled against the hold even as Mystral used her sprawled body to press her back into the mat. They were so close. Ashe could feel every inch of

Mystral against her, the softness and strength of her body. Her breath on Ashe's skin.

Her pulse roared in her ears and Ashe lay stunned. She had to end this.

"Let me up," Ashe said. Her voice came out husky and strained. She squashed the spark of desire that blossomed within her with cold ferocity.

"What if I don't want to?" Mystral whispered. Her eyes were dark, her face only inches from Ashe's.

"Let me up!" With a flash of panic, Ashe twisted out of the hold and shoved Mystral away from her. She sat up and ran a hand through her hair as she fought the urge to curse.

"I'm sorry, Ashe, I guess I just don't know when the joke's not funny anymore," Mystral said with pain and turmoil on her face.

"It's okay," Ashe said, even though she was pretty sure it wasn't. The hurt in Mystral's eyes tore at Ashe's heart. Ashe realized that she could make things okay. She dredged up a careless grin that she didn't entirely feel, gave her head a toss and said, "If that's how you're going to play missy, let's see how you do for real stakes."

Ashe cracked her knuckles with an irrational burst of pure joy at the way Mystral's body relaxed, the guilty tension drained from her muscles. The calm strength returned to her eyes.

"If you can get out of my hold and put me in a wristlock five times in a row, I will personally mix all your drinks and buy you dinner at May's tonight."

"I accept that challenge," Mystral purred as her stance dropped and her hands came up. "All right Devon, game on."

The next few minutes saw Ashe getting trounced like she never had before, not even on one notable brawl night when the entire Margaret Houston University woman's judo team had showed up with a bone to pick with her for giving one of their members a fake number after Ashe had endured her advances all night. As Mystral's knee eased up from the small of her back, Ashe hauled her face off the mat one more time. She sat up and rubbed her sore wrist with a wince. Given the right motivation, Mystral certainly could unleash a steady stream of hell.

Ashe ignored the cheering and hoots from Jax and the assorted miscreants enjoying the show from the sidelines. She caught her breath and her gaze softened as she looked up at Mystral, who was standing in front of her. Mystral's hair was a mess. It trailed over her shoulders and fell into her face. Sweat-stains decorated the front of her T-shirt and somewhere along the line, Jax tossed her an old, ratty towel and she had it slung around her neck. She was, in short, the most beautiful person Ashe had ever seen.

That alone brought a wave of emotion that Ashe had to swallow. She held up her hands and said, "I surrender."

"Heh, told you your best friend's name is Matt." Mystral said. "Don't mess with me. I've got gravity on my side."

"That's for sure," Ashe said. She made a move to get up, but a sudden twinge in her side stopped her. Mystral held out a hand and before Ashe could think

of a reason not to, she took it and was pulled to her feet in a single, easy motion.

"Sorry, I forgot you're still probably hurting from last night," Mystral said.

"Don't worry about it," Ashe said. A heartbeat passed before she realized she hadn't let go of Mystral's hand. Ashe released Mystral and quickly crossed her arms. She leaned back on her heels, glad the earlier awkwardness was gone. "Good work today. How about heading over to the office? Unless there's anything else you want to work on?"

"Well," Mystral began. She shifted and looked uneasy. "What if they have, like a knife or a gun or something?"

"Treat a knife like a poison snake," Ashe said. The words came to her automatically. "Keep it the hell away from you. A gun? It's not likely but that's when you weigh your options. Keep them talking until you can get something big and solid between the two of you. Don't bother trying to count bullets. You never know if they've got more."

"Okay." Mystral seemed mollified by that.

"Anyway, like Jax said, all you need to do is get away. If they've got you by the arm, twist. If they've got you around the body, just go completely limp and drop." Ashe crossed her arms and continued, "There aren't many people who can dead-lift an adult."

Mystral nodded and mopped at the sweat on her forehead with the towel. "Are we going to practice some more?"

"I think we're done," Ashe said. "Great, I'm beat."

"Wait until tomorrow," Ashe told her. "You'll be all aches and pains."

"I think that's my line," Mystral replied with a grin. She balled up her towel and pitched it at Ashe, who caught it without thinking. Contrary to its threadbare and well-used appearance, the towel carried a clean, spicy smell along with a heady, sweet scent that was Mystral's own. Ashe held it for a moment longer, peripherally aware of Mystral's proud head ducking into the changing room.

After she tossed the towel into the basket in the corner, Ashe took her time heading across the floor to give Mystral a head-start on getting changed. While Jax's place didn't have showers, he provided scented body-wipes and Mystral was happily scrubbing herself down with a handful of them as Ashe closed the door behind her.

"Here, take a few of these, I'm hogging the pack," Mystral said as she handed them over.

Ashe followed Mystral's lead. The damp sheets were astringent and cool against her skin and left a nice powdery feel behind.

Soon they were back on the road in Ashe's truck and Mystral provided a running commentary about her earlier triumph.

"I thought for sure you had me that last time," she said. "But then I remembered what Jax said about distractions. Sorry if I stomped on you too hard."

"That's all right," Ashe said. She tried not to wince as she pressed on the accelerator. "It worked, didn't it? And that's the only thing that matters."

Chapter Nine

AS THEY PULLED up to Rosie's, Ashe saw Kieran's Kia Forte in the parking lot. She confirmed both his and Gus's presence when she entered the bar. She and Mystral made their way over to the booth where Kieran and Gus had set up camp. Gus had a tablet in his hand and Ashe was curious what was in it. He'd been working on the phone calls, maybe he had a lead.

After a short round of introductions, Ashe crossed the room to feed the jukebox. She returned and took her place beside Mystral as if it had always been that way. Rosie came over with glasses of water for them.

"What can I get for you all today?"

"What's the special?" Gus asked.

"Chicken pie with my good homemade minestrone soup."

"Nice. I'll have that." Gus rubbed his hands together. "Plus a side of fries."

Kieran and Mystral decided on veggie wraps and Ashe ordered soup and rolls, which arrived in a fragrant, buttery pile in a basket and were promptly stolen by everyone at the table. Ashe called Rosie over and grumpily ordered another.

"What have you got for us?" Ashe asked as soon as Rosie had left the second basket of fresh rolls on the table. She pulled the basket away and leaned protectively over it before Gus could swipe any more of her precious rolls. She rested her elbows on the table and looked at the two men across from her.

"I'll go first," Kieran said. "I've been following up on the exgirlfriend angle. Mostly the husband, Gordon Basset. Staking him out and asking around a bit. From what I've got, he's the dullest, most responsible dude on the planet. He makes his own lunch, drops the kids off at his mother-in-law's, goes to work, does an hour or two of overtime then goes back home. Sometimes he treats his subordinates to a round of coffee and muffins from the stand on the corner, but that's it."

"What was he doing last night?" Ashe asked.

"He was at home," Kieran said. "But his wife wasn't." He consulted the notebook in his hand. "She left just after midnight and didn't get back until almost four. I didn't follow her, my target was him. Yakkun's covering her anyway. Just so you know, both the cars they've got don't match up with one that followed you guys the other night. But that doesn't discount a rental or something. I wonder if she does that a lot, stay out all night?" He looked over at Mystral.

"Lily said that as long as she's there to make dinner and breakfast," Mystral said. "Then she's free to do whatever she wants. No questions asked."

Ashe kept her gaze calm as she studied Mystral. Her hands were in her lap, fingers twisting together. For a moment, Ashe pondered the arrangement and knew that while she could never live like that, she had a lot more choice and freedom than

some. Historically, a woman living as she wished without submitting herself to a man was a luxury and a scandal. In some parts of the world, it still was.

"Lily, huh," Kieran said as he flipped through his notes. "Actual name Babette."

"Babette Basset?" Gus chortled. "Yeah, I would'a gone with Lily too. Shit."

"Are you just here for comic relief?" Ashe raised an eyebrow and glared at Gus. "Or do you have something of value to add to the conversation?"

"Yeah, I was getting to that. The number I pulled from the call last night doesn't match their home phone. None of them do," Gus piped up. "And unless Gord-oh's got a zipline hooked up to a payphone across town, it looks like the guy's off the hook."

With a sigh, Mystral sank back against the padded seat. "All right, one suspect off the list," Ashe said.

Rosie came over with their lunches and Gus dove into his pie. After he'd shoveled about half of it into himself, he wiped a paper napkin across his mouth and picked up the tablet.

Gus said, "I traced the calls, and they're coming from a bank of payphones in front of the Esso on Wright Avenue." He looked across the table to where Mystral was picking at her veggie wrap. "Know anyone in the area?"

Mystral was silent for a moment then she bolted upright. "Wait, I know that place. It's by the old drive-in, isn't it?"

"Yeah, the Golden Way," Gus said. "Heh, if the back seat of my car could talk, oh the tales it would tell about that place. That drive-in was like the gateway to pleasure island starring me and a parade of the sexiest babes you could ever imagine."

"Pardon me?" Ashe cocked her head and fixed Gus with a puzzled look. "What am I hearing? Could it be? Are you attempting to convince us that your sexual past actually includes other people? And not the blow-up kind either? Gus, here's a tip from a pro," she said as she took a roll from her carefully protected stash and dunked it into her soup. "We are all trained in the art of detecting bullshit here. Do not think for a minute anybody bought a word you said."

Both Mystral and Kieran turned from the table as they were overcome with sudden, highly contagious fits of coughing.

"Well forgive me!" Gus put on the air of offended majesty. He gestured with the tablet clutched in his big hand. "But I think *someone's* jealous of my powerful animal magnetism that lets me hit homeruns with all the ladies I fancy every time."

"Feel free to nurse your delusions," Ashe said. She jabbed a finger in Gus's direction, punctuating her words as she spat, "I'll have you know, buddy, that I am a champion homerun hitter and I take pride in making sure any lady I fancy gets—" Ashe realized what she was saying and choked on the words. "Sorry, what were we talking about? Do you think we could return to the main topic without going on unnecessary tangents?"

Kieran had his head down on the table. He wasn't even pretending that he wasn't laughing. Beside Ashe, Mystral was limp with laughter and she leaned

weakly against Ashe's arm. Ashe schooled her face into nonchalance. She tugged at her cuffs and smoothed her hair, the image of professionalism.

"Okay, okay," Gus said through a handful of fries. "Mystral was just telling us about that gas station on Wright Avenue."

"Yeah, a friend of my brother lives right across from there," Mystral said. "Pete—Peter Vegas. It's probably a coincidence, but he's on Wright and Jones. They've been best buddies forever, since college at least. He used to let me hang out at his place when I was waiting for Brady to drive me home. In high school I used to work at the Tim Horton's near there. I always got him a Boston Crème and a double-double to go."

"I got a bunch of pics of people in the area," Gus said. His big fingers swiped across the tablet before he passed it over. "Recognize any of them?"

"Holy crap, Gus. Did you take pictures of every single person in the area?"

"Pretty much. Anyway, have a look and let me know."

Mystral scrolled through the pictures. She zoomed in on one. "This one, maybe. But no. I don't think so." She set the tablet down with a sigh.

"What's he look like?" Gus asked.

"Average-height, he'd be thirty-two right now," Mystral said. "Black guy, not bad looking. I haven't seen him for a while but he keeps his hair pretty short. The last time I met up with him, he had a kind of crisscross pattern shaved into one side."

In the gentlest voice she could muster, Ashe asked, "Do you think you could ID him for us?"

"Sure," Mystral said. Then she fell back into her seat. "Oh no, do you think Pete could be...no way. I mean, I'm practically his kid sister. He always said..." Her voice trailed off, her face was drawn and pale. She swallowed. Her voice broke as she said, "He's a good guy."

"It's just another lead we're following up," Ashe said. Before she realized what she was doing, Ashe reached out and took Mystral's face in her hands. She gently guided Mystral to meet her eyes. The rush of raw heat that followed the gesture made Ashe immediately regret it. However the calm, trusting gaze that met hers pushed the thought from her mind. Mystral gave her a smile, one of such beauty that Ashe's mind went blank. She took a deep breath as Mystral's hands came up to cover her own. There was nothing else Ashe cared about at that moment. In that instant of raw, pure connection, she wanted to tell Mystral she would do anything for her. Ashe didn't just lust after Mystral, she cared for her. Deeply. At that precise moment, Ashe knew she was falling in love with Mystral.

Just then, Ashe remembered they were right in the middle of Rosie's, having a business meeting. She dropped her hands into her lap and scooted back, certain that all of the people at the table, and maybe in the entire restaurant, had noticed the moment that had passed between them.

Ashe fought to control her breathing. She said in a crisp voice, "The sooner we eliminate potential suspects the better. Everything's going to be all right."

"With such an awesome team on my side," Mystral said in her usual

carefree way, "I don't doubt it. It's probably a waste of time, but I'll point out Pete for you and whatever else you need me to do." Under the table, Ashe felt Mystral's long fingers slip over her own and give her a slow, lingering squeeze. One thumb stroked over the back of her hand in a way that had Ashe's coffee nearly going up her nose.

"Cool," Gus said. He busied himself scrolling through his mass of photographs. "Give me another day to scout out the area a bit more and we'll see if you can help us out with ID-ing some likely suspects. Doesn't necessarily mean it's your bro's friend. Could be someone just passing through, or who doesn't live there but works nights or something."

"Well, at least we've got things happening," Kieran said. He started in on the second half of his wrap and gulped at his coffee between mouthfuls.

"Hey kids. Looks like you started the party without me."

Ashe looked up to see Yakkun. Kieran and Gus scooted over and squashed together as Yakkun inserted himself into the gathering. Rosie took Yakkun's order and disappeared into the kitchen. With almost obnoxious excitement, Yakkun clutched a suspiciously videotape-shaped package to his chest.

"How's things, boss?" Gus asked as he corralled the remains of his chicken pie. His elbows looked like they were squashing something important.

"Not bad," Yakkun said. "Look, I only got a minute here, Shauna's holding down the fort alone and will kick my ass if I take too long. Have you guys brought Ashe up to speed?"

"Yup," Gus said. "So what've you got there?"

"This," Yakkun proudly waved his bundle. "Is the one, the only, director's cut of *Smoke Out*."

"Huh," Gus said as he exchanged confused glances with the other members at the table.

"Oh my God." Mystral suddenly was on high alert. She sprawled over the table. Both hands reached for the package. "How on earth did you get that? There are like only about fourteen copies in existence!"

"I have my ways," Yakkun said. He fanned himself nonchalantly with the videotape.

"Why are we excited about this?" Kieran asked. He peered out from where he was squashed up against the wall, the remnants of his wrap in one hand. Lettuce rained gently from it into the napkin holder.

"*Smoke Out* is considered to be *the* original zombie movie," Mystral told them. She waved her hands around as she spoke. "Guys. Don't you know it? It was a flop at the time but it became a cult hit in the 70s and inspired the whole genre. Okay, that decides it, movie night at Yakkun's is going to be happening sometime soon."

"Sure," Yakkun said amiably as Rosie came over with a plate loaded with his lunch in one hand and a pot of coffee in the other. "Bring a few beers and maybe some of those awesome cupcakes like you gave us the other day and it's a deal. Uh, and I hope your Japanese is up to scratch," he said with a worried expression. "A friend of my mom's got it for me from the 'old

country' and it's dubbed. He said the additional restored parts are in English, though."

"That's fine," Mystral said. She glowed. "I've pretty much memorized the whole movie, and recently I've been thinking it's a good time to brush up my Japanese. It would be a waste for me to forget what I spent all that time learning." She gave Yakkun a brilliant grin and repeated herself in Japanese, "*Sekkaku oboetanoni, wasuretara mottai nai desho?*"

"*Da yo na,*" Yakkun agreed with a nod of his head.

Ashe met Mystral's gaze. A breathless wonder dawned within her at the elegant, smooth way the words rolled off her tongue. There was the slightest hesitation and her accent was far from perfect, but she was more than passable.

Ashe's defenses were slowly crumbling with every new revelation. In order to keep herself sane, Ashe concentrated on sweeping the last drops of her soup from her bowl with a bit of roll.

"All right then," Yakkun said. "Zombie night will happen soon. My place is too small so how about having it at Kieran's? It's nice and central plus he has a hammock in his yard for anyone who wants to wuss out."

"What?" Kieran choked.

"Excellent," Mystral sat back with a look of complete satisfaction.

"But *my* house? Seriously?"

"Oh yes," Yakkun said. "It's all part of the plan. We need to be prepared when the inevitable happens and the undead rise up and start to overrun the world."

"I don't even own a VCR!"

"That's all right," Yakkun said. "I'll bring mine over."

With that, Kieran slumped back as much as he could in the tight confines of his corner. He dabbed at his forehead with a paper napkin.

Ashe just shook her head and hid her amusement as Mystral and Yakkun started enthusiastically comparing zombie survival strategies, most of which involved deciding who to use as "bait".

"Fuck zombies," Gus declared as he polished off the last of his pie and put his fork down with a decisive clatter. "Anyone can get rid of those things, it's vampires you have to worry about."

"Not you too," Ashe said.

"What? I think we need to discuss the real threat of those goddamned bloodsuckers. I'm not dumb." Gus stabbed his finger onto the table. "I know they're around, just waiting for us to let our guard down before they take over. They've already got Hollywood, the rest of the world is next."

"Bunch of garlic, maybe a cross and you're gold," Yakkun said with a shrug.

"Throw in some black lights and the fact that the sun rises pretty regularly," Mystral added. "All you have to do is wait them out. Vampires have a well-known list of weaknesses. Unless you're spending the winter in Nunavut, you're pretty much all right."

"You'll see." Gus crossed his arms over his pecs and sulked. "Don't come crying to me when they take over. I'm not sharing my holy water."

"How about killer crocodiles in the sewer?" Kieran asked. He waved the hand he could free from his cramped position.

"Yeah, those are a real threat," Gus said. "You gotta be on the lookout for those buggers. Come up the wrong way and bite a fella on the tush when he least expects it. And the Ogotogo, sneaky little shit. Don't even get me started on those sasquatch dudes."

Ashe covered her face with one hand as she gave in to the urge to laugh. "With the bunch of you here, at least we'll be prepared for any eventuality," she said.

"That's the main thing," Mystral said. She surveyed the members clustered around the table and looked quite pleased with herself.

Yakkun pushed away his empty plate and stood up. "Thanks for lunch, Ashe."

"Yeah, we gotta do this again soon." Gus shifted his tablet from one hand to the other as he shrugged into his wooly coat.

"What the—" Ashe sputtered. "Aw come on guys."

"Just joking," Gus said. "Man, it sure is fun to get you riled up, Ashe. I missed that."

Ashe shook her head and watched the three of them leave. Once they were alone again, she turned to Mystral and said, "You're scheduled to work at the bakery this afternoon. How about I drop you off there and pick you up at closing as usual? If you're okay with it, I'd like to head over to Wright Street as soon as Gus gives us the okay."

"Yeah, all right," Mystral said with her eyes unfocused as she picked up her bag. In the quiet aftermath of the lively lunch discussion, she looked quite young and alone. Ashe ached to reach out to her, to hold her close and shield her from anything that would hurt her. But she couldn't. The only thing she could do was walk beside her, stand strong next to her. That would have to be enough. Soon they were side-by-side in the truck, and Ashe fought the comfortable, intimate feeling the familiar scene brought.

"If I remember correctly," Ashe said she revved the engine into life, "I owe you my expert drink-mixing services tonight."

"That's right," Mystral said with a grin. "And don't think I'll let you off easily."

Ashe let out a groan, but was secretly pleased that Mystral perked up after that and was her usual cheerful self by the time they'd reached Pierre's. The harsh light of the morning had turned into a golden afternoon. The sunlight streaming in through the windows was warm on her face as Ashe pulled into the parking lot.

"I'll probably be done at about five," Mystral said. She gathered her stuff and hopped out of the truck. With her hand on the door frame, she gave Ashe a smile that kicked right through her. "See you tonight!"

The door closed with a final slam. Ashe leaned both arms on the steering wheel and watched Mystral patter up the stairs. As Ashe had come to expect, Mystral turned and gave a final wave before going into the little shop. In reply, Ashe raised

two fingers from the steering wheel before she pulled onto the street. Her phone buzzed. Ashe pulled over and dug out her phone.

"Are you free to chat now?" Yakkun asked as soon as she answered.

"Sure, what's up?"

"I just remembered, I didn't get a chance to update you on the situation with Lily."

"Talk to me." Ashe tucked the phone between her ear and shoulder as she adjusted the rear-view mirror, automatically studying the cars passing by on the road.

"Good news there," he said. "You've got a date with her tomorrow."

"A date? Tomorrow?" Ashe ran a hand across her forehead. Even though she didn't feel ready to deal with the clandestine dating scene, even fictitiously, it was probably a good idea to contact Mystral's ex. The sooner they got through the list of suspects, the better. Ashe steeled herself and said, "All right, send me the details."

She ended the call and checked the time and place Yakkun sent her. For the next few minutes, Ashe read through the additional transcripts of the chats he'd shared with Lily. When she'd finished, Ashe rested her head on the steering wheel. She had to admit, Yakkun was smooth. Even through the flat medium of digital messaging, he'd managed to make a real connection with Lily. In a way, Ashe hoped she would turn out to be the stalker because if not, the sad truth of the matter was a lonely, closeted woman trapped in a loveless marriage would be schmoozed and duped by this plan. She noted down the meeting time and place before she ended the call.

Faced with a few hours with nothing constructive scheduled, Ashe decided to go burn off some of the wild energy she'd accumulated. The memory of Mystral holding her down, the heat of her body against hers, crowded her mind with unsettling thoughts and breathed life into desires that were best kept under wraps.

She parked her truck behind a multi-level parking garage, one of her favorite haunts recently. It served the employees of the office complex behind it and was deserted on the weekend. Ashe took a minute to strip off her jeans in the narrow confines of her truck's cab and pulled on a pair of calf-length dungarees. She replaced her button-down shirt with a long sleeved waffle top and her boots with sneakers.

After a quick stretch, Ashe jogged up to the second level. Her target was an artistically uneven brick wall she liked to climb. She bashed her hands a bit on her way up, but managed to flip over the top on the first try. Instinct overrode conscious thought as she continued her routine. Ashe's breath came hard as she threw herself onto railings, scaled obstacles, and jumped stairwells. As she got into the harder moves, her abused ribs gave a few twinges, but she ignored the small discomforts. Instead, she concentrated on scouting out interesting locations and challenges for herself. Her blood sang with the physical activity. Concentration drove away any thoughts other than what was right in front of her. She had to focus or she would fall. Ashe felt free and alive. The cold autumn air filled her lungs even as sweat gathered at her hairline.

Ashe was there for over an hour when she caught a glimpse of a security guard on his rounds. In a single, light movement she leaped down from her perch on a parking bollard. She landed firmly on both feet just as he rounded the corner.

He looked surprised to see Ashe. His hand twitched toward the baton in his belt and for a moment she tensed. With a quick up-and-down glance, the security guard apparently decided Ashe wasn't a threat. His hand moved away from his belt and he frowned at her.

"The garage is closed today," he said.

"Oh dear! Is it really?" Ashe put on her fakest, prettiest smile. "Sorry, I was just taking a walk."

The guard scratched under his cap and said, "Look, this place isn't the safest for a girl to walk alone. I heard there's some of them crazy sports types that like to hang out around here and do stuff like jump off the stairs for fun."

"Oh my." Ashe put a hand to her face when all she wanted to do was shove him. *Girl?* "Thank you for letting me know. I'll be on my way then."

"How about I walk you to the entrance?"

"That's all right, I know a shortcut." With that, Ashe backed up a step and took off at a dead run. She hit the railing of the fire escape with both hands and used her momentum to carry her over it. She hung for a split second before she let go and landed lightly on the balls of her feet. She looked back over her shoulder and gave the security guard a cheerful wave and trotted off down the alley.

Refreshed, Ashe treated herself to a fancy coffee at a small café near Pierre's. It was nice, but nothing compared to the decadent perfection of the Spanish confection she'd shared with Mystral. She'd shared an awful lot with Mystral. May's Kitchen, Jax's gym, and even her own apartment. Not to mention her wayward thoughts and half-formed dreams. Ashe looked into the depths of her cup as if the answer to her predicament was lurking there. Mystral had invaded almost every facet of her life. She only needed to show up at Ashe's desk at Infra BC and the Bingo card would be complete. Like a slowly blooming dawn, Ashe was coming to accept the reality that it was getting more and more difficult to imagine her life without Mystral in it. She struggled to swallow the blackness that rose up with the realization she would have to, sooner rather than later.

The sinking sun cast long red squares over the tables until one of the staff lowered the paper blinds.

That was Ashe's cue to leave. She had lingered long enough. It was time to pick Mystral up, and Ashe had a responsibility waiting for her at May's Kitchen. In a few minutes, Ashe pulled up in front of the bakery. She leaned over to open the door for Mystral to jump in. The simple ritual was familiar and comforting. In the passenger seat with her arms full of her uniform, Mystral was cheerful and pink-cheeked. The heady scent of burnt sugar and vanilla wafted from her

"It's a good thing I always keep a few spare uniforms at Pierre's," she said and

held up the crumpled garment. That day, it was decorated with chocolate streaks and purple splotches.

"Did you have a lot of work today?" Ashe asked as shops streamed by outside.

"The usual, a few birthday cakes but nothing out of the ordinary," Mystral said. She absently played with the sound system as she spoke. Ashe tried hard not to notice how graceful and talented her fingers were. The cab of the truck filled with a rousing rock anthem from the oldies-but-goodies category. "What did you do to pass the afternoon?"

"Not too much," Ashe said. "Just checked out a few old haunts and hung out with a coffee. Oh, this is a good song, keep it here." Automatically Ashe reached out and put her hand over Mystral's. She jerked back and hoped the heat that rose to her cheeks wasn't obvious.

"Good call, I like this one too." Without any indication she'd noticed anything, Mystral shimmied her shoulders along with the music and joined in on the chorus. When they stopped at a red light, Mystral rolled down the windows and leaned her elbow out. Another foot-stomping tune on the playlist took over and she kept rhythm by banging her hand on the door.

"You've got a kickass sound system and great taste in music, Ashe," she said.

"That means a lot, coming from you," Ashe said.

"Well, it's true. Mind if I pump up the volume?" Mystral asked. Her eyes danced with mischief as she twisted the dial. The truck shook like a wheeled nightclub. "Sometimes you gotta just let it rip! Woo! Let's hear it for the good old days when music was music! Don'tcha think?"

Buoyed by the inspiring tune, Ashe tapped her fingers on the steering wheel.

When they arrived at May's restaurant she was just putting out the wooden sign and waved them in. That day, they were the first customers instead of the last. Vic was holding court at her usual place at the counter. As the two entered, she got up to set their places with practiced efficiency.

With her usual energy, May bustled back into the room and ducked behind the counter. She gave Mystral a big smile as she tied the apron behind her back.

"What can I get you ladies tonight? I've got some nice fried chicken and roast beef I just made up. Vic helped me make a bunch of salmon steamers I can heat up if you like."

"May's fried chicken is always really good," Ashe said to Mystral. "Is that all right?"

"Sure, that sounds great," she said. As May fixed their plates, Mystral raised herself from her stool so she could inspect the various platters decorating the raised counter in front of them. "What's that grey stuff?"

"It's *konnyaku*. Devil's tongue-root jelly," May said. "I boiled it up with some soy sauce and these little taros. Have a try and see if you like it." She put a small triangle on a dish and added a dab of sweet miso sauce before passing it over.

"Pretty good, actually. Seems like it would be healthy," Mystral said as she chewed. "All right, I'll take a dish of that."

"Coming right up."

"When you have a moment, could you get my bottle and four glasses?" Ashe asked, raising herself up from her stool. She looked over to Vic, who was busily opening a new pack of bamboo chopsticks. "Are you driving tonight?"

"Nope," she said. "Sunday nights we're always a bit slow so May lets me relax and have a few."

Ashe made up drinks for everyone and passed them around. The four of them clinked glasses with a cheerful chorus of "*Kampai!*".

"What's the occasion?" May asked. She studied Ashe over the rim of her glass. "You don't usually mix for us."

"I lost a bet," Ashe said with a shrug. She took a sip of her drink and ignored May's sudden triumphant laugh. Instead, she studied the bottle. The level was getting pleasantly low. "It's about time for a new bottle I think."

"Same as usual?" May asked, although she'd already dragged the stout stepladder.

"Yes, thanks," Ashe said. As May rummaged on the high shelf for a new bottle of Kuro-Kirishima, Ashe leaned on one elbow and looked over to Mystral, who was studying the decorations littering every horizontal space of the small eatery. She seemed particularly fascinated with a small red-beamed model.

"Is that Tokyo Tower?" Mystral asked.

"Nope," Vic said. "Sapporo TV Tower. We got it a couple years ago when we went there on vacation. Good place. Great food and the people are really polite."

"Wow, that's really cool! I'd love to go to Japan someday." She went back to gnawing on her slab of konnyaku and said around it, "But I don't know if I'd be able to get around. It just seems, so, I don't know. Difficult."

"Go with Ashe," Vic said. She held up a hand to deflect Ashe's not completely joking glare of death. "What? It's not like I'm saying you gotta take her to a love hotel. Or go in a hot spring together. But lemme tellya, that's a good time. Heh."

"Vic," Ashe growled. She did not like the wave of mental turbulence Vic's words called forth.

"Sorry, my bad," she said. Vic bent her head and spoke in a conspiratorial tone, "Some people are entirely too starchy around here. A bit of a soak in hot water would do 'em a world of good I think."

Mystral snickered and Ashe concentrated on her food. When they finished their chicken, she ordered some grilled tofu blocks for them, which Mystral seemed to like quite a bit. For the remainder of the meal, Ashe obediently made up a number of drinks for everybody until the evening took on a jovial atmosphere.

After Ashe settled the bill, May scurried into the back room and came back with a clanking plastic bag. She handed it to Ashe with a smile playing about her lips. A quick peek revealed it contained a number of tallboys of Chu-Hi.

"Just a little souvenir for you," May told her in a stage whisper. "Junji brought a

case back for us and I wanted to share."

"Really?" Ashe couldn't help the happy grin as Mystral leaned over her shoulder to examine the contents of the bag. "Thanks May! I used to love this stuff when I was in, uh." Ashe stopped herself. "I mean when I was over the legal drinking age of course."

"Of course," May said. She nodded and patted Ashe on the arm as Mystral and Vic snickered into their sleeves. "Don't worry, I'm not going to tell your mama."

Hoisting the bag in the crook of her elbow, Ashe muttered, "The statute of limitations has run out anyway."

She'd drunk much more than her usual already, and Ashe felt relaxed and magnanimous as she left the warm clatter of the restaurant and re-entered the cold night with Mystral at her side as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"WHERE'S YOUR SAFEHOUSE then?" Ashe pulled out the map and studied it. "It seems like we'll need to take a taxi there."

"Can't I impose on you for one more night?" Mystral asked in a low voice that sent a thrill down Ashe's spine. She twitched as Mystral slipped her arm through Ashe's and drew close to her. "I'm sleepy and I like your place. All my stuff is there and I don't want to figure out someplace new tonight."

Logically, Ashe knew she should refuse. Load Mystral into a taxi and dump her off at the borrowed room. But she couldn't. Without even a chance to gather her belongings, Mystral had been evicted from her own apartment and was being passed around from place to place like a Christmas fruitcake. She'd had enough upheaval that Ashe didn't want to subject her to more than she was willing to handle.

When Ashe was honest with herself, there was another reason she didn't want to let Mystral go quite yet. As much as she didn't want to admit it, she was not looking forward to becoming reacquainted with the aching emptiness of her apartment again.

"All right. One more night," Ashe said. As gently as she could, she retrieved her arm and stepped back. Her side was suddenly cold where Mystral had been. "Don't think I don't know you're just angling for another one of my champion omelets."

"You got me," Mystral said. "But thanks, really. You're the best, Ashe." Mystral led the way and navigated the few blocks to Ashe's apartment.

"How about we break out these bad boys?" Ashe held up one of the cans and waggled it.

"Sounds great," Mystral said. "Mind if I get changed?"

"Go right ahead," Ashe said.

She went into the kitchen and stuck the cans in the freezer to cool them off a bit. Ashe was full from the good dinner, but she never drank without something to munch on, so she rummaged around and came up with some fruit and cheese plus a bunch of different crackers that rounded out the selection.

Ashe heard Mystral come back into the living room. She leaned back against the kitchen doorway to see what Mystral was doing and swallowed hard. Mystral had changed into a simple T-shirt and shorts. She lounged on the sofa with one of her cake books in her hands. She looked altogether too sexy with her long legs curled up on the cushions.

For a moment, Ashe allowed her gaze to soften, her defenses to lower a fraction. She really could get used to this. She had never realized how nice it was to share her space with someone. Not someone. Mystral. For an instant, Ashe wondered what it would be like to come home to her every night and wake up with her every morning. Startled, Ashe put a firm lid on those compelling but inadvisable thoughts. Letting herself get emotionally involved was not going to help Mystral. If anything, it would make things much more difficult.

She hefted the tray with two ice-filled glasses and the snack-plate and came into the living room. Mystral glanced up from her book as Ashe put the tray down.

"Oh, that looks delicious," she purred and gave a stretch that left Ashe flustered.

"How about some music?" Ashe asked as she hurried over to the stereo. She selected a playlist that she hoped wouldn't offend Mystral's finely-honed musical taste. As Ashe came back over, Mystral put her book down and scooted over, making room on the sofa.

"So, what's Chu-Hi anyway?" Mystral asked as Ashe popped open a can that was decorated with pictures of lemons.

"It's fruit juice, soda, and vodka or sometimes shochu," Ashe said. She filled both glasses and plunked a straw into one of them. She gave the fizzy drink a quick stir before she handed it over. "It's easy to drink, but this one's nine percent alcohol so take it slow. It can sneak up on you if you're not careful. Not that I know anything about that." Ashe felt a bit lightheaded as she picked up her drink and met Mystral's toast with it.

Mystral took a good-sized quaff. She patted herself on the chest.

"Yes, I'm feeling the booze right here," Mystral said. "It's really good though!"

She leaned forward and inspected the snack plate, not seeming to notice that the motion had her nearly slung across Ashe's lap. She popped a cheese-topped cracker into her mouth and closed her eyes as she crunched blissfully.

"You really know how to show a gal a good time," Mystral said.

"I do my best," Ashe said. She sipped her drink as the tension slipped from her shoulders.

They chatted aimlessly about a number of topics and a second can got opened, then a third. The crisis that had brought Mystral to her seemed very far away and unimportant as Ashe got more involved in the rambling conversation. Soon Ashe found herself quite warm and before she could think about what she was doing, she had stripped down to her tank top and boxer briefs. She endured a bit of good-natured ribbing from Mystral about her butch choice of underwear. They were both getting tipsy and Ashe played along with Mystral as she told stupid jokes and funny stories from her life, adding her

own groaners from time to time. Finally both of them ended up collapsing in a heap of giggles.

After the storm was over, Mystral became quiet and her eyes drifted to look out of the window where sparkling streetlights of the city winked through the sheer curtains. The conversation dwindled to a gentle silence. The only sounds were the thin strains of music from the stereo.

"What is it?" Ashe asked. She studied Mystral's face. "Hey, talk to me."

"It's just, oh," Mystral leaned back and raked both hands through her hair. "Why is this happening to me? I mean, did I accidentally lead someone on or give them the wrong idea? What the hell did I do to get myself into this situation?"

"This isn't your fault," Ashe said. Conviction deepened her tone. She noticed her glass was almost empty and set it down. She hoped the Chu-Hi wouldn't make her say something she shouldn't. "Whoever is harassing you is doing it of their own volition. They don't care about who you really are or what you feel. They're lost in their own fantasies and probably have no idea how much damage they're doing. You did nothing wrong, Mystral. Believe that."

"I just want all this to be over," Mystral said and Ashe noticed with a lurch that her eyes were filled with unshed tears. "I'm not worth all this fuss. What the hell's the big deal with me anyway? I'm just your average fuckup."

The urge to reach out to Mystral was overwhelming. Ashe struggled with herself for an instant before she lost the battle. She turned to face Mystral and folded both hands around Mystral's.

"You are not a fuckup, sweetheart." Ashe winced internally at her third slip. However she let the unease go at the softening of Mystral's posture, the slow effusion of happiness that returned to her face. She gave Mystral's hands a quick squeeze and continued, "You are intelligent and creative. You are adorably awkward and at the same time you've got a streak of humor and charisma that just shines through. You care about people, and you make them feel safe and comfortable. You make me feel—" Ashe cut herself off. Her heart pounded.

Mystral's gaze bored into hers. She whispered, "How do I make you feel?"

"Alive." The word hung in the air between them. Ashe gulped and dropped Mystral's hands. She turned away, only to glance back the next moment, shocked to see Mystral with one hand pressed to her mouth. The truth burst from Ashe like the floodgates of her subconscious had been wrenched open. "You make me feel alive, and forgiven, and I think you are in need of a hug," Ashe said. Her body trembled and her hands shook, but she was absolutely certain it was the right thing to do. Her voice dropped as she murmured, "If that's okay."

Without answering, Mystral gave her a bright-eyed nod and Ashe wrapped her arms about Mystral's shoulders. Ashe drew her close and felt a slight tremor in the slender body pressed against hers. Rubbing a hand up and down Mystral's back, Ashe bent her head and whispered into Mystral's hair, "Trust me. Everything's going to be all right."

Mystral nodded then tucked her head against Ashe's shoulder. The motion brought herself flush with Ashe, who realized the intimacy of the position she'd put them in. It was too late to back out now. A deep heat started to rise up within herself, her body grew electrified and taut. Her skin tingled with the need to be touched. Her breath came faster as Mystral's arms snaked around her waist. Soft lips brushed her neck and Ashe heard own voice come out in a moan. Even as she pressed herself into the caress, Ashe steeled herself against the wave of desire Mystral's touch evoked.

The part of her brain that managed to function in spite of being soaked in Chu-Hi informed Ashe that drunken sofa cuddling was not an acceptable way to spend the evening with a client. They had crossed the hugging line, but as long as Ashe stopped things before full-on kissing happened, they'd be fine.

They fit together so well. The completion Ashe felt in Mystral's embrace was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. It was addictive. Ashe wanted more. She hitched herself forward on the sofa and gathered Mystral closer to her. Ashe cupped one hand on the back of Mystral's head. She drew in a great breath as Mystral responded to her and their bodies melted together. Hot breath against Ashe's skin precluded what could only be described as a hungry kiss in the juncture of her neck and shoulder. Through her euphoric drunken haze, Ashe kept up her mental tally. It wasn't on the lips, things were still okay.

Automatically, Ashe's head went down. Her chest heaved with desire as she buried her face in the soft mass of Mystral's hair. The heated trail of kisses went up the side of her neck and ended with Mystral nuzzling behind her ear. Her panting breaths were loud and resonated through Ashe with every heartbeat. She knew she was going to have to put the brakes on at some point, but they were just hugging. There wasn't anything wrong with that, was there? Her thighs were trembling and Ashe felt her underwear sticking to herself in a way that no hug had ever done to her before.

"When I was fourteen, I had my first girlfriend." Mystral's voice hummed though Ashe's body. She punctuated the words by trailing her hands up Ashe's back to her curl around her shoulders. "We were too scared to actually kiss so we just kind of squashed our faces into each other's shoulders. Kind of like this."

"Good practice," Ashe managed to say, impressed at Mystral's early debut. Ashe herself hadn't bothered even attempting to brave the dating game until she'd been in her mid-twenties. She drew back and took Mystral's face in her hands so she could look at her directly. The desire she saw in the depths of Mystral's eyes startled her. Before she could stop herself, Ashe trailed her thumb over Mystral's lower lip. The softness and slight smile the movement brought sent a shaft of fire all the way through her. She was on the verge of making a huge mistake.

"We did that until one day we slipped, and suddenly her mouth was on mine," Mystral murmured. She sat still, not moving either forward or back.

Her eyes drifted closed and she gave a dreamy sigh. "It was the most intimate, electrifying feeling. Not because I was in love with her or anything, but the fact that it was so right that she was a girl. Ever since then, I've been searching for something like that, but with the right person. Ashe, I think maybe..." She trailed off and leaned into Ashe's hold.

Ashe couldn't let this discussion go any further. She clenched her teeth and let go of Mystral, intending to stand up. Instead, she gave a bark of surprise as Mystral pitched forward and sprawled over her lap. Frozen in shock, Ashe gaped for a few seconds, at a complete loss before a snore broke the silence.

"Okay, I guess that's enough for tonight," Ashe said as she attempted to hoist Mystral upright. "Let's get you to bed." She got Mystral's arm slung over her shoulder and, with Mystral muttering things like "Five more minutes, Mom," Ashe got up on unsteady legs and half-carried Mystral into the bedroom where they collapsed onto the bed with Ashe sprawled out halfway underneath the sleeping young woman. Ashe freed herself and tried to drag the bedcovers around Mystral's floppy and unresponsive body. She got most of Mystral under the blanket before she gave up and slumped down beside her. Ashe had a brief thought about moving to the sofa, but the lure of sleep was too great and the next second, Ashe was adding to the chorus of snoring.

ASHE OPENED HER eyes early the next morning. She desperately wished the events clouding her mind from the previous night had been a dream. However that wish was shattered by the fact that instead of a pillow, her head was resting on the deliciously soft swell of Mystral's breast and long, slender legs twined with her own to the point where Mystral's thigh was pressed against the throbbing need at her crotch. Ashe discovered she had one hand on Mystral's firm buttock and the other was under her T-shirt, resting on the soft, bare skin of Mystral's midriff, dangerously close to forbidden territory. With Mystral's arms around her, Ashe had never felt so safe. But she couldn't stay like that. Ashe held her breath as she teased Mystral's arms open and prayed she wouldn't wake up.

With a groan torn from her throat at the loss of contact, Ashe hoisted herself onto her elbows and extracted herself from the loose embrace. Mystral mumbled something and rolled forward. Her face buried itself neatly against Ashe's chest with a happy, muffled sigh. Ashe jumped and let out a startled yelp.

Ashe heaved Mystral away from her with a bit too much force. The motion sent Ashe backwards. With another yelp, she pitched over and fell from the mattress to the floor. After lying there stunned for a few seconds, Ashe staggered upright. She grabbed at her side with a hiss at the sudden dull shock of pain from her ribs. She had to get out of there. Ashe's panicked and fumbling hands grabbed some clean clothes from her dresser and she escaped into the shower, where she held her head in her hands and wondered if she'd be able to look Mystral in the eye ever again. Under the unrelenting spray,

Ashe fought to regain her composure. She had never spent the entire night with anyone before, and certainly never in her own bed. Upon further thought, Ashe concluded she had no regrets, other than the fact that what had nearly happened would never actually occur. She couldn't let it.

She let out a frustrated breath and shifted under the warm spray as the nagging burn between her legs refused to die. She could not work in the state she was in. Ashe braced one arm against the slick tiles and closed her eyes as she trailed one wet hand down to where a tight ache begged for attention. Her breaths quickened as Ashe relived the moment where Mystral had folded herself into her arms, remembering the soft pressure of her kisses against Ashe's neck. Her body came alive. Her hips started to move of their own volition. She lost herself in the fantasy and mentally continued where reality left off. Finally, she grit her teeth against the sobbing whimpers of release.

A much relieved Ashe was dressed and putting the finishing touches on an omelet when Mystral padded into the kitchen. She was breathtakingly tousled and lovely in her sleep-rumpled shirt. Ashe noticed her flushed cheeks and how she moved in a sinuous, loose-hipped sway similar to the one Ashe had found herself in possession of earlier that morning. A fleeting thought crossed Ashe's mind, maybe she hadn't been the only one to "take care of business" that morning.

They exchanged casual good mornings. Mystral gave a yawn and a stretch. Ashe turned away and rummaged around in the silverware drawer for something, anything to keep her attention away from Mystral.

"I had the best dream last night," Mystral said. She put both elbows on the table and propped her chin up on clasped hands.

Ashe bit her lip in order to stop from blurting out that it hadn't been a dream, instead she put a mug of coffee and a plate in front of Mystral. "Here's the omelet I promised you."

"Yum! Thanks!" Mystral said as she happily dug into her omelet. After a few mouthfuls, she looked up at Ashe somewhat sheepishly. "You were right, that Chu-Hi really did ambush me last night. Did I fall asleep on the sofa?"

"It's all right, I got knocked out pretty quickly myself," Ashe said. She wondered uneasily if she should apologize or to just let things drift off unsaid. Her mind whirled and went down a dark, painful path, uncomfortably aware that Mystral could accuse her of sexual misconduct, if not full-on assault for a number of things that had occurred the night before. Ashe sat down with her own plate and decided to go with the truth. She didn't want to hide anything from Mystral.

Ashe took a sip of coffee before she said, "*Champon*—that's mixing alcohol—isn't a great idea. I tried to get you to bed and, well, I think we both kind of ended up in there." At Mystral's sudden flush and raised eyebrows, Ashe hastened to add, "Don't worry, nothing happened. I didn't take advantage of the situation."

"Maybe next time," Mystral said, holding her mug in front of her smile.

There won't be a next time, Ashe thought firmly to herself. Unnerved by the direct look, Ashe switched on the radio and the conversation turned to safe topics.

Chapter Ten

AFTER SHE DROPPED Mystral off at the bakery bright and early, Ashe made her way to the bus station downtown. It was Monday, the last day she'd begged off work. In the six months she'd been working there, Ashe had never taken so much as an afternoon off and the long stretch without having to endure the stifling office air felt decadent and freeing. She didn't want to think about the next day when she'd have to go back there. Her meeting, Ashe didn't want to consider it a date, with Lily was coming up. Apparently they were supposed to be meeting for a drive and "lunch by the sea". The fact that Lily was active in the dating scene made it somewhat unlikely that she was still hung up on Mystral enough to waste time stalking her. However, Ashe wanted to definitively eliminate her from the list of suspects and there was only one way to do that. The meeting would take place as scheduled.

Ashe drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and turned the details of the case over in her mind. Something wasn't sitting right. The tone of the letters was different from the phone calls. The timing as well. She checked the time and quelled the unanswered questions. She would see what Lily had to say for herself. Maybe that would give her a clearer idea of what was going on.

She left her truck at the free park-and-ride and got on the bus that would take her to the suburbs. After paying the fare, Ashe slung herself into one of the rear seats. With a growling rattle, the bus lurched into motion. The view outside the window changed from the blocky gray buildings of the city to sprawling strip malls and clusters of hedge-bordered lawns, decorated with squat brick homes. Driveways sported station wagons and the occasional minivan. Ashe recoiled from the stifling feel of those too-perfect lawns and little swing sets.

Ashe had long known that kind of life wasn't for her. Raised in the city, she was much more comfortable there. She only felt like herself in the city, or conversely in the absolute middle of nowhere. After her parents had retired to their remodeled cottage a four and a half-hour drive from civilization on the shores of a lake too obscure to even be named on the map, Ashe had visited a number of times and had been charmed by the area. The nearest neighbors were a twenty-minute hike away, the only store reachable by canoe, and the main occupation was either fishing or contributing to the monthly newsletter/almanac that the volunteer firefighters churned out on their ancient mimeograph machine. Everyone in the little self-contained community had their own peculiarities and charm. Even the air was different. Before she could stop herself, Ashe had a fleeting vision of standing under a flawless midnight sky with the dazzling diamond arch of the milky way sprawling overhead, wind off the lake chilling her skin, and Mystral in her arms. No. Don't even think about it. Ashe bit back the flash of loss as she forced the vision down.

She came back to the present just in time to press the button for her stop. The bus juddered to a stop and Ashe clambered down the steps. She stood for a

while as the purple haze of exhaust blew around her. She frowned while she batted at her clothing and hoped she didn't smell like diesel. Ashe hadn't made any particular effort with her outfit and she'd kept her hair soft and natural, letting her bangs fall across her brow. Still, she was feeling relaxed and proud, true to herself for the first time in months.

It was in that frame of mind that Ashe saw the car pull up. The driver's side window lowered and a pleasantly made-up face peered out. With a quick glance into the backseat, Ashe was relieved to note the absence of any uninvited passengers.

"Hi, you must be Lily. It's a pleasure to meet you in person." Ashe gave her a dashing smile and was rewarded by a giggle and blush from Lily. "It's Ashe, um Crazy Daisy." She tried not to grimace at the username Yakkun had chosen.

Without answering, Lily released the lock on the passenger's side door and leaned over. She grabbed the handle and cracked the door open a sliver.

With a quick flash of nerves, Ashe sauntered over to the car and got in. She hoped Yakkun hadn't set her up to be kidnapped and maybe chopped up by a crazy person. Her fears were assuaged somewhat as Lily turned to her and started speaking in a cheerful and bubbly voice.

"Thanks for coming, Ashe. Wow, you look way different from your picture! Not at all what I was expecting."

"It was an old one," Ashe said, suddenly breaking into a cold sweat as she realized she hadn't followed through with Yakkun's request of a photo of herself. What on earth had he sent her?

"Anyway, I thought we could go somewhere quiet and get to know each other."

"Yeah, I'd like that," Ashe said. She buckled herself up and leaned back in the passenger's seat, studying Lily's profile as she drove. Long brown curls were pulled back from her face and held with a rhinestone-studded band. She was wearing a stretchy top under a puffy down vest and well-made jeans that looked to be designer. The top wasn't flashy or sexy, but just tight and low-cut enough to give a person with imagination something to amuse themselves with mentally. Lily wasn't a bad-looking person and she obviously took a lot of care with her appearance. However it would be a complete lie to say she was Ashe's type. While she was pretty lenient with whom she associated with, Ashe drew the line at a "taken" person. No matter how phony they said the relationship was, Ashe didn't want to get herself stuck in the middle of anything that had the potential to erupt into a mudslinging disaster. Someone always got more attached than they should. She had seen more than enough of that sort of thing when she'd been an active P.I., and it never ended well.

"So you're into surfing?" Lily asked.

Mentally cursing Yakkun, Ashe gave a leisurely grin and said, "Yeah. I got into it in college and kept it up. There's something both so calming and powerful about the ocean, don't you think?"

"Yeah really." Lily fiddled with the stereo, turning down the pop tunes coming from it. Ashe noticed it was a top-of-the-line system. The car too was new, an import model.

The scenery scrolled by and Ashe knew she would have to get to the meat of her interview pretty soon. She didn't want to get too far away from civilization in case Lily decided to kick her out and leave her somewhere in a fit of temper. For some reason, not everyone reacted positively when the person they thought was planning on giving them orgasms turned out to be actually more interested in grilling them about the most uncomfortable aspects of their lives, with absolutely no inclination to even pop a single button.

"I heard you were going out with that DJ." Ashe kept her face calm, her tone conversational. "The one who calls herself Phoenix."

"Who did you hear that from?" Lily's voice was sharp, her movements on the steering wheel became erratic.

"Just from around," Ashe said. She reached over and covered Lily's hand with her own as she surreptitiously steadied the car's path.

"Well the little bitch dumped me," Lily said. "I hope she didn't spread any nasty rumors about me."

"Not that I know of," Ashe said through gritted teeth as she resisted the urge to throw the insult back in Lily's face. Bitch indeed! She took a breath and calmed her voice as she continued, "I heard it was kind of a rough breakup and that's all. You deserve better than that." The veering trajectory was still quite unsettling. Ashe saw the tree-studded expanse of a park coming up on the right and nodded her head toward it. "How about we stop the car and take a stroll?"

"Okay, that sounds nice," Lily said. She batted her eyelashes and didn't move her hand from under Ashe's.

As smoothly as she could, Ashe retrieved her hand. She felt like a complete fake and a person of low moral standards to boot as she fought to retain her smooth exterior. She got out of the car first and gallantly opened the door for Lily, who took Ashe by the arm and didn't let go as they started walking.

They'd walked for a short while, chatting lightly about inane things Ashe forgot as soon as she'd said them when she felt it was a good time to bring up the real topic again. She pulled away and faced Lily squarely. "So do you have anyone special in your life right now?"

"Of course not silly," Lily said. She gave Ashe a playful swat in a way that made Ashe want to put her into a wristlock. "That's why I wanted to meet you."

"Nobody you're still thinking of?" Ashe asked. "Like someone who dumped you?"

"If you mean Mystral," Lily spat the name, "Then no." She crossed her arms over her chest. "What's with dragging up the past again, huh? I thought we could have a nice day and here you are going on about stuff that's over and done with. What's the hang up with her anyway? You know what? I think this whole thing was a bad idea."

Ashe said, "I've been asked to look into a situation and I'd like to ask you some questions."

"You're a pro?"

She hesitated for a split second before she answered, "Yes."

Lily's face went ashen and she turned and darted back toward the car. Ashe overtook her in two long steps.

"Easy now," Ashe said. She stilled Lily with a hand on her arm.

"Let go of me before I call rape! Don't think I won't!"

"Just relax," Ashe said. She let go of Lily and stepped back, hands held out. "I'm not here to wreck your life or expose you or anything. I know your situation and I get it. This is about Mystral, all right? How about we take a seat here and I'll tell you what's going on."

Lily sank down onto the wooden bench. Her fingers worried at the clasp of her bag. Hermes, Ashe noted.

"Okay who sent you?" Lily had her head down, shoulders hunched. "Was it Mystral? Because I'm not interested in getting back together anymore. She had her chance and lost it. Now she can just lump it."

"It's something much more serious than that, I'm afraid. Somebody's stalking her," Ashe said without preamble, waiting to see Lily's reaction.

"And you think I know anything about it?" Lily snapped. She shifted and looked uneasy. "If you're snooping around my life, you know I've got two kids and a household to take care of, and I don't have the time to do stuff like that."

"You sent her a bunch of messages on Babysteps. Not entirely sweet and friendly ones, either."

"Oh shit, yeah I remember that. But that was a long time ago and she had just dumped me." Lily's lower lip started quivering and Ashe fought a wave of annoyance. "Look, people do stupid stuff in that kind of situation but I got over it, okay? I'm no crazy stalker-type."

"You still have to convince me," Ashe said. She wasn't going to fall into the trap Lily baited with her tears. "Where were you last Saturday night at around one thirty am?"

Lily gaped at her. "Are you fucking serious? You're wanting my alibi?"

"If you have one," Ashe said, her voice casual. "If not, then you're just making yourself more interesting to us."

"Fine." Lily dug through her purse and pulled out a tissue, holding it ready. Ashe appreciated her forethought. "On that night I was at a singles' event at Rainbow Haven."

Ashe took note of that information. She had been to Rainbow Haven a few times way back in her clubbing days and was glad to hear they were still in business. Run by a jovial trans woman and her wife, the intimate dining bar attracted a certain crowd who valued discretion.

"Were you there all night?"

"I was there from I think twelve thirty till closing at around three," Lily said. "Then I went home. Straight home. Alone."

Three am, over an hour after the perp had been at Mystral's. "Is there anybody who can back you up?"

With an annoyed sigh, Lily said, "Birdy was there all night. I didn't get anyone's number or anything so I don't know how to get in contact with anyone else who was there." By the grumpy look on her face Ashe could tell the event's result didn't rank in as satisfactory for Lily. She continued, "I didn't leave except to go to the can, all right? Would you like me to list how many times and what I did in there?"

"That's not necessary."

"I'm glad." Lily's eyes filled with tears. "I know I'm not a great person, but I'm no stalker. Look, I have way more to lose than her. I have to think of my kids." With that, she let loose with a few tears. She sniffled and dabbed at her eyes with the tissue. "I just want them to have a normal life, and I'm not going to mess that up. You can check up on me and whatever if you don't believe me, but do not get my kids wrapped up in this, okay?"

"I wasn't planning on it," Ashe said. She had to admit not feeling entirely unaffected by Lily's plight but there was no way she was going to let herself be manipulated. She could tell Lily wanted Ashe to put an arm around her or something by the way she was leaning in her direction. Ashe inched back.

"You don't know how lonely it is for me," Lily said. "I don't talk to anyone for days, weeks at a time! Just doing laundry, making the food and cleaning the house. Can I help it if I sometimes want somebody to listen to me for a minute? You have to understand what it's like for me. My kids are everything to me but you wouldn't believe how so many people look down on me and reject me for having them. I just wanted to give them a better life than I had. Is that so bad? I don't want my kids to grow up in a broken home so I stay. Do what I have to do."

Ashe decided she had better reel in the discussion before it got too off-track. "Did Mystral ever mention anyone that gave her a weird vibe or anything? You know, even offhand."

Lily's crying petered out and she folded her hands in her lap. "Why are you asking me this? Don't you have, like surveillance cameras or stakeouts or something?"

"Because there's nothing like human intuition," Ashe said. She gave up a bit of her pride as she edged closer to Lily and pitched her voice low. "You have a chance to help me out here. You knew Mystral better than anyone, there must be something you can tell me."

"Well I don't know if this is relevant, but we used to do tag-alongs for Birdy," Lily fanned herself and pursed her pink frosted lips as she hummed thoughtfully. She said, "At least I did. I got Misty to be my backup just in case there was anyone strange or I needed an out. If anybody's gonna be a stalker, it's probably somebody from there. Lots of weirdos, people without a lot of social skills, you know the type."

"All right, I'm listening," Ashe said. She straightened up and hung onto Lily's words. "Tell me more about that. How did you contact them?"

"There's this chat room for local people who've never been to a bar, well, one of our bars. We'd chat a bit online and then I'd meet up with them in a cafe

or somewhere. We'd end up at Rainbow Haven if they weren't freaks or lying." Lily settled herself on the bench and tugged at her top, pulling the front of it slightly lower in what seemed to be an automatic motion. After that, her fingers went to her throat and she played with the charm on her necklace, zipping it from side to side.

While Lily fidgeted, Ashe let her gaze wander. Her mind processed the information. She needed to find those people. Ashe didn't have either the access or the expertise to track people digitally. Old-fashioned analogue footwork had stood her in good stead until now, and it would continue to do so.

"What was the system?" Ashe asked.

"For every new customer we brought, we'd get free drinks. Sometimes Birdy would make us snacks or something like that. Okay, I know it looks like I have money." Lily turned and fixed her eyes on Ashe. "But none of it's mine. It's *his* and it's really hard for me to go out without using it. He thinks we have savings but we don't, so if there's anything I can do to, like, find my own way to pay then I'll do it. Anyway, it's not like they thought it was a date or anything. I was just introducing someone to the community, is all."

"I get it. It's hard to go alone your first time. There's nothing wrong with that," Ashe said. She rested her elbows on her knees and loosely knit her fingers together. Ashe spoke again, her voice low and calm, "I want you to think back. Was there anyone who struck you as odd?"

"Well of course there were more than a few weirdos," Lily said. "Lemme think if anyone was more weird than usual."

As she waited for Lily to speak, Ashe looked out over the grassy expanse of the park. In front of them a young couple played fetch with a Labrador puppy. The little dog bounded around on the grass, not really understanding the objective of the game, but having a fine time anyway. Laughter filtered through the dry wind that was alive with the sound and scent of autumn leaves. The sky overhead was a brilliant blue, clumps of clouds scudded around the horizon.

"Okay, I got a couple." Lily sank back against the bench and stuffed her hands in the pockets of her vest. "The worst was this guy who was obviously wearing a bra under his shirt. Like, no undershirt or anything. It was one of those crappy black lace ones they sell in those bins at department stores. Not that I care about any of that, but he really gave me the creeps. He had this really gross way of looking at you and asking weird random questions. Like I'd be saying something about a movie and suddenly he would be like: Do you eat broccoli? Where do you keep your toilet paper? Have you ever voted by proxy?" Lily grimaced. "We never even made it to Birdy's and I'm kinda glad. I heard later on, one of the guys at Watchman's had to ask him to leave after he got weird with some of the staff."

"Did he show any kind of interest in Mystral at the time?"

"No, actually I don't think he even met her." Lily shook herself. "That's right, Misty was sitting across the room and I gave her our signal and she called me with a 'family emergency'." Lily withdrew her hands from her

pockets long enough to perform quotation marks.

"How about anyone else, even anyone who was friendly or seemed like they wanted to get closer to Mystral? Especially anyone who knew she was a DJ."

"A lot of people were friendly and nice," Lily said with a shrug. "A few times we'd all have a laugh at Birdy's and sometimes go onto another shop or something, but most people kept a respectable distance because they knew she was with me." She preened and said, "I did get a few requests for *my* number. Not that I gave it out, but it's nice to know you've still got it. Don't you think so?" She scooted toward Ashe and ended up far too close for Ashe's liking.

"How about some details?" Ashe asked as she got out her notebook to use as a shield. Lily was obviously a bit starved for company and seemed to be enjoying the fact she had Ashe's undivided attention a little too much.

"All right, I don't remember so clearly," Lily said. She pouted at the barrier that Ashe held between them. "We did them mostly last year, in August, when we first started going out. You know, 'cause when you've got someone new you want to go out a lot and stuff and that takes money. Anyway, I stopped doing the tag-alongs for good when it looked like I'd have to do them on my own."

"Tell me about some of them."

"Umm...let's see. There was Moe and Nydia, I think her name was. They came as a couple, and they kept making threesome jokes and talking about 'swapping'. I don't think they were serious but you never know."

"Straight couple? Swingers?"

"No, they were like us," Lily said as she gave Ashe a long sideways glance. "And there was this guy, think his name was Matthew and he was really into the club scene. Really, really into Mystral too. Maybe you've heard of Tootie Tra-La-La? Well, we got him started. Mostly Mystral though because she had the connections, but yeah. I think him and Mystral are still friends. He totally idolized her from the start, called her like a bunch of times and stuff. I don't know if he would bother stalking anyone though. I don't think he is really into *subtle*, if you know what I mean."

With a warm feeling, Ashe remembered the charming and fabulous Tootie and her "Amazing Technicolor Dream Shoes". In spite of herself, Ashe gave a smile. The young drag queen obviously thought the world of Mystral. She brought her attention back to Lily as she continued to speak.

"Uh yeah, there was this chick called Tracy, and she said she wanted to be a guy," Lily said with a snort. "Okay fine, but don't hang around our bars. I saw 'him'," Lily gestured again, "A couple months ago, trying to gatecrash a singles' event at Julie & Juliette's but I got her kicked out." Lily gloated. "Fine, be a guy if you want, but if you're a guy and like girls then you're straight. Go hang out where straight people hang out. Go find a bi girl. Our space is small enough without people like that."

With a cold jolt of disgust, Ashe said, "Mystral doesn't share your opinion."

"No, not her." Lily waved a hand dismissively. "She's always trying to get the women's-only events to let in the trannys. I think some of them still won't unless

they're accompanied by an actual girl, but most places nowadays will." The curl of Lily's lip as she spoke made Ashe bristle.

"I don't see what the problem is," Ashe said. While she didn't want to stop the flow of information, she was unable to let a comment like that slide. "Everybody should have someplace where they feel safe to be themselves. Who belongs and who doesn't, that's not for you to decide."

"Yeah, well whatever," Lily said. "Mystral would have listened to her talk all night but I got jealous and we went home early. I mean, hello! Most of them who say they want to change into a guy are faking it anyway, just trying to get attention."

Her gut clenched. Ashe wanted nothing more than to get up and leave Lily in her perfume-cloud right then and there. However, Lily was giving up some good information and Ashe couldn't finish with her yet.

"Oh yeah, and there was this girl, I think her name was Kelsey. Kinda quiet but you could tell she was like super smart. She was a bit odd, though. Kind of just looked at you when you were talking. Big girl, kind of butch." Lily examined her nails as she spoke. "She seemed really into Mystral, now that I think of it. They connected over the weird indie music they listened to. And I remember she picked up every single flyer Birdy had. I never really saw her again after that, so who knows if she ever got the nerve up to come back."

Ashe made a mental note: quiet, super-focused, and smart but shy checked off more than a few boxes in the stalker profiling list.

"Anyway, that's all I can really think of. Hope it helps."

"More than you know," Ashe said and was rewarded with a frosted pink smile. She stood and put her notebook away. "Anyway, I won't keep you any longer. I appreciate your help and cooperation." She was about to hand Lily a business card, but decided against it as she didn't want to give her any encouragement. "If you think of anything else, feel free to send us a message on Babysteps."

"Wait, is that all?" Lily didn't make a move to stand. "But what about all our conversations? I thought you wanted—"

"That was my boss," Ashe said with an apologetic shrug. "Mr. Yamaguchi. Sorry, he's a bit of a sweet-talker and I don't do online stuff."

"Fine. Whatever. Just don't come crawling back when you realize what a fine lady you've passed up." Lily muttered and hauled herself to her feet, angrily waving off Ashe's offer of a hand up. Her face was dark with anger as she stomped back toward the parking lot; however, she unlocked the car's doors and gestured for Ashe to get in.

Relieved she wasn't going to be stranded in the middle of suburbia, Ashe sat quietly in Lily's pine-scented car. She didn't really have much to say and they were almost back at the bus stop where they'd started when Lily blurted out, "So what's in it for you?"

"Pardon?" Startled, Ashe turned from the window.

"You're not the standard private eye, are you? Why are you doing this?"

"It's my job," Ashe told her with a flash of annoyance. "I was hired to do it."

"Uh huh." Lily glanced over at Ashe. "I know I messed up my chances with her, but Mystral really is a sweetie. She'll move heaven and earth for you if you do right by her. Even if you don't, she'll still treat you like a princess."

"I'm not really into the whole princess thing." Ashe couldn't help but crack a grin at the thought.

"You know what I mean," Lily said. "Look, from one gal to another, Mystral is a keeper. She deserves someone who can belong to her completely, who can give her everything because she will give you absolutely everything of herself. She deserves someone like you."

Stunned into silence, Ashe just stared at Lily.

That didn't appear to phase Lily as she continued, "She's also quite a vixen in the sack." She paused to give Ashe a long, calculating look as she finished off with, "So anyway, here we are."

"Thanks for the drive," Ashe said. She got out of the car and paused with the door open. "By the way, what photo did my boss send you?"

"A good one." Lily's lips quirked up. She dug her phone out of her bag and fiddled with it for a moment before she held the screen out to Ashe.

Ashe lost her voice.

The photo was of herself, age twenty. At her Coming-of-Age Ceremony.

In a kimono.

With an internal groan, Ashe remembered that day. Her mother had gone all-out, loaded her down with the whole shebang: fur stole, crimson sleeves sweeping down to the floor, flowers in her hair. Lipstick. It had taken over three hours and several old-lady friends of her mother's to truss her up in that getup and Ashe had hated every second of it. She had no idea how Yakkun had gotten a hold of that picture. Ashe was certain she'd hunted down and burned every last one of them.

The phone disappeared and Ashe was left blinking up at Lily until her mind came back online and she closed the door.

"Anyway, good luck," Lily called out as she sped off.

Her knees gave out and Ashe collapsed onto the hard metal bench at the bus stop, mind blank. She came back to the present just as the bus pulled into the stop.

"Getting on?" the bus driver called out.

"Yes, sure, just a minute," Ashe said as she clambered to her feet. At that hour of the day, the bus was empty save for a few pensioners having a cheerful meeting at the front. As the bus toiled down the winding road, Ashe stared dumbly out of the window. Ashe rubbed a hand through her hair and tried to put Lily's parting words from her mind. Instead she concentrated on the new information. Rather than be upset that Mystral hadn't mentioned the tag-alongs, Ashe realized Mystral and her innate belief in the goodness of people most likely hadn't even considered the people she helped into the community as suspects.

She picked up her truck at the park-and-ride and drove over to Yakkun's office. It was unoccupied except for Gus who was holding court over his desk with a lot of sandwiches and cookies scattered over it.

"Hey, wanna sammich?" Gus called out. "I thought people'd be here so I got too

many for even me to finish.”

“Sure.” Ashe grabbed a mug of coffee before she dragged over a chair and sat down across from Gus.

“We got pastrami on rye, this one’s feta and onion. How about a nice tuna fish salad? It’s got lots of pickles on it.”

“I’ll go with that. Thanks,” Ashe said. She accepted the paper-wrapped parcel and peeled the wrapping back. She recognized the skilled handiwork of Maurice who owned the deli across the street.

“So how’d the date go?” Gus waggled his eyebrows. “You’re back early. I thought women were supposed to last longer than guys. Got any juicy stories to share?”

Ashe groaned. “Get your mind out of the gutter. At any rate, Lily’s not a suspect any more. She’s got an alibi. I’ll check it out, but I’m pretty sure she’s off our list. And for your information, *no* I do not have any ‘juicy stories’ and even if I did, I sure as hell wouldn’t tell you.”

“Hey, can’t blame a guy for trying,” Gus said. “She give you any info?”

With the hand that wasn’t holding onto her sandwich, Ashe flipped her notebook open and studied her notes, even though they were etched into her mind already. “She gave me some more leads to follow up on. It’s a start. Maybe Mystral can give us some additional information to narrow the list down.”

Gus took a gulp of his coffee and said, “You’re doing good, Ashe.”

“Of course.” Ashe looked across the desk at him. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s just that with that whole thing with Jessie.” He stuffed the last bite of sandwich into his mouth, and balled up the wrapper as he spoke around the mass in his cheek. “Then coming back here with this case. This is your turf. Must hit kinda close to home, you know.”

Ashe shrugged, suddenly occupied with rearranging the pickles in her sandwich. “I’ve got a job to do and I’m doing it. That’s all.”

“So you think you’re gonna want to stay on after this case? You know all you have to do is say the word and you’re back. Yakkun’s never even talked about finding a replacement for you.”

Ashe put her sandwich down and knitted her fingers together. “Gus, I don’t know. Everything else aside, I don’t think I can do the twenty-four-hour work day anymore. I want to breathe a bit, see the light of day from time to time.”

With his characteristic guffaw, Gus said, “Yeah, I hear ya. Plus it’s hard to balance a personal life and this job too.”

“What do you mean by that?” Ashe was on the edge of her seat, her guard up.

Gus put his hands up with a look of innocence on his face. “Nothing in particular. Just sayin’ nobody would be surprised to see you with a reason to want your weekends off in the future. Nobody would be judging either. You deserve to have someone in your life.”

“Why is it,” Ashe spat without thinking, “that just because we are both into women we have to be into each other? Straight people don’t have to deal with

that. How about you and that lady who comes by to sell those yogurt drink things, huh Gus? She likes the cock. You wanna do her?" Ashe knew she was being crude, but she didn't care.

"Hey now, I never mentioned anyone specifically," Gus said with a satisfied look. "Seems like you've got someone in mind, though."

"This is not open to discussion," Ashe said. Her face flamed. She crossed her arms over her chest and chose to keep quiet before she implicated herself further. Mystral was a client. Ashe seethed to herself, even as a deep well of despair opened up and threatened to swallow her whole. As much as she wished things could be different, there was no denying that one fact. Another fact came to her—the one where she'd woken up in Mystral's arms that morning and how much she had liked it. She shifted in her chair as she noticed that Gus was studying her with that carefully uninterested expression he got when he was anything but uninterested.

"Theoretically speaking of course," Gus began as he leaned back in his chair and looked out of the window with a toothpick in his mouth. "Let's say I have this buddy whose friend is in a jam. Like, they need to move. I used to work for a moving company but I don't anymore, but anyway I say, sure I'll help you out and that friend just so happens to be a really nice person and hot too. Say I have a certain criteria that only like five, uh seven? Whatever, a small percent of the population fits and that friend just happens to be smack-dab right in the middle of that percent. Say it's mutual. That kind of chance is not something I should pass up just because I'm hung up on the kinda-sorta job-like way we met."

Speechless, Ashe just looked at him. She took a breath and spat out in a bad-humored way, "What are you insinuating? Are you implying that you have friends?"

"This is only a hypothetical situation. But what I figure," Gus seemed not to notice the consternation his words were causing as he was busy folding his paper napkin, "is people over-think things. Sometimes you just gotta go with the flow and say fuck it to everything else. If there's someone who stops you in your tracks then they're worth a second look. Doesn't matter how they got there. Stuff like this case will end. Life goes on."

She took a quick look inward. Was it obvious? For all his ham-fisted boorish exterior, she knew Gus didn't let anything get by him. Not that it would take a wizard to see how Mystral was affecting her. She'd made a few dangerous slip-ups already and couldn't risk any more.

"Well I know who *not* to call if I need to move," Ashe said. She got to her feet. Her thoughts matched the dangerous scowl on her face. Once the case was over, nothing would change except for the fact she'd have a lot more free time. She flung herself down at her desk and pretended to be fascinated with a bunch of reports she'd already read. What she wanted was immaterial. Ashe would just have to make sure she didn't let things drift into dangerous territory. She wouldn't let anything untoward happen. She couldn't.

"Anyway," Gus drawled as he stood up and wandered over to Ashe's desk.

He pulled over a chair and sat on it backwards. "I snooped around a bit more last night and it looks like the gas station has a security camera in the area. You can see the sidewalk right next to the phones."

Her head came up and Ashe shoved the reports aside.

"The guy on duty was suddenly busy with an emergency helpfully provided by our good buddy Shauna and I just happened to accidentally schlep into the security office when I was looking for the men's room. Oops!"

"Funny how that happens," Ashe said. She leaned forward, unconsciously bending the pen in her fingers.

"They didn't have the tapes from the night of the first two calls anymore, but I got footage from the twenty-fifth." He propped his tablet on the table and queued up a video. The picture was grainy and blurred. It wavered from time to time as Gus shifted position while he filmed the monitor.

"Okay, here he is," Gus said and pointed as a shadowy figure in a hoodie came into view and went over to the phone. Ashe shifted in frustration as the figure didn't turn to face the camera.

"Looks like it was a guy who called. Or at least a guy-like person." Gus shot Ashe a knowing look. "Hanging with you has made me revise the way I classify people. We can't see enough for a positive ID but I wouldn't rule out the brother's friend. I'll upload this and you can have a look whenever, but it doesn't get much clearer than this."

Ashe looked down, surprised to find an L-shaped pen in her hand. "All right, thanks Gus. I'll take it from here."

"No prob," he said. He collected his tablet and returned to his desk.

Ashe borrowed Yakkun's computer and wrote a brief summary of the interview with Lily. She added it to the growing collection of information.

"Thanks for lunch," Ashe called over her shoulder as she headed out, her thoughts heavy. She wanted to check out Lily's alibi with the folks at Rainbow Haven as well as get some more information about the people on her suspect list.

Chapter Eleven

ASHE WAITED IN the parking lot as Mystral bounded down the steps of the bakery, the familiar shock of joy at her smile took Ashe's breath away for an instant. With Mystral beside her chatting up a storm and playing with the radio, the cab of the truck felt infinitely warmer.

"I was thinking about heading over to Rainbow Haven for dinner. There are a few things I'd like to ask Birdy. Do you think you'd be up for that?"

"Sure," Mystral said. "If it's okay if I'm there too, like not getting in the way or anything?"

"That's fine. Actually, it'll be better if you're there," Ashe said. She paused and took a breath before she continued, "I met with Lily today."

"Oh God." Mystral rubbed a hand over her forehead. "I hope she didn't give you a bad impression of me. Seriously, I should have ended things better but I didn't."

"Don't worry about it. I'm more than capable of forming my own opinions," Ashe said. "She told me you used to do tag-alongs."

"That's right," Mystral said. She looked up from folding her uniform. "Do you suspect anyone from those? Okay, some of them were pretty weird, but they were all good people, just looking for a place where they could be themselves. Besides, they were mainly there for Lily. I can't believe anyone would..." Mystral trailed off and she sat back in the seat. Her hands fell limply into her lap.

"Nothing's set in stone," Ashe said. The troubled look on Mystral's face made her heart ache. "It's my job to suspect everyone and trust no one."

"The truth is out there!" Mystral perked up and poked a finger into the air. "Maybe I trust people too much. Think everyone's good when really, not everyone is."

"That's your greatest strength," Ashe said. "Don't let anything take away your belief in people."

"Yeah, sometimes it's hard though."

Ashe didn't really know what to say and drove in silence until they reached the parking lot outside Rainbow Haven. It was on the fifth floor of a small building that housed a number of businesses including a few bars and café-type places, along with a shiatsu massage clinic and a tarot card-reader who doubled as an all-around life advisor. Their destination was not hard to find. Rainbow flags hung in the windows and tolerance-minded bumper stickers were plastered on the front door.

It had been years since Ash had been to the dining bar but the interior hadn't changed much. The velvet upholstery was a different color and the selection of books and magazines displayed in a cozy nook by the back wall had increased, but overall it was just as warm and classy as she remembered. Two of the three tables were occupied and a single customer sat at the counter.

Separated from the main room was a little alcove filled by a long table that was used for private parties and events, such as the singles' night Lily had attended.

"Take a seat anywhere." A young woman with a quick smile came over with a menu.

"Hi Jenn." Mystral greeted her with a cheerful wave and sat down beside Ashe at the counter.

"Is Birdy here?" Ashe asked. "I'd like to ask her about a few things."

"Yeah, she's in the back. Why do you want to talk to her?" Jenn's eyes were guarded. She looked at Ashe carefully, assessing her it seemed. Ashe wondered if Jenn remembered her. It had been a few years after all.

"I just want to check out some details, specifically about the singles' event on the twenty-fifth."

"She's not going to spill names and stuff like that."

"It's all right, I don't need to know anything secret. I just need her to confirm a few things."

With another glance in Ashe's direction, Jenn went into the back and Ashe could hear her speaking in a soft voice to Birdy, who came out a few moments later. She was wearing an apron over a long-sleeved peasant blouse that was rolled up to her elbows. She pulled over a stool and placed herself across the counter from Ashe. Her face was framed by dark golden curls and softer than Ashe remembered, but she still radiated a serene benevolence that put Ashe at ease.

With a quick word to Ashe, Mystral got up and wandered over to look at the collection of CDs that were stacked behind a squat stereo system. Jenn came back out and started to chat with Mystral and showed her a few books from the display case.

"Long time no see," Birdy said in a moderately friendly voice. "What can I help you with today?"

"I'm investigating someone who's been stalking Mystral," Ashe said. She pitched her voice low, so it didn't carry over to the other diners. Birdy's smile vanished and she got a concerned look on her face. "I just want to know about your event last Saturday. Did anybody leave before, say two am?"

"No." Birdy shook her head. "We had a pretty good turnout. Most people stay for the whole thing because we always finish with a giveaway and have a phone number exchange. Why?"

"Someone was waiting at Mystral's place that night. She's under protection now, but she can't go home until we find out who did it."

"Oh my God, is she okay?"

"She's all right," Ashe said. She leaned back in her chair with a wince as her injury reminded her of its presence. "So Lily was there the whole time?"

"Yes, she was. Ah, good old Lily," Birdy said with a wry look and a sigh.

Finished with the books, Mystral came back over and sat down beside Ashe. "Is it all right if I'm here?"

"Of course." Ashe moved her stool over a bit, aware of Mystral's warmth

against her arm.

Mystral glanced over at Birdy and said, "Oh no, I know that look. Did Lily do what she always does?"

Birdy shrugged and said, "I don't know if that's relevant."

"What does she always do?" Ashe asked.

"Monopolizes the conversation and always ends up crying. Goes on at length about her troubles and the unfairness of the world."

"That must make for a fun evening," Ashe said dryly. It also explained why she didn't get any phone numbers.

"She's got a lot of stuff to deal with," Birdy said. "Anything else you'd like to know?" She looked up briefly as Jenn came over and draped herself over Birdy's shoulder for a quick peck on the cheek.

"Mystral's ordered the Thanksgiving special," she informed Ashe. "What can I get for you?"

"That sounds good, I'll have that too," Ashe said. She didn't know what it was but she trusted Mystral's judgment enough to order it herself.

"Remember when me and Lily used to do tag-alongs?" Mystral asked. "Was there anyone weird that we introduced?"

"Nobody really comes to mind right now, but it was a long time ago," Birdy said, her face grim. "Why don't you start by giving me some names."

"How about a couple named Moe and Nydia?" Ashe watched Birdy's face brighten in recognition.

"Oh yes, I do remember them. Nice people." Birdy smiled. "They're still regulars here. In fact, last month I went to their wedding. They had the ceremony at Seaside Park, pirate-themed if I remember correctly."

"Really? That sounds amazing!" Mystral sat up. She leaned her chin on one hand. She caught Ashe's eye and said, "I'd go with a Star Wars theme myself. Wouldn't it be great to walk down the aisle to the Imperial March?"

"I guess it's better than a zombie-themed wedding," Ashe replied and squashed the whispered ache that came with the idea of Mystral walking the virgin road for someone else.

"Ooh, zombie wedding! Good idea!" Mystral said. She laughed and nudged Ashe.

Ashe shook her head and turned her thoughts back to the case. "How about a person named Tracy? Possibly transgender."

"Not possibly," Mystral said. "Definitely."

"Tracy?" Birdy furrowed her brow. "How long ago was this?"

"A year ago last summer," Ashe said as she flipped pages. "Of course he might not be going by that name anymore."

"I remember him. He wasn't so big," Mystral said. "Well, not for a guy anyway. Blondish hair, kind of quiet but respectful and polite. A real gentleman."

With a thoughtful expression, Birdy leaned back against the counter. A moment later, she snapped her fingers and made a triumphant gesture in the air. She went over to the stacks of promotional flyers and postcards by the cash register and returned with a small glossy poster. It was an advertisement for

some kind of event at a lounge-type establishment that called itself Eagle and appeared to offer conversation opportunities with people of androgynous-to-masculine persuasion. The employees were featured in square photos ranked in some kind of order.

Mystral leaned over and pointed to a smallish photo on the third line, "That's him right there." The one she indicated was sporting slicked-back hair and a single gold earring, the name underneath was listed as Ray.

"Okay, yes I thought so! He's been in here a few times," Birdy said. "He's usually with the manager and a few others from Eagle. They're here pretty early, probably before they hit the floor for the night. The host club crowd keeps to themselves, though.

They don't really seem interested in chatting much. I guess because they've got to do it on demand every night anyway."

The payment system was detailed at the bottom of the poster. It wasn't the cheapest place, but not nearly as expensive as it could be. Some of the companion bars near May's were much more.

"You can have this," Birdy said. "I've got plenty."

"Thanks," Ashe said. She folded the poster and stuck it in her notebook. "How about someone called Kelsey? Do you remember anything about her?"

"Maybe," Birdy said. "Sorry, I'm not really coming up with anything concrete. Give me a hint?"

"She's into role-playing games and computer stuff," Mystral piped up. "And really *really* into music. Like, even more than me."

"Is she the one who commandeered our music selection for the evening?" Birdy asked. "And called the Carpenters 'a vanilla waste of time'?"

"That's the one," Mystral said.

"Hmm, well I think she was only here the one time. Unless she came back when I wasn't here. Sometimes if another place is having an anniversary event," Birdy explained, "I'll go over there and leave the running of this place to Jenn and whoever is on staff that night."

"And do you know anything about," Ashe hesitated, "a guy in a bra?"

Birdy laughed. "You're going to have to narrow it down a bit. We have plenty of those."

"Never mind, it was a long shot anyway," Ashe said.

"It's a pity when things like this happen," Birdy said with a sigh. "We're already so marginalized, but then when the community turns against itself, well that's just giving everyone here a bad image."

"It doesn't matter what kind of minority someone is," Ashe said. She placed her hands flat on the countertop, spurred by a flash of anger. "If they break the law then they deserve to be caught and punished."

"That's true," Birdy said. She stood up as Jenn came over with two plates that turned out to hold slices of vegetarian holiday roast with heaps of golden stuffing. Potatoes and steamed carrots nestled against a leafy salad background. A cup of spicy bean mixture that appeared to be meant as a topping completed the selection. "Is there anything else I can help you with?" she asked.

"Not at the moment," Ashe said. She dug out a business card and passed it over. "Look, if you think of anything, no matter how small, give me a call."

"Will do." Birdy took the card and tucked it into a pocket on her apron. "I'll ask around and see if anyone noticed anything odd on the twenty-fifth. The clubs are all real close to here."

"I appreciate that." Ashe felt a measure of tension leave her. She knew that Birdy's willingness to talk was in no small part because of Ashe herself. She was part of the community and had just as much to lose as anyone else there. With that, Birdy got up and moved down the counter. She greeted the customer at the end of it and started up a cheerful conversation. Beside Ashe, Mystral was happily cutting up her thick slices of roast.

"Birdy's such a good cook," she said. "I used to only come here with Lily, so it's kind of strange but also kind of nice to be here with you." Mystral stopped abruptly. "Um, that came out funny. I didn't mean anything by that."

"Don't worry about it," Ashe said. She rested her cheek on one hand. She didn't want to admit it, but she agreed. It *was* nice sitting at the counter with Mystral. The atmosphere was relaxing and Ashe felt herself growing comfortable and calm. The music Jenn put on filled the room with its gentle presence. The thin strains of the ballad from the CD player brought a wave of nostalgia.

Ashe studied Mystral for a moment before she said, "I hope you know you're probably officially Yakkun's favorite person right now. None of us care to put up with him when he starts going on about those old movies he loves."

"Proves he's got good taste," Mystral said with a proud toss of her head. "And that movie night is going to happen. Of course you're coming too."

"Oh no," Ashe groaned. "Seriously? There's nothing I can do to get out of it?"

"Nope. Because you're in charge of popcorn. I've got the cupcakes covered. We'll make the guys provide the booze and Shauna can be in charge of soft drinks."

"Fine," Ashe said. She had capitulated far too easily but she couldn't refuse Mystral. "I hope you know I only agreed because you asked me and not any other reason. There's no way I'll actually admit to enjoying those awful splatter-movies."

"Of course not." Mystral gave Ashe a long, lingering look that did nothing to help the fluttery feeling that had been building in her chest. Ashe looked back, unwilling to turn away. Her breath caught in her throat as she realized once more how incredibly beautiful Mystral was, how soft and luscious her lips looked in the subdued lighting. A lively group arrived and the sudden commotion from the doorway broke the mood. Ashe turned back to her plate, lightheaded as if she had forgotten to breathe for a moment. For a while, they both concentrated on their dinners, relaxed and comfortable in the ambience of the dining bar.

"Do you feel up to heading over to Wright after this?" Ashe asked as she finished off her meal. "If not, I can take you directly to the safehouse."

"That's all right, I can do it," Mystral said, her face set. "But I don't think

Pete would do anything like that. I mean, my parents love him and kind of consider him a second son. My dad takes him and Brady on fishing trips where they guy-out and do all those man versus nature stuff guys do. Pete's never been anything but a gentleman to me. I mean, God, I can't imagine why he would be after me. It's like I can't believe anyone anymore."

"Sometimes people have hidden sides to them." Ashe didn't like the effect her words were having. "But don't stop believing. Leave the suspicion to me." Before she could stop herself, Ashe reached out and gave Mystral's hand a squeeze. It was over in a flash, but the look Mystral met her with sent a shock of electricity racing through her. Flustered and awkward, Ashe got to her feet and hauled her bag over her shoulder. "How about we hit the road, then?"

ASHE PARKED THE truck in an alley down the street from Pete's apartment. The air outside was cold as it seeped in through the window Ashe cracked open. With a full belly, Ashe knew she'd get an attack of the sleepies if she didn't let a bit of fresh air in. They had an oblique but clear view of the building Pete lived in. Some of the windows were lit, but most of them were dark.

Ashe took off her seatbelt and cranked the seat back before giving a stretch. Her muscles protested after the workout she'd given them earlier and she sucked back a groan. She caught Mystral looking at her and said, "I'm getting soft in my old age. I used to be able to take a butt-kicking much better than this."

"You're not old," Mystral said. She removed her own seat belt and shifted so she was on her side, facing Ashe. "And you're in better shape than most people I know of any age. You don't know how absolutely fucking amazing you are."

Ashe caught her breath. She wrenched her gaze away from Mystral and focused her attention on the apartment. "Which room is Pete in?"

"Six-B," Mystral said. "Middle window, second from the top."

"Looks like he's not home."

"I guess he's at work or hanging out with Brady. What do we do now?"

"We wait." Ashe glanced back at Mystral. She was sitting up straight, her posture tense. "Get comfortable, this could take a while. We may be here for hours."

"That's fine, I don't mind hanging out here with you," Mystral said. She rustled around as she curled up and made a kind of nest for herself.

Ashe said, "If you're cold, let me know. I've got a blanket in the back you can drape over your lap or something."

"I'm actually pretty good here. So do you do stakeouts often?"

"I did," Ashe said. "Most of a P.I.'s work is spent sitting on our butts, waiting. You can't do anything else. Not listen to music or read or even check your phone. Just sit, watch, and wait without knowing when you're going to have to move. It's the most difficult thing about the job and I don't really miss it."

"I can see why you'd need to spend a lot of time waiting," Mystral said. "So

how did you do it? How'd you keep yourself from going batty sitting alone for hours on end? Or did you have backup with you?"

"Both, depending on the job. Alone was better than listening to Yakkun blathering on about whatever his topic of the day was," Ashe said. She took a sip of her coffee. "But at least it kept me awake."

"Well that's my job now," Mystral said. Like Ashe, she reclined her seat and stretched out. "I can talk anybody's ear off anytime. Any topic in particular you'd like me to illuminate you on?"

"Whatever you want," Ashe said. "But keep your eyes on the street. You have to let me know when we see him."

"Wouldn't it be better to just call the guy? Or like, knock on his door or something?"

"No. We don't want to give him time to get rid of evidence or put together an alibi or something. Or worse, vanish. Doors have locks, phones can be disconnected. People can disappear."

"I was afraid of that," Mystral said. She laced her fingers together behind her head and peered out the window. "Hopefully he comes home soon and we can get this whole thing over with."

She was right. The inevitable end was coming. Every step closer to the end of the case was a step closer to saying goodbye. Once her job was over, there would be no reason to meet Mystral after work, no need to take her to May's. While Ashe wished for nothing more than for Mystral to live freely without fear or danger, she didn't want to live without her. However she also knew that she would have to.

As much as Mystral seemed to enjoy her company, this was probably the worst thing that had ever happened to her, and Ashe's continued presence in her life would only serve as a reminder of that. In the small part of her mind that was still able to think logically, Ashe knew without a doubt that letting Mystral go was not only the most ethical option, it was the only option. The only thing worse than letting her go, Ashe knew in a blinding moment of clarity, would be to admit her feelings to Mystral. What if she returned them? What then? Mystral was young enough she would only stay long enough for a blistering hope to blossom within Ashe's heart before she drifted off. Mystral's voice shocked Ashe back to the present.

"Did you say something?" Ashe asked. She covered her discomfiture by grabbing her coffee cup and fiddling with the plastic lid.

"Yeah, I said I'm sorry," Mystral said in a soft voice. "I'm sorry for tying up your schedule so badly. You've been spending pretty much every waking moment taking care of me. This case must be wreaking havoc on your personal life."

Ashe gaped at her for a moment before she replied, "It's all right. My personal life is pretty dead."

"Really?" Mystral clasped her hands behind her head and glanced over at Ashe. "Have you ever lived with anyone?"

"Not since I was in the college dorm."

"So I guess that means you've never been married."

"Nope."

"How about a serious relationship?"

Ashe froze in disbelief.

Mystral shifted and Ashe felt the weight of her gaze resting on her. "Would you ever consider one?"

Only with you. The words were sitting on her tongue but Ashe reeled them in just in time. That was dangerous territory. Don't go there, Ashe told herself. Not even one step. Ashe squared her shoulders and looked straight ahead. "Why are you asking me this?"

"Well, you don't go out and you don't have anyone in your life either." Mystral turned in her seat and focused her full attention on Ashe. "Why is that? I know you said you're not into clubbing or online dating, but I'm sure there are plenty of other opportunities to meet your special someone out there. Or do you prefer to keep things casual?"

"I'm finished with casual." Ashe let her gaze meet Mystral's for an instant. There was a moment when she debated letting her professional mask fall into place and brushing off the question. However the sweet, unwavering gaze that held hers stripped Ashe of her resolve. She returned her attention to the street and said in a flat voice, "The next time I fall is going to be the last."

"You are going to make someone very lucky," Mystral said. "I hope you find her."

Ashe didn't want to say that maybe she already had. After the volley of questions, Mystral lapsed into silence. It wasn't uncomfortable. Far from it. In spite of everything going on inside her head, Ashe relaxed and enjoyed having Mystral beside her. It was definitely the nicest stakeout she had ever been on. Mystral was scrunched down in her seat, eyes level with the window. She had her coffee in her hands, long fingers wrapped around the Styrofoam cup. Ashe remembered the feeling of her hand, the quick pressure of Mystral's fingers closing around her own. The street faded from her eyes and Ashe's mind wandered. She was peripherally aware of Mystral absently picking at the plastic lid of her cup but Ashe could only wonder what would happen if she let herself cross the small distance between them. She could reach out, put her hand on Mystral's thigh, lean over and kiss her.

Focus, dammit! Ashe clamped down on the wayward thoughts. It was not the time for entertaining fantasies.

"You know why I think people want a zombie apocalypse?" Mystral's soft voice brought Ashe out of her internal fugue.

"Why?"

"Chaos. Everything, all the rules and stupid boring stuff we have to do suddenly get thrown out the window," Mystral said. She kept her eyes trained on the street outside. "Survival is the only thing left. No jobs, no schedules. No laws or expectations. Of course it would be pretty awful to have no running water or supermarkets and I probably would be eaten or turned into a zombie in a number of minutes, but still, wouldn't it be great to be so free?" She returned her coffee cup to the holder and her eyes flicked to Ashe's for a moment. "All the petty, insignificant things that bog down our day would be

burned off. Nothing left other than simply living to see the sun rise the next morning. Add to that the fact that zombie-hunting is basically being allowed to kill people, including annoying people you hate, well the appeal is pretty much universal. Does that sound stupid? I don't know," Mystral faltered. "I've never told anyone that before."

"It's not stupid at all," Ashe said. "I think it makes a lot of sense. I'm glad you told me."

"That makes me glad too." With a little laugh and a sigh, Mystral's shoulders dropped. She had been nervous, Ashe realized.

"At least now I understand why you like those zombie movies so much."

"That, and it was the only way underage me could see boobs."

Before she could stop herself, Ashe let out a peal of laughter.

"But I still keep a stash of sporting gear that could double as weapons, just in case."

Ashe clapped a hand to her forehead and shook her head. "You don't have to worry. In the event of a zombie apocalypse, I wouldn't let any of them get you," Ashe said. She made an effort to keep her voice light and neutral when actually she wanted to get down on her knees and promise eternal loyalty to the young woman in her passenger's seat.

"You'd do that for me? Thanks," Mystral said with a smile that made Ashe catch her breath with its radiance. "Know what? I can see it now. We'd round up a ragtag band of survivors and make an anti-zombie ass-kicking force. We can have, like matching fedoras or grenade-launchers or something."

"Nice idea. If you're going to face an undead horde," Ashe said, "Might as well do it in style."

Suddenly, Mystral's body tensed and she reached out and tapped Ashe on the forearm. Her fingers were shaking. "There he is," she whispered. "The guy in the red sweater. He's carrying a bag, looks like groceries or something."

"Stay here," Ashe said. She opened the door and eased herself out. She didn't slam the door but pressed it closed behind her. She stood with her back against the alley wall as she waited for Pete to pass. He walked in front of her and didn't give any indication he noticed as she slipped from the shadows and fell into step behind him. With a few long strides, Ashe came up beside him.

"Hey, got a minute?" she asked in a pleasant voice even though she wanted to growl. If this guy was the one harassing Mystral, she would make short work of him. "I'd like to ask you a few questions about Mystral." This time she did lower her voice as she gritted out, "And a certain person who has been calling her with threats."

Pete jerked back and looked at her with a mixture of horror and surprise. Not exactly the look of an innocent man. "I don't know what you're talking about. You've got the wrong guy."

"I don't think so." Ashe reached out and clamped a hand around his arm. "Come on Pete, let's take a walk."

With a desperate wrench, Pete yanked his arm back, breaking the hold Ashe had on him. He dashed his bag of groceries to the ground and took off at

a dead run. Breathing a laundry list of all the bad words she knew, Ashe vaulted over the scattered apples and cookie boxes. Her feet pounded against the damp pavement as Ashe chased Pete's retreating back. He was faster and familiar with the terrain, but Ashe had the advantage of years of parkour practice, which stood her in good stead as she cleared a line of benches and leaped down a flight of stairs after Pete darted into a small park.

He got tangled up in a group of skateboarders and Ashe took advantage of it. She put on a burst of mad speed as Pete veered off the gravel walkway and headed for a line of bushes. As he made a move as if to duck behind a telephone booth, Ashe cut across his path and caught him in the middle of his back with an elbow. With a shout of pain and surprise, Pete dropped to the ground.

Without giving Pete a second to recover, Ashe was on him.

She grabbed him by the collar and hauled him up to face her.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Ashe snarled. She felt her lips contort into a feral grimace. "Do you have any idea how scared Mystral is?" She gave him a savage shake, growling out, "Give me one reason not to snap your fucking neck. And it better be a good one."

Eyes wide, Pete's shaking hands batted at hers. He made high-pitched whines of panic but Ashe didn't care. She threw him back against the phone booth, vision narrowing to a pinpoint. She had waited for this moment. Her fingers tightened on his collar.

"Ashe, let him go!"

Mystral's voice broke Ashe out of her berserker rage. She opened her hands and took a step back. Released, Pete fell to his knees where he rubbed his throat and coughed. Mystral stood a short distance away, her arms full of Pete's dropped groceries. A small crowd had gathered, but Ashe ignored them.

"What the hell? You nearly killed me," Pete rasped. He got to his feet and leaned weakly against the phone booth.

"Bolt again," Ashe told him, "And I won't stop at *nearly*."

"Who the hell are you? A cop?"

Ashe crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Pete. "I'm going to be asking the questions. Not you."

"This is Ashe Devon and she's a private investigator," Mystral said. "Look, why don't we sit down and discuss this without trying to murder each other?"

"Keep her away from me," Pete said. For a moment, he looked like he was going to take off again, then his head went down. "All right. How about we go to my place?"

With a curt nod, Ashe reached out and grabbed a handful of Pete's collar. She used it to steer him through the park. "No funny business," she said and hauled him upright as he tripped attempting to keep up with Ashe's pace.

"Okay okay, watch the curb there." Pete flapped around, but Ashe just shoved him bodily down the street.

Soon they were in Pete's apartment. Mystral sat somewhat miserably on the sofa while Ashe stood with her back to the door and her arms folded as she

glared at Pete. She mentally dared him to take a runner again. She was looking forward to stopping him. With shaking hands, Pete took his cell phone out of his pocket and held it close to his face.

"Who are you calling?" Mystral asked. "The police?"

"Feel free to report an assault and battery, you know, in advance," Ashe said in a conversational way as she cracked her knuckles.

With a start, Pete said, "Uh no. I'm calling Brady. Uh, how about sitting down? I promise I won't run."

"That remains to be seen." Ashe didn't move from her station.

Pete and his phone moved into the other room. His voice sounded low and worried. The call was short and soon Pete came back.

"So it was you, wasn't it? You're the one who's made Mystral's life a living hell for the past couple months." Ashe crossed the room in two steps and came face-to-face with Pete. She backed him up against the bathroom doorway. "Why did you do it, huh? You wanted to get your dirty hands on your buddy's sister? Think your dick can turn her straight?" One hand shot out and slammed against the wall, corralling Pete in his place. "You sick fucking freak, once I get done with you, you won't even be able to think of—"

"Oh God, don't hurt me please!" Pete cried out. Sweat shone on his face. "Look I can explain. Okay, yeah it was me who made the calls but," he held up both hands as Ashe's face twisted into a vicious, unhinged expression and her fists clenched, "but I didn't write the letters. I swear it wasn't me. All I did was call those three times. Nothing else, I swear."

"Why the hell would you do that?" Ashe spat. Behind her, she could hear Mystral's shocked intake of breath.

The back of his sweater skimmed along the wall as Pete put a judicious distance between himself and Ashe. Pete sank into a chair and put his head in his hands. "We—me and Brady—thought that, you know, since Mystral was already getting letters, phone calls or something would make her quit for good."

"You wanted me to quit DJ-ing?" Mystral gasped. "Why?"

What on earth does it have to do with you?"

Still with his head down, Pete said, "Everybody knows you work the gay club circuit. You do stuff like Pride parades and don't care about hiding. Your parents' friends, people at Brady's work, everybody knows."

"No, I don't hide," Mystral said, hands on her hips. "Nothing is ever going to change if people lie about who they are. Pete, why would you do this to me? I thought we were friends! I trusted you!"

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice muffled. "I didn't think it would be this serious. But it's not just about you." Pete raised his face. His eyes were haunted. "People were starting to talk—suspect things."

"Suspect what?" Ashe wanted to know.

"Look, I don't want to get into anything before Brady gets here." Pete edged out of his seat. "How about I get you, like, a coffee or something? I got cookies too, uh, hopefully they're not all smashed."

Ashe was fully prepared to spit out a refusal, but he was already clattering around in the kitchen cubby with mugs in his hands so she allowed him to continue. She satisfied herself by glaring daggers at him from her looming position. Soon the three of them were sitting in an awkward, strained silence with steaming mugs on the coffee table. Not relaxing her guard for an instant, Ashe studied Pete.

"People were starting to suspect," Ashe began slowly. She met Pete's panicked gaze as his head came up. "Suspect about you and Brady." She had only hazarded a guess, but the raw, guilty expression on Pete's face let Ashe know she had scored a resounding bull's eye.

"What?" Mystral choked at the same time as Pete gave a groan and fell backwards with his hands over his face. "Oh my God? Really?"

He rubbed a hand over his close-shaved scalp and said, "I promised Brady I wouldn't tell."

"But—but—" Mystral flapped around. "How did I not know?" She leaped up and Ashe instinctively moved to get between Mystral and Pete. "But oh my God, Pete, this is awesome!" Mystral said with a big grin. She darted around Ashe and threw herself at Pete, where she gave him a hug and pounded him on the back. "I always wanted you to be my real big-bro and now you are! Welcome to the family!" She sat back down and bounced in her seat, looking ecstatic.

Just then the door opened and a man came in. While he looked only a few years older than his sister, his posture was stooped and his expression haunted. He had chestnut hair with a natural wave to it and was slimly built like Mystral, with the same sensitive, long-lashed eyes.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

"They figured it out, Brady." Pete jumped up and looked even more guilty. "Mystral hired a Terminator, I mean a private detective and, well, they know everything."

"Oh God," Brady said. His hands fell limply to his sides. "Everything?"

"Yup," Pete said with a sigh. "Sorry. I tried to run but, uh, Ms. Devon here convinced me to change my mind."

Ashe replied with a modest nod and a clenched fist.

"Does Mom know?" Mystral leapt to her feet. "About you guys?"

"Of course Mom knows," Brady said. "She's our mom. She probably knew before I did."

"How about Dad?"

Brady sank down onto an armchair and looked as if he wanted to be anywhere else but there. "I don't want Dad to know. I don't think he'd take it well."

"Why not?" Mystral pattered around. "He loves Pete! You know how he's always bitching about how I'm not going to bring home a son-in-law for him to do all that male bonding he-man stuff he likes. Come on, Brady, this is the best news ever! We are both super off the hook from the parents now!"

"There's still the issue," Ashe interrupted the joyous family reunion by

rounding on Brady, her voice low with anger, "of the fact that your boyfriend," she jabbed a finger at Pete, who flinched violently, "called your sister with threats that made her fear for her safety. How could you let him do something like that? Do you know how fucking scared you made her? Do you have even the slightest idea?" Ashe's voice ratcheted up to a rather unfriendly level and she forced herself to back up a step, just in case she accidentally managed to murder Mystral's brother.

"Was it really that bad?" Brady looked genuinely startled. "From what Misty told me I just thought some fan was being a bit weird."

"She was getting bunches of creepy letters and mysterious calls and being followed at night. She can't even go home now!" Ashe spat. "Of course it was that bad. Do you have a functioning brain cell in your head? That's not how people treat each other. Especially not family!"

"You were followed?" Brady looked over to his sister, face pale. "Oh God, Misty, you should have told me how bad it was."

"I didn't want you to worry or have you do something dumb. But that's not the main issue here," Mystral said. "How did I not know about this? You and Pete? I mean, really how could I not know? Me, of all people, I mean I'm pretty much the gayest and out-est person I know! How could this slip under my radar?"

"It's because you are so busy shoving your lifestyle all in people's faces and don't give a thought to anybody else who might get caught in the backlash." Suddenly incensed, Brady jumped to his feet. "It's not easy for normal people who have to survive in a normal world, okay? I just wanted you to back off a bit, you know calm down and maybe people would continue to look the other way."

"I'm sorry if I've made things hard for you," Mystral said. Her head came up and her eyes flashed. "But we have a responsibility and a moral duty to be out and loud about it and not pretend we're invisible. That's why it's called Pride, okay dumbass? People have to know sexual minorities exist and we have to be in their faces about it. Nothing will change if we keep quiet and conform. Eventually people will get used to us and you know what? Maybe the generation of kids growing up now will have an easier time identifying as gay, bi, ace, transgender, or whatever without worrying about people judging them or bullying them. Maybe there will be more equality in the future. We've come a long way, but there's still so much further to go. That's why I came out and that's why I am not fucking going back into the closet. Not for you. Not for anyone."

Visibly deflated in the face of his sister's impassioned monologue, Brady sank back in his chair. He allowed himself to be placated with a mug of coffee and a few somewhat chipped jam cookies provided by Pete. "Okay," he said. "And just so you know, it was all my idea. The calls and stuff. Pete was really against the plan but I made him do it."

"You're lucky Mystral's not calling the cops on you," Ashe snapped. She rotated her shoulder with a sigh. At least one mystery had been cleared up. She glanced over at Mystral and added, "You still can if you want. It's well within your rights to

do so."

"No, I don't want to do that," Mystral said with a shake of her head.

"Thanks for that," Brady said.

"But you had girlfriends in high school and college," Mystral said. She perched on the sofa, head tilted as she studied her brother. "What was that? Were you just faking it to try and pass?"

"No, I wasn't," Brady said. "Look Misty, I don't want to get into all the details, but people are allowed to like who they like. Let's just say I don't discriminate and leave it at that."

"Fair enough." Sipping her coffee with a satisfied expression, Mystral curled her feet under herself. Suddenly she sat up and said brightly, "Maybe that's why I didn't know. Because I don't care for dick and you obviously—" Her words cut off with a squeak as Brady reached over and got her in a headlock. In an instant, Ashe was on her feet, ready to take retaliatory action.

"How about being quiet for a minute, huh?"

"Watch the coffee, dumbass," Mystral laughed and kicked at her brother's shins, which caused him to dance around and say things like, "Well you watch your mouth," and "Ouch." Ashe relaxed as Brady let his sister go. Mystral plopped back onto the sofa and faked him out with a pretend punch to the crotch. With a squeak, Brady doubled over and protected himself with his hands.

"Quit it you two," Pete said with a long-suffering sigh.

"She started it!" Brady whined.

"Your fat face deserved it," Mystral retorted.

"Okay, anyway, what are you gonna do?" Pete asked Mystral, who was inspecting the cookie plate with interest. "Like Ms. Devon said, you aren't calling the cops, right?"

"Ashe is fine," the owner of the name said rather stiffly.

"No, I'm not calling the cops," Mystral said. "But I want to find out the asswipe who's sending me letters and following me and shit like that. I want that to stop, like anytime now."

"If there's anything we can do," Pete said as he leaned forward with a sincere expression, "Let us know, okay? It might not seem like it, but we're on your team."

"All right," Mystral replied happily even as Ashe fixed Pete with an incredulous expression. She returned her attention to Mystral, who was currently dunking a jam cookie into her coffee and looking quite relaxed. The difference in her expression and stance put Ashe at ease and also impressed her with Mystral's forgiving nature, the joy with which she'd welcomed the identity of the phantom caller. Ashe knew if it had been up to her, both Pete and Brady would be on a one-way trip to Painville with a stop along the way at Pummeltown and maybe even a scenic detour through Nutshot Island.

"So we're good here?" Brady looked from Mystral to Ashe with his brow furrowed.

"I think so," Ashe said. She stood up and gave Pete a nod, "Sorry for nearly killing you before, but I thought—"

"Yeah, that's okay," Pete said at the same time as Brady barked out, "Nearly killing you? *What?*"

"How about we call it even?" Mystral offered, her eyebrows raised hopefully. "You know, let bygones be bygones. Put the past behind us. Start over as friends?"

"Okay, sure," Pete said. He looked a bit scared as he held out his hand for Ashe to shake. Brady followed suit and Ashe gave him a dark, glowering look before she wrapped her long fingers around his and applied a steadily increasing pressure until his face went white and his knees buckled.

"Let's hope there are no more – incidents from here on in, shall we?" Ashe said. She released her hold and bared her teeth in a feral smile.

Brady hissed in a breath as he fell onto the sofa with his hand pressed between his knees.

"Hey, you okay, Bee?" Pete asked as he turned to Brady with a concerned look on his face.

"Fine," he gritted.

"All right then, we're going to go now," Mystral said. "Thank God," Brady said.

As the door closed, Ashe thought she heard something suspiciously like Brady's voice saying, "You were right, she really is a Terminator."

Once they were back in the truck and on their way, Ashe said, "How about we go back to my place and get your stuff? I'll take you to the safehouse."

"Okay, if you're sure," Mystral said with a grin. "I think you're getting used to having me around."

It was true, but Ashe couldn't say that. She kept her eyes on the road. "Do you want to pick up anything on the way? Yakkun said the place belongs to a friend of his who usually rents it out like a kind of weekly apartment for businesspeople and travelers, so it's fully furnished but they won't have any food or anything. Maybe some instant coffee but that's probably it."

"I hope they have a toaster," Mystral said.

"Probably." Ashe gave her a glance. After the upheaval of discovering the mysterious caller was not only an old friend, but also her brother's boyfriend, Mystral seemed calm. Never to be kept down for long, she was currently absorbed in bopping her bright head along to the music coming from the radio. As an only child, Ashe wasn't sure what transpired in the bond between siblings, but she was certain that for a person with a less generous heart than Mystral, the incident would have caused an irreparable split between herself and her brother. Ashe had seen entire families torn apart by a lot less.

"Great! All I need is a nice big loaf of bread and maybe some butter or jam or something," Mystral said. She gave a lithe stretch in her seat that had Ashe struggling to keep her attention on driving. "What a day!" she said. Mystral rested one elbow on the windowsill and closed her eyes as the cold wind whipped over her face.

AFTER A BRIEF stop at Ashe's to gather Mystral's things, which had somehow managed to get scattered throughout the apartment, Ashe took them to a nearby supermarket. Mystral commandeered a shopping cart and zoomed up and down the aisles while Ashe followed at a more stately pace. Soon Mystral had collected a nice selection of bread from the bakery corner, along with some cold meats from the deli, and a head of romaine lettuce along with relish and mustard packets from the picnic supply area, apparently planning on making a sandwich-like creation in the near future. At Mystral's insistence, they went up to the liquor store on the second floor where Mystral invested in a number of beers from the refrigerated display case.

"Here, these are for you," she said and handed over a pair of cold cans as they walked back to Ashe's truck. "Something to help you unwind and enjoy the peace and quiet of your place again, now that you don't have a homeless person camping out in your bedroom."

"Thanks," Ashe said with a burst of surprise.

She stashed everything behind the seat in the truck then consulted the map Yakkun had given them. The safehouse wasn't too far and soon Ashe pulled up to a nicely-kept property. At one time, it appeared to have been a large family home, but it had been renovated into a number of rental units. The building was set back from the road and was shrouded by thick bushes and trees. While mentally cataloguing the blind spots and weak points of the house's defenses, Ashe had to admit it looked comfortable and classy.

The room was on the second floor, overlooking the somewhat overgrown backyard. There was a brick barbeque area in one corner and old maple trees circled the area. In the summer the leaves would make a dappled green ceiling overhead, Ashe thought as she pushed aside the lace curtains for a better look. At the moment, the branches were holding onto the last dregs of their autumn-tinted foliage. Fallen leaves blew in drifts around the trunks. A wrought-iron patio set was in the middle of the yard, and Ashe could imagine cheerful gatherings taking place around it with the attendees holding wine glasses and speaking at great length about solving the world's problems and other things people became experts on with the addition of alcohol.

A clatter from the kitchen area drew Ashe's attention back to the present and she glanced around the room where Mystral would be staying. While the building seemed to be quite old, maybe even dating back to the Victorian times, the inside was clean and modern. The walls were painted an eggshell white and the floors were a darkly finished hardwood. Besides the bed, there wasn't any other furniture in the room. In one corner was a small washing machine with a dryer perched on a sturdy shelf over it. Ashe was glad that Mystral wouldn't have to brave either a communal laundry room or risk going to a Laundromat.

The kitchen was little more than a small cubby off the main room, but it was complete with a black marble-like counter and a mini-refrigerator under it, as well as a sink and a single electric hotplate. Ashe was relieved to see not only a microwave oven, but also a sleek silver toaster sharing the counter

space next to the hotplate. A small selection of dishes was stacked in a cupboard over the sink. Mystral stood at the sink as she filled an old-fashioned kettle.

"Can I offer you a coffee or something?" she called over her shoulder. "Looks like they've got herb tea too."

Ashe knew she should leave as soon as possible. She shoved her hands in her pockets and fought the flash of reluctance as she said, "Actually, I have some reports to finish tonight, but thanks anyway."

"Wow, you work late," Mystral said. She leaned back against the counter with her eyes on Ashe, who stood somewhat awkwardly in the middle of the small room. Lacking a sofa, the only real sitting area was on the neatly made-up double bed in the corner and Ashe was not going to go there.

"I have to go in to my boring office-flunky job tomorrow, prove I'm not dead," Ashe said with a shrug. She kept her stance and expression nonchalant. "I could write them at the office while I'm pretending to be working, but I'd rather get it over with ASAP."

"Good idea." Mystral sank down on the bed with a mug in her hands. "This is a nice place. Tell Yakkun thanks. When you guys said safehouse, I was picturing some kind of boxcar setup in the forest."

"Don't worry, we wouldn't make you stay in a place like that."

"That's good to hear." Mystral pulled her feet up to sit crosslegged and leaned her head on one hand. "But today's been, just wow. Like, I'm probably the least observant person in the whole world." Mystral looked up and furrowed her brow. "Am I really that dumb? I mean, how could something like that get by me? My own brother. I mean, if I was straight that would be one thing, but I thought I had gaydar. My street cred is shot now." Her words were light and joking, but there was some real pain behind them. While she knew she should just walk out, Ashe couldn't leave

Mystral like that. She tried to keep a suitable distance between them as Ashe eased herself onto the bed. The firm box-spring creaked under her weight. She swallowed the flash of desire being so close to Mystral ignited.

"Don't blame yourself," Ashe said. "You know that a person's orientation isn't like a switch that just randomly gets flipped one day. It's not like he suddenly changed from one thing to another. You've known him your entire life and probably just accepted him as he is. That's perfectly fine."

"Thanks," Mystral said. She gave Ashe a wan smile. "I guess hanging out with drag queens and really flamboyant types doesn't help."

"There are all kinds of people," Ashe said. "Some are just naturally low-key and some aren't."

"Yeah, good point. Actually, it's kind of cool, you know?" Mystral leaned back. Her shoulder brushed Ashe's, who didn't move away even as a spark of electricity shot through her at the slight contact. Mystral gestured happily with her mug and said, "It's kind of like my brother has a secret identity! Yeah, we could be superheroes, Mystral and Chinook: the siblings with the power of wind." Mystral seemed quite amused with that and sputtered in laughter. "Or

you know, we could be the gay version of Luke and Leia! Without the kissing of course."

"I should hope not," Ashe said. "Just don't say I'm Chewbacca."

"No way, you can be Han Solo," Mystral said blithely. Then she stopped herself with a start, and looked as if she wanted to say something else, but instead busied herself by dunking her teabag in her mug.

"If that means my truck is the Millennium Falcon," Ashe said, keeping her tone light, "I'm fine with that."

"Glad that's settled," Mystral said. At that moment, Ashe was very aware of the pressure of Mystral's shoulder against her own, the warmth of her body. If she moved the slightest, shifted just a bit, she would be in the perfect position for a kiss.

Swallowing the urge, Ashe backed up just enough to put a sliver of cold air between them. She studied Mystral. "Do you remember anything more about Kelsey? Anything we could use to maybe track her down?"

"Let's see," Mystral said. She put her mug down on the bedside table and stretched out, lacing her fingers behind her head. She closed her eyes and her brow creased. "It was a long time ago, but I'll see what I can remember."

Ashe froze. She didn't want to get up and break Mystral's concentration, but the intimacy of the situation unsettled her.

"Don't worry," Ashe said. "Anything you can think of is fine. Maybe where she's from, her job or school. Some place she goes a lot. Anything we can use."

Mystral was their last hope in tracking down this suspect.

Ashe held her breath.

"Okay, we were at Birdy's," Mystral said. "And Lily was going on at length about whatever she does. We were having drinks, I had a beer and they were drinking wine, I'm pretty sure. Anyway, Kelsey was smoking and it gave me a headache." Suddenly Mystral opened her eyes and Ashe found herself gazing down into them.

"And?" Ashe managed to whisper as her heart kicked into a frenzy.

"Kelsey gave me some generic Tylenol or something," Mystral said. She absently reached out and laid one hand on Ashe's leg. She punctuated her words by giving a tap with each one. "She said she worked at a pharmacy and could get stuff cheap there. That's right!"

"Okay, that's just what we need!" Ashe said. She fought the surge of heat that raced through her from the place where Mystral's fingers rested so gently on her thigh. "Can you remember anything about where it came from? Maybe the package?"

Mystral pressed both hands to her face. Her voice was muffled as she spoke. "She had a paper bag. Blue and white and yellow, I think. Yeah, the logo was like a figure eight."

"That sounds like Eastman's," With a shot of triumph, she said, "Well done Mystral!"

"Thanks," Mystral dropped her hands and sat up. The motion brought her face-to-face with Ashe. Her breath was hot on Ashe's skin. The bed dipped as

Mystral started to lean toward her.

"Oh my God, Ashe," Mystral whispered. "Don't move."

Mystral was going to kiss her. Even as Ashe's instincts kicked into high alert, a dangerous whisper urged her to let it happen. A perilous thread of heat blazed into life within her. Mystral's lips looked so soft, slightly parted and a delicate pink. If she did as Mystral asked and held herself still for one more second, the decision would be made. But she couldn't. As much as Ashe yearned for the completion of the act, she couldn't allow it. There was no Chu-Hi to blame it on, no mitigating circumstances to hide behind. Her body twitched with a sudden jolt of desire-tinged alarm. Ashe had to stop before it turned into something she couldn't control.

Ashe jumped to her feet. "Eastman's. I'll look into it." Her voice boomed and she sounded entirely too jolly. She surreptitiously rubbed her sweating palms on her pants. The moment was over. The connection between them broken like it had never existed. She looked over at Mystral. Her flushed cheeks were the only evidence that something had just happened between them. "Are you going to be all right?"

"Sure, I've got a toaster and a bunch of bread, I'll be fine." Mystral's stubborn strength shone through in the guileless smile as her eyes met Ashe's. It seemed she was all right with playing along, pretending the unguarded moment hadn't happened. Ashe was grateful for that, at least.

"What time are you going into the bakery tomorrow?"

"Not too early, I was thinking around eleven maybe," Mystral said. "I only have one order plus the usual daily stuff to do so it shouldn't be too busy."

"Eleven, got it." Ashe said. "I'll let Yakkun know. Someone will be by to pick you up in the morning. Make sure you check who it is before you open the door, and I'll come by in the evening to take you back here. Is the usual time all right?"

"Yup," Mystral said. She grabbed her mug and gave a one-armed stretch. She looked tired and vulnerable.

In that instant, Ashe ached to gather Mystral up in her arms, hold her tight and kiss her worries away. She had never wanted anything more than to feel the weight of Mystral's body, the soft pressure of Mystral's lips against her own. She wanted to lay Mystral down on that bed, press her back into the soft pillows. Ashe's body came alive with desire. She yearned to love Mystral with everything she had. The force of her need shocked the breath from Ashe's lungs. Heart pounding, she backed up until she collided with the door. Clumsy fingers fumbled before they grabbed the doorknob and twisted it.

"If that's everything, then I should go," Ashe said. Her voice sounded harsh in her ears. "Lock the door behind me, okay?"

She stumbled out to the hallway and pulled the door shut behind her before Mystral could reply. Ashe waited until she heard the sound of the deadbolt behind her. She raked a hand through her hair and let out a long, shaky breath. The sooner the case ended the better. For both Mystral and herself.

Chapter Twelve

ASHE MADE EXCELLENT time driving across town. She struggled to put what had nearly happened in the safehouse from her mind. She almost succeeded in convincing herself it had been all a fabrication of her own overwrought brain when she arrived at the office. The comforting line of lit windows shone down on her as she parked in the lot and went up the stairs. The familiar smell of coffee welcomed her as she let herself into the office. Yakkun and Shauna were there, in the middle of a paper airplane war.

"Slow night?" Ashe asked as she came into the room. She ducked as a paper Concorde flew over her head.

Yakkun's head popped up from behind his desk. "Yeah, just waiting for updates."

He rummaged around in the recycling tray he'd apparently dragged over from the copier and came up with a sheaf of printed bus schedules, which he busily started folding. He was interrupted from time to time by Shauna sending over paper missiles of her own. She'd gotten hold of a stack of old telephone books that she used as ammunition, tearing out pages with a savage kind of glee. After she initiated a cease-fire long enough to arrange for Shauna to pick Mystral up the next morning, Ashe ducked as a new volley of paper airplanes came flying at her from both sides.

"My desk is Switzerland, all right?" Ashe called out. She shielded herself with her bag as she crossed through the battle zone. She settled at her desk and ignored the conflict as she wrote up a summary of the stakeout on her phone. Of course Ashe could have done that anywhere, but she liked the feeling of being back. It was as if she'd slipped back in time, back to the old feeling of being part of a team, of knowing she was making a difference in people's lives instead of being instrumental in ending them.

"Anything new?"

Ashe looked up as Yakkun came over, pushing a desk chair. He had a small paper airplane stuck in his hair, which fell into his lap as he sat down. He looked at it in surprise, then he turned and flicked it back toward Shauna, who deflected it with a handy file folder.

Ashe put her phone down. "We got the ID of the caller. He's a friend of Mystral's brother. Boyfriend, actually." Ashe briefly summarized the situation while Yakkun listened with his eyebrows raised.

"What a soap opera," he said. "So the letters were by someone else? Shit. I read your report from the interview with Lily. At least we've got some leads."

"Yeah, I'm going to follow up on those."

"What if they turn out to be dead ends too?"

"I don't know," Ashe said with a flash of irritation. "I guess we just have to wait for something to turn up. Some witnesses or something. Dig a bit deeper."

"Until that happens, we're stuck in a holding pattern."

"Looks like it," Ashe said.

"This is going nowhere. You know what, I got an idea how we can lure the stalker out," Yakkun said. He held up a hand. "Hear me out before you say anything." He produced a flyer and handed it over to Ashe, who studied it with a suspicious look on her face.

"What's this?"

"It's a live event called Rave by the Docks. Mainstream. They get a bunch of DJs and hold this big party in a renovated warehouse down by the container port every month. Tons of people go and it's in a really seedy area of town. I was thinking," Yakkun's voice took on a conspiratorial tone that Ashe did not like at all, "what if Mystral performed there? See, I know a guy who knows a guy who can get her in as a warm-up act. The next one is a week from Friday and they've still got room on the schedule. The place is huge, dark, and crowded. It's nearly impossible to patrol and it's the perfect chance for the stalker to strike."

"Absolutely not!" Ashe was on her feet in an instant. "How could you even think of endangering Mystral like that?"

"She won't be in danger," Yakkun said. "Come on, just hear me out. We'll have all of us stationed around, ready to nab the stalker when they appear."

"That's a terrible idea," Ashe said. She sat back down so she could glare at Yakkun more effectively. "I refuse to even consider it."

"Okay, okay, it was just an idea. But if we don't do something, this case is just going to keep dragging out."

"I don't care. Let it go on for as long as it has to."

"That's fine for you," Yakkun said, "But what if something else comes up for us here? I can't tie up every investigator I've got on staff with this. Plus Joelle Fischer's footing the bill." He shifted and said, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but Gus has waived his fee as well."

"Really?" Ashe fixed Yakkun with an incredulous look.

"Yeah, really." He threw up his hands and said, "I don't know what it is about this case that brings out the spirit of altruism in you people, but even so it's gonna get expensive. What if she pulls the plug?"

"That's your problem," Ashe told him. "If necessary, I'll continue this alone. I will not agree to put Mystral in the line of fire and that's final." She turned away from Yakkun's gaze, aware that he was studying her with that surgeon-like efficiency he got sometimes. "If you don't mind, I'd like to finish up here and go home. I have to be at work by nine tomorrow."

"All right," Yakkun said. He pushed himself away from Ashe's desk and used his feet to wheel himself back over to his own desk.

Alone again, Ashe finished her report. She grunted a grumpy reply to his and Shauna's chorus of "Goodnight!"

On the drive back to her apartment, Ashe quietly seethed at Yakkun's idea. What the hell was he thinking? Did he want to have a replay of what had happened with Jessie? Ashe knew she had screwed up badly, but she'd be damned if she'd let something like that happen again. She didn't care how long

it took, Ashe wasn't going to take risks with Mystral's safety. By the time she pulled into her building's parking lot, Ashe had calmed down and was almost regretting her outburst at the office. She was certain Yakkun had noticed that she wasn't as professionally detached as she should have been.

Ashe almost forgot the beers Mystral had given her and only remembered when she caught a glimpse of one can behind the seat as she got out of her truck. She scooped the icy-cold cans up and stuck them in her bag. They would have undoubtedly frozen and burst if she'd left them in the truck overnight.

Ashe let herself into her apartment, glad she'd avoided having beer-stained upholstery. It was quiet, cold, and felt much bigger than it had that morning. The lingering aroma of the omelet she'd made for breakfast at Mystral's request was quickly banished as Ashe threw the windows and French doors wide open, inviting a gust of cold air to sweep through the room. A quick search of her kitchen turned up a pack of crackers plus a block of white cheddar that made a nice accompaniment to the beer.

For the first time, Ashe got ready for bed without dreading going into the office the next day. She didn't entertain disaster fantasies or think about setting the place on fire. In fact, in a way she was looking forward to returning to her usual duties, the dull but safe tasks that ate the hours between breakfast and dinner. One thing was for sure, she was not going to wear that damned skirt anymore. Let Pam and her gang make snide comments, she didn't care. She was ready to be proud of who she was once more.

As she slipped under the blankets, Ashe realized with a jolt she hadn't bothered changing the sheets since Mystral had slept in them. Since they had lain together. Even as her pulse quickened, Ashe felt a sweet, deep calm come over her. Everything would be all right, she thought somewhat desperately to herself.

Chapter Thirteen

THE NEXT MORNING, Ashe walked into the office, aware of the shocked stares of most of the people in the room. She slung herself down at her desk and started picking through the piles of documents and memos that had accumulated in her absence. She was halfway through separating the mess into “unimportant crap” and “trivial garbage” when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Without thinking, Ashe was on her feet. She grabbed the intruder’s wrist and put him face down on the floor with a practiced twist.

“Crumpety crisps, Ashe!” Kevin’s voice filtered up to her, muffled by the carpet.

“Whoops,” Ashe said. She let go of her supervisor’s arm and eased her knee from the small of his back. “You have to quit sneaking up on me like that.” Ashe made a face and offered Kevin a hand up. She waited for him to tuck in his shirt and straighten his ugly, offensively patterned tie.

“Flashbacks from ‘Nam?” Pam called in a snotty voice from her desk.

Ashe ignored her and focused on Kevin.

“I was just coming by to see how you’re doing,” he said. “Apparently you’ve made a complete recovery.” His watery eyes studied Ashe’s cropped hair and smart three-piece suit. She had the jacket draped across the back of her chair and her tie was deep red silk, matching the polished garnet cufflinks at her wrists.

“Thanks for the concern,” Ashe said. For once, she wanted to get back to the boring monotony of her job as it was preferable to communicating with Kevin. She did not owe him an explanation and was not interested in chatting with him.

“You had scarlet fever or something?” Pam said as she snickered to herself.

“I think it was probably either Ebola or the Plague,” Ashe said. She leaned against her desk with her hands in her pockets and aimed a few coughs over in Pam’s direction before she glanced over at Kevin. “Mind if I get back to work?”

“About that,” Kevin said. “Look, if you’re having any trouble, just let me know. If there’s anything I can do, you know. Stuff like that.”

“Sure,” Ashe said. She turned back to the papers on her desk with a puzzled expression. Why did he care?

The day passed with remarkable speed. Ashe got through the backlog of dreary tasks that had accumulated in the days she’d been “sick” by mid-afternoon, which left her with some free time to ponder things in the afternoon. As she wandered around on a leisurely tour of the facilities that included the tea corner, one of the meeting rooms on the third floor that had a good view of the grounds, and the least-used washroom in the building, Ashe made a decision.

She sat down at her desk and typed out a request to be transferred to the Accounting Department. They were housed in a separate room due to the sensitive nature of the information they handled and everyone seemed

professional and fairly normal from what Ashe had observed. It would be a nice change from the prison-yard openness of the main office. Also, Mystral was right. It was a waste for her to spend her day making useless schedules when she could be using what she'd busted her ass studying and was actually good at. While international tax laws weren't the most intriguing thing in the world, Ashe understood them and realized their necessity.

Under the guise of some kind of work-related research, Ashe and her cell phone set up a temporary base of operations in an unoccupied meeting room. She nursed a cup of coffee while she looked up all the branches of Eastman's Drugstore in the area and called them in rapid succession, pretending to be looking for a female pharmacist in order to help her out with some mysterious and ill-defined "feminine issues".

Two of the shops showed promise, but Ashe struck gold with the last branch on the list that boasted an assistant pharmacist who the affable manager was only too glad to give her name as Kelsey Brook. Ashe scribbled a memo and gave a cheerful thanks she didn't feel. As she cut the connection, her expression darkened. She stuffed the cell phone back into her pocket and returned to her desk.

Ashe decided to ditch her job and follow up the lead. Faking a migraine got her permission to leave early and she let Pam's caustic comment thrown at her back roll off without comment.

Half an hour later, Ashe pulled into the parking lot of the squat drugstore. It was one square building in a line of them that made up the Shoreview Strip-mall. Eastman's was sandwiched between a Chinese buffet and a shop that specialized in comic books and trading cards.

Ashe pushed the door open and set off a nerve-shattering jangle that didn't do anything to help her keep her expression calm and collected. She wandered over to the pharmacy counter where a jolly, bespectacled man was working alongside someone who Ashe assumed was Kelsey. Her identity was confirmed by the nametag that read "K. Brook". She was waiting on a customer and Ashe used that opportunity to study her. Kelsey was solidly built, with a heavy jaw and wide shoulders that could allow her to be mistaken for a man at a distance. She had a knot of blonde hair tied up at the back of her head and a brusque but not unfriendly way of dealing with people. Ashe noted the unmistakable shape of a pack of smokes in her breast pocket.

Ashe left the pharmacy and circled around to the back where she found the ashtray. It was a battered metal cylinder filled with butts half-buried in sand like the ruins of a miniature society. She crossed her arms, leaned back against the rough brick wall and waited. She'd been there for almost an hour when Kelsey came around the corner. Her steps faltered as she saw Ashe. Her lips thinned in annoyance, but she took her place on the other side of the ashtray and reached for her cigarettes.

Ashe waited while Kelsey lit up. With her lip curled, Kelsey blew out a stream of smoke. She glanced at Ashe, obviously not pleased to have her sanctuary invaded.

After the third hairy eyeball, Ashe said, "Hey, I was wondering if you could help me out."

Kelsey took a long drag before she said, "If you're trying to score cough syrup or shit like that, get lost. I don't do that kind of thing."

"Where were you last Saturday?"

"Why do you wanna know?" Kelsey said. She angled her lips in an automatic way to blow the smoke away from them. "What the fuck is this all about anyway? Are you a cop or something?"

"I was just wondering if you'd been in touch with Mystral Galbraith recently," Ashe said in as casual a tone as she could as she studied Kelsey's face.

"Can't say that I have. The name doesn't ring any bells." She tapped off the ash with a practiced drum of her finger.

"It should. She introduced you to Birdy's place last year," Ashe said. A short distance away, a couple of people wearing the Eastman's uniform came out of the drugstore with coffees in their hands. Ashe raised her voice, "I thought you'd know the lesbian—"

"Shut it," Kelsey hissed. She whirled on Ashe with a dangerous light in her eye. "I don't hang out in those places anymore. It wasn't for me, okay?" With her cigarette held protectively at her side, she advanced on Ashe, obviously comfortable with using her height and bulk to her advantage. Ashe didn't even flinch and held her ground. Kelsey said, "What the fuck are you doing, trying to stir up ancient history? Who the fuck are you?"

"So you haven't been sending her letters, following her home and stuff like that?"

"Of course not. Why the fuck would I do that?"

"I don't know." Ashe shrugged with fake nonchalance. "She is pretty hot. Quite a sweet piece of ass, actually. Great taste in music too. I hear you like that kind of thing. You two really connected, from what I heard. Too bad she was taken at the time, right?"

Kelsey didn't answer. She just gave Ashe a blank stare.

Eyes down, Ashe gave one cuff a crisp tug as she said, "But she's free now." She raised her head and studied Kelsey. "How does it feel, being so close to her and not able to reach out and take what you want? I can see you're a classy kind of person. You wouldn't make a move on someone else's lady. But you've been waiting for so long and now the moment is finally here. It's time to take what you've been offered, right?"

"What the fuck are you going on about?"

"Nothing really." Ashe shrugged. "Just the fact that Mystral's—"

"I don't get what the big deal with that chick is," Kelsey said in a bitchy voice.

Ashe resisted giving a sigh of frustration. "I just thought you might want to talk about Mystral with someone who knows."

"No I don't," Kelsey spat. She crossed her arms and tapped one foot. "Look, you're taking up my entire break with your bullshit." With a glance over to where her coworkers were standing in a cluster, she said in a low

voice, "I don't know what the fuck your game is, but I don't have anything to say to you." She clamped her mouth shut and continued glaring at Ashe.

"How do you get here?" Ashe nodded toward the parking lot, automatically scanning it for a blocky, grey car. "Drive?"

Kelsey stuck her cig in her mouth and took a long, deep drag as if she was desperate to get as much out of it as possible.

"How about when you're not here? What do you do for fun? Are you getting out much?" Ashe kept up her rapid-fire questions as the uniformed group lingered a polite distance away as they took care of their own cigarettes. "Seeing anyone?"

Kelsey glanced at the half-smoked cigarette in her hand before stubbing it out. "I gotta get back to work."

"You do that," Ashe said. She frowned at Kelsey's back as she stomped into the store again.

Ashe got into her truck and drove until she got to a park where she perched on a picnic table and jotted down her notes about Kelsey. Nothing really stood out, but Ashe wasn't ready to discount her yet. She took off her jacket, loosened her tie, and spent the rest of the afternoon vaulting over benches.

After the incident that had almost happened the night before, Ashe decided the best course of action would be to steer clear of temptation. Even though Ashe regretted the lack of interaction, she treated Mystral with clinical efficiency and cut her off when it seemed like she was about to invite Ashe up to her room. She reasoned away the hurt look in Mystral's eyes with the fact she didn't have time anyway. Ashe had one more place to go that evening.

Ashe pulled away from the safehouse and kept her eyes on the road until she'd reached the nightclub district. She left her truck in a parking garage even though Eagle wouldn't open for another hour. She wanted to be the first in the door, so she could have her pick of conversation partners for the evening.

Ashe spent the hour camping out in her truck. Alternately she picked guiltily at the tart Mystral had slipped her and twisted the dial of the radio as she tried to get it to play something even remotely interesting. Five minutes before opening, Ashe left the parking garage and strode over to the entrance to Eagle with purpose in her steps. The front of the shop was decorated with backlit signs that showed the various staff members and outlined the payment system.

Ashe was greeted by a young man at the door who seemed to be a kind of concierge.

"Sorry, we're not hiring right now," he said.

Ashe glanced down at the three-piece pinstripe suit she'd worn to work. Maybe she should have resurrected her skirt with its burst back seam one last time. She cleared her throat and said, "Actually, I'd like an hour's set please."

"My apologies." If the young man was surprised, he hid it well. "Anyone you'd like to request?" he asked in a pleasant voice. "May I recommend either Blaise or Keyshawn?" He indicated two of the sweetest-faced staff members who were young enough Ashe could have easily been their mother, or at least their mother's girlfriend.

Ashe felt an odd sense of dissociation as she pointed to Ray's picture. "I'm more in the mood for someone like this."

"Very good choice," the boy said with a nod to the floor manager.

After she handed over the initial charge, the manager led her through a maze of semi-circular sofas and glass-topped tables. Her boots sank into the deep carpet as if it was carnivorous. Each table was given the impression of privacy by mirrored pillars or banks of flowering plants that were most likely high-quality fakes. However, Ashe's trained eye noted that the floor manager could easily observe every table from his vantage point between the entrance and bar.

At this early hour of the evening, the other tables were unoccupied. Ashe was shown to a discreet spot by the kitchen door. As she waited, a group of three middle-aged women appeared in the entrance hall and excitedly looked over the establishment's offerings. Their necks under their heavily made-up faces were hung with strings of pearls and their ears sported sparkling earrings that were definitely not glass. Just as Ashe was getting interested in the drama of their selection for the evening's company, her vision was blocked by a stout, solemn-faced man in a suit. Immediately he got down on one knee and presented Ashe with a name card.

"Good evening," he said. "Welcome to Eagle. I'm Ray and I'm looking forward to getting to know you tonight." Ashe was startled by the gentility of the greeting. The words held the frog-in-throat quality of someone whose voice is changing a decade or so late.

"Yeah, uh, me too," Ashe stammered. "I'm Ashe, by the way." The second she'd spoken, Ashe wondered if she should have used an alias. The situation had her off-guard and flustered. She fought to regain her composure. Mystral's safety depended on her keeping a cool head.

To his credit, Ray didn't bat an eye at who he would be serving that evening as he slipped in beside Ashe. He placed one hand on the table and the other rested ever-so-casually on the cushion next to her thigh.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. What will you have to drink?"

"Whiskey?" Confounded, Ashe blurted out the first thing that occurred to her.

Ray looked over the tops of the lush sofas and caught the eye of the floor manager, who came over to take their order.

"Uh, what would you like?" Ashe asked.

"I'm fine with what you're having," Ray said. He moved just a bit closer and Ashe felt like she should be more judicious with her personal space. As the manager went off to get their order from the bartender, Ashe studied Ray. He had a calculating look, a smile that didn't reach his eyes. Ashe wasn't sure how much of that was in response to Ashe herself, or if it was a side-effect of the whole companion business. Her ears were filled with the piped-in dance music. Ashe mentally compared it to the magic Mystral spun and found it uninspired and trite.

"So what brings you here?" Ray asked over the throbbing beat.

"Just looking for some answers," Ashe said. She shifted so she was taking up more space on the sofa and draped one arm over the back of the chair. To his credit, Ray didn't move away.

"I hope you find them," he said. The shining bottle arrived with a crystal bucket of ice and two glasses. Ray leaned forward and dropped ice cubes into the glasses before he picked up the bottle and poured for Ashe and himself with a practiced flair. Ashe fought the feeling they were both playing at some surreal game of make-believe and clinked glasses with him. She took a drink without lowering her gaze.

"How long have you been here?" Ashe asked.

"About three months," Ray told her. Very casually he moved so he was resting under the arch of Ashe's arm, almost brushing up against her. Uneasily, she wondered if that was part of the service menu or if Ray was taking liberties. "I haven't seen you here before. Are you new to this kind of place?"

"A little," Ashe said truthfully. She gulped at her whiskey and regretted not ordering something a bit less potent as the liquor burned down her throat. "But I'm not really all that interesting. I'd much rather talk about you. What made you want to work here? In a place like this."

"I enjoy fine wine and good company."

Standard answer, Ashe thought. Ray was smooth, full of the right answers. She wouldn't get anything real unless she riled him up a bit.

"It couldn't have been an easy road," Ashe said. She leaned forward and placed her glass on the table which allowed her to face Ray more squarely. They were already quite close, and her new position ended up being more intimate than Ashe intended. Go with it, she coached herself.

"No, it wasn't." There was a note of truth in Ray's tone and Ashe grabbed onto it.

"There must have been someone special who was there for you, helping you along the way."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Someone you can't forget." Ashe tilted her head and gave Ray a long look through her lashes. "Someone you want all to yourself. Who is it, Ray?"

"What's this about?" Ray jerked back only for Ashe to bring her arm down around his shoulders. Her other hand clamped down on his thigh. She pressed him into the firm cushions of the seat, effectively restraining him.

"I think you know," Ashe said.

"Back off or I'm calling the manager," Ray hissed.

"Answer the question," Ashe said. She speared him with her gaze.

Wild eyes met hers and Ray's mouth opened and closed a few times.

"What do you want?" His voice was hoarse. "I haven't broken any laws. I don't do take-homes or compensated dating, okay? This isn't that kind of place."

Having made her point that she wasn't going to tolerate an escape attempt,

Ashe released her hold on him and leaned forward. She loosely clasped her hands but kept some tension in her stance. "How about we go get some fresh air? Have a little chat where it's a bit quieter."

Face white, Ray gave a nod. He stood as if being yanked by a string and had a brief conversation with the floor manager. He pointed once to Ashe then he came back to the table and summoned Ashe with a jerk of his head. Together they left the cloying heat of Eagle.

The air was cold and sweet after the lingering mix of rich lady perfume and spilled liquor. Ashe took a deep breath to clear her head. She spotted a bench by a clod of trees that passed for a park in the city and stuck her hands in her pockets as she walked over to it. Ray followed without speaking.

"Can you tell me where you were last Saturday night?" She asked as soon as Ray had settled down beside her.

Ray dropped his head into his hands.

"What happened that night?" Ashe angled her head to try and see his face. His eyes were scrunched up.

"A lot of things," he said in a guarded tone. He sat back and fixed Ashe with a stare. "Why don't you let me know where to start?"

"Mystral Galbraith," Ashe said point blank, eyes fixed on Ray's face.

He relaxed and gave a smile that sent a shiver of rage through Ashe. "She's an angel. Really, a true angel. Precious, beautiful." He leaned in close to Ashe. "What about her? She send you to track me down?"

"In a way," Ashe said, her voice tight. She wanted to backhand that smarmy grin right off his face, send it flying like a fleshy boomerang over the close-packed roofs.

"I knew it," he said in a quiet voice, more to himself than Ashe. "I've never been able to forget her either."

That was enough to break the control that was holding her back. Filled with rage, Ashe leapt to her feet and towered over Ray. How dare he think he could even have a chance with Mystral? Incensed, she snapped, "Actually I was sent here to get you to back the fuck off."

Ray's face went blank. He shook his head, his earring flashed in the wan light.

"You think that's what guys do?" A flash of anger burst into life in her chest and Ashe found herself hollering into Ray's face. He reared back at the sudden attack. The look of fear on his face gave her grim satisfaction. "You think you can chase after girls like some kind of animal? You of all people have to know what it's like to be treated like a piece of meat and you don't give a shit, do you?"

Ray got up and backed up a step. "Hang on a minute I only want Mystral to—"

He didn't get the chance to finish before Ashe grabbed the front of his shirt and dragged him up against her. Her words were quiet, dangerously so. "If you come near her again I will kill you. Snap your neck and leave you in a dumpster. Do you understand?"

Ray struggled out of Ashe's grip and lunged. He shoved Ashe with both hands. The shove didn't knock her down, but the force of it drove her back a

step. Ray was outweighed and outclassed, but he still came at her with everything he had. Ashe didn't want to admit the grudging respect the action brought.

He spat at her, "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"What is wrong with *you*?" Ashe countered. Her blood was up, fighting instinct surged through her like pure adrenaline. "Roid-raging now? Where'd you get your T? Behind the racetrack?" Ashe knew it was a low blow, but she didn't care.

"None of your goddamned business!" Ashe knew she'd finally managed to get past his defenses as Ray yanked his shirt straight and shouted back into her face, "Don't even go there. Do *not* make this about hormones."

"No, this is about you and how you are going to make yourself disappear from Mystral's life," Ashe said.

"I don't have to listen to your shit. This discussion is over." He turned and started heading back to the club.

"Not by a long shot," Ashe called to his retreating back. "I'm watching you, buddy."

Alone in the echoing night, Ashe felt a sick wave of regret. She'd crossed a line that she wasn't proud of. She slumped under the weight of the bile that she'd just vented. She'd been spurred by nothing other than jealousy. The way she'd acted, Ashe had been no better than the stalker. Worse, now that she thought about it. Her feet dragged as she went back to her truck. She slammed the door and rested her forehead on the cold steering wheel for a while before she dug out her keys to head home.

Chapter Fourteen

THE STING OF her actions and words the night before followed Ashe to work the next day. Her jarred mental state led to no shortage of errors and mishaps. At the end of the day, Ashe put everything else out of her mind and clocked out promptly at five o'clock. The drive from Ashe's work to Mystral's bakery was fairly short even at that time of the evening. The sky was already darkening by the time she'd pulled into the parking lot. The lights from the wide shop windows spilled into a cheerful pool around Ashe's truck. She killed the engine and as she waited in the chilly cab, Ashe scrolled through her notes about the case and frowned at the names on the suspect list. Hopefully Birdy would be able to get something, because Ashe was at a dead end.

A cheerful knocking on the window startled Ashe and she looked up to see Mystral outside. She was still in her uniform, the first time Ashe had actually seen her wearing it. She had her bright hair tucked up into a neat cap. The crisp lines of the neat white outfit flattered her trim figure. Mystral looked poised and professional. Ashe fought the heat that rose to her cheeks at Mystral's new facet.

Breathless, Ashe rolled down the window and raised her eyebrows in a question.

"It looks like I'm going to have to stay late tonight. I got a bunch of last-minute orders," Mystral said and made a face. "Thanks to Pierre and his amazing scheduling abilities."

"That's all right," Ashe said. "I'm fine with waiting. Take your time."

"No way, it's freezing out here," Mystral said. She hugged her arms to her chest. "How about coming inside and keeping me company? Pierre's already gone home and I'm thinking of just closing up. We won't have any more customers tonight anyway."

Ashe was on the verge of refusing, but she was drawn to the clean, bright space. She'd never actually gone into Mystral's workplace before and was curious about it. Her decision was solidified by the way the cab of the truck resembled the inside of a fridge more and more with every passing minute.

"All right, if I'm not going to be in your way."

"Not at all," Mystral replied with a smile that drove any hesitation from Ashe's mind.

She rolled up the window and followed Mystral up the steps and into the bakery. Once inside, Ashe studied the shining, clean display cases, empty save for two decorated cakes apparently ready for the next day. The air was sweet with the clean scent of lemons and burnt sugar wafting through it. Behind her, Mystral locked the front door and pulled down the ceiling-to-floor blinds that closed the eyes of the shop. She flipped a switch and the main area was lit only by the emergency light over the entrance.

"My space is back here," Mystral said, her movements quick and excited as

she showed Ashe through a swinging door to a room next to the vast ovens and towering cooling racks. "It's not much, but it's all mine."

"This is great," Ashe said. The room was clean and uncluttered, dominated by a central table. A great number of instruments and things that looked like spatulas were arranged with surgical precision on it. A cake at the beginning stages of decoration sat on a raised circular stand, a neat cylinder of white cream. Bowls of colored cream and a row of purple, white, and yellow icing flowers lined the working space. The air was slightly cooler than the main bakery but still held the same sweet scent.

"Pull up a chair," Mystral said. She picked up a pastry bag and nodded toward a folding chair that was leaning against the wall. Ashe unfolded it and sat on it backwards. She rested her arms on the back of the chair and watched in fascination as Mystral gave the cake on the stand a twirl, then aimed the nozzle of the bag in her hands to make rows of neat cream piping around the top. Her movements were sure and confident. Her timing impeccable. Just as she never missed a beat when DJ-ing, Mystral also moved with unwavering precision over the cake. Once the decorations were complete, she straightened up and rubbed the back of her hand over her forehead with a look of satisfaction.

"Now for the fun part," Mystral said. She turned to the tall fridge in the corner and grabbed a bowl from it. She caught up a whisk and soon whipped up a fluffy batch of chocolate cream. "Needs more chunks," Mystral muttered before she tossed in a handful of chopped pecans and walnuts.

With a pair of scissors, she snipped the end from a new plastic pastry bag and began scooping the chocolate mixture into it.

Worried, Ashe pointed out, "Don't you need a thing at the end? You know to make it like, swooshy?"

"Nope," Mystral answered with laughter in her eyes. She leaned over the cake again and squeezed out generous dollops, making swirling, brown deposits that looked to Ashe's untrained eye like only one thing.

"What kind of cake is this?" Ashe asked as she examined the little piles.

"Special order," Mystral said. She rolled some green marzipan into a long, thin strand then chopped it into pieces and set them aside. She started on a new strand. As she worked, she said, "See, this family had a golden lab named Pansy who had a long, fun life with them before she got called to play in the eternal park in the sky. Anyway, they were thinking of becoming the foreverfamily to a new puppy but first wanted to give Pansy a proper sendoff, you know a celebration of her life and a big thank you for all the good times she spent with them. They wanted it to be a happy time, reflecting the laughter and love they had with her."

"So basically..."

"Yes, basically," Mystral paused to meet Ashe's gaze with her own bright one, "I'm making a dog shit cake." She gathered up a bunch of the green strands and expertly tapered the ends with a twist of her fingers then placed them around the creamturds in little grass-like bunches. "Voila!" She made a

grand gesture with both hands.

"That's," Ashe suddenly found an irrational tightness in her throat and struggled to get the words out. "That's beautiful." She jumped as Mystral came up beside her and put an arm around her in a one-armed hug. The contact sent a jolt through Ashe and she froze.

"Isn't it?" Mystral's tone was light even as her arm tightened around Ashe, who tried desperately not to feel or think.

The starched white sleeve was crisp against her shoulders. A dangerous softness pressed up against her and Ashe's brain was trapped in a racing feedback loop until Mystral pulled away. The contact had only lasted a second, but it had shifted the axis of Ashe's world. The simple, offhand touch had left her hungry and aching for more. If Mystral had lingered against her for even a few seconds more, Ashe didn't think she would have been able to stop herself from turning around and catching Mystral up in her arms. Ashe's mind was hijacked by the vision of pushing Mystral back against the counter and kissing her, right then and there in the middle of the bakery.

Even though she was shaky and not completely in control of her faculties, Ashe managed a wan smile and asked, "Is this the last-minute order you mentioned before?"

"No, this one was properly scheduled," Mystral said as she bent over the rows of flowers. With a pastry knife, she picked them up one by one and nestled them in bunches on the cake. "The last-minute job is because Pierre's daughter volunteered her daddy's expertise as a cupcake maker-extraordinaire for her school band's bake sale. Tomorrow. Which Pierre conveniently forgot to tell me about until like four-thirty today. All right, this one's done." Mystral finished placing the last flower and looked at her handiwork with a nod. She picked up a white chocolate plate that had "Thank You Pansy" written on it in green icing and carefully placed it in the middle of the poop-and-flower bouquet. Mystral whipped out her phone and snapped a few pictures of the cake. "For my portfolio," she said.

"Are you sure you want to have a dog shit cake in your public record?"

"Sure. I actually really like how it turned out. Those poops look good enough to eat. And you know what, they are!" Mystral said with a quick grin. She nodded over to a glassed-in cabinet. "Oh, Ashe, could you grab that box over there? Thanks."

She took the pink cake box Ashe handed over and expertly transferred the finished cake onto a thick card platter. She added a last line of cream piping around the base before she slid the cake into the box and sealed it with a gold sticker from a roll hanging off the side of the table. She disappeared into the other room and came back holding a large tray piled high with chocolate and vanilla cupcakes.

"How many are there?" Ashe levered herself off her chair and gaped at the sheer number of cakes.

"One hundred and thirty," Mystral said. She put the tray down with a sigh. "Okay, this could take a while. You might want to get comfy. Mind if I put on

some tunes?"

"Not at all."

Mystral propped her cell phone in the holder on the counter. She hummed to herself as she fiddled with the settings and switched on the speakers. At once, the room filled with the boppy sounds of Riko Aikawa singing her signature hit, "*Summer Holiday*."

"I made a playlist for times like this," Mystral said as she cleared her workspace with fierce efficiency. She pulled out a number of stainless steel bowls and dumped in powdered sugar, wads of butter, and cream. She added cocoa powder to one, chopped fruit, and bottled essences to others until she had a number of different-colored frostings, each of which looked and smelled divine. She sang to herself while she worked and Ashe was startled both by the beauty of her voice as well as her perfect mastery of the foreign lyrics. Mystral sang with an unconventional, husky tone, like smoke and absinthe laced with honey. A new song came on. The melody was sweetly sad. The lyrics sparked an uncomfortable flash of recognition in Ashe. She knew that song. She'd listened to it non-stop the summer of her sixteenth birthday when she'd been faced with her first major crush and had lacked the knowledge and experience to do anything about it.

Mystral paused as she caught Ashe studying her. With a tiny quirk to her lips she asked, "What, is my pronunciation horrible?"

"Not at all. You've really got this song down," Ashe said.

"Yeah, it's pretty funny, but I don't actually know what I'm singing most of the time." Mystral cast her eyes down as she spoke, the tone carefully indifferent. "Sometimes I'll look up the words if I really love the song or something, but most of the time I just memorize the sounds. This one's not about something like molesting Chihuahuas, I hope."

"No, it's just your standard pop fare," Ashe said dismissively. She swallowed the flush of heat that rose to her face as Mystral fixed her with a long, piercing gaze.

"Don't bullshit me, Ashe. It's about unrequited love," Mystral told her. She leaned against the counter and crossed her arms over her chest. "It's about two people who should be together, who belong together and the stupid shit they let get between them."

"I know," Ashe said as her throat got tight.

"But I get it," Mystral said. She bent her head to continue her work. "Sometimes the timing isn't right. Sometimes something has to change before things can progress. Maybe I'm just a sucker for a happy ending, but I believe things will work out, even against a stack of odds."

"You're a romantic," Ashe said softly with a shake of her head. More than the timing was wrong with their situation and she had to steer the conversation to safer ground. "Is there anything I can help you with?" Ashe asked. "If it's all right, I mean, I don't have a license to do this or anything."

With that, Mystral gave her a knee-melting smile. "Thanks so much! It doesn't matter who does what, this isn't a business thing. Anyway, first things first." Mystral directed Ashe over to a sink. Ashe didn't miss the lingering

once-over Mystral gave her as she pulled off her tie and popped the collar of her shirt open. She pocketed her cufflinks and rolled her sleeves to scrub up. She returned to the long table where Mystral surprised her by presenting Ashe with a cheerful red and white striped apron.

She looped it over her head and tied it behind her back before she divided the cupcakes into groups according to Mystral's instructions. While Ashe was doing that, Mystral shoveled scoops of icing into various pastry bags. She left out two bags and stashed the rest in the fridge.

"I'll start with the blackberry icing," Mystral said. She took the pastry bag in both hands and squeezed a purple swirl onto the cupcake. As she did a few more, Ashe leaned against the counter and studied her movements with interest. Mystral looked up. "Think you could do this?"

"No way," Ashe held up both hands and backed away. "You make it look easy, but I'm sure it's really not."

"It *is* easy," Mystral said. She picked up a bag of cream-colored icing and passed it over. "And even if it looks funny, it'll still taste the same, which is super delicious because how could it not? Come on, give it a try."

"Don't blame me if what comes out looks more like a turd than your cake," Ashe muttered. She hovered over a vanilla cupcake and bit her lip in concentration as she gave a measured squeeze. The icing came out more-or-less evenly and as Ashe straightened up to survey her work, she had to admit that while it wasn't perfect, she'd managed to make a decent swirl. Mystral came up behind Ashe and peeked over her shoulder.

"That's a great first try," she said. "It's a bit easier to control the flow if you squeeze it from the top here, like this —"

Before Ashe was aware what was happening Mystral's arms were around her. Strong and sure hands covered her own with a gentle pressure. Ashe felt big and awkward and more turned on than she had ever been. She forced herself to hold still as her racing pulse pounded through her entire body. It took every ounce of self-control in her not to drop the pastry bag and sweep Mystral up against her. In an instant, a liquid shot of fire lanced through her. Every idea of cupcake decoration vanished from her mind. Ashe had never wanted anyone as badly as she wanted Mystral right then. Panic flooded her and Ashe jerked away.

"Sorry, was that —" Mystral faltered and drew back. "Maybe I shouldn't have —"

"Oh, no not at all," Ashe blathered. She hoisted the bag and said, "Good tip. Okay, I'll do that. Um, okay, what should I do next?"

"Finish this group." Mystral indicated a cluster of cakes on the table. "And then I'll give you another batch of icing."

"Great!" Her voice sounded loud and altogether too jovial in her ears. She focused on the task in front of her and managed to complete it without disaster. After that, she swapped her depleted bag for another one that contained strawberry butter cream.

The music provided an invigorating background and soon Mystral sealed

the boxes containing one hundred and twenty-nine cupcakes—one cupcake mysteriously vanished during the process, along with two cups of tea. She enlisted Ashe's help in ferrying them out to the display window, which also appeared to function as a holding area and refrigeration unit for finished items. After she slid the final box onto the shelf, Mystral surveyed their work with a satisfied expression.

"I can't believe we finished all that so quickly," Ashe said.

"We make a great team," Mystral declared as she yanked off her cap, then bent over to fluff out her hair.

They did, Ashe privately agreed. She returned the borrowed apron and watched as Mystral scrubbed down her workspace. Her movements were smooth with practiced confidence. Against her better judgment, Ashe found her gaze lingering on the striking figure Mystral made in her white uniform. Ashe leaned back against the wall and let her thoughts drift until Mystral came over to stand right in front of her with a knowing look on her face. She was far too close for Ashe's peace of mind. Mystral gave a mischievous grin at Ashe's discomfit as she reached out. With a quick flip of the switch at Ashe's shoulder, the bakery was thrown into thin darkness. In the light from the emergency exit, Mystral's form was only a silhouette.

"Admit it," Mystral purred with her hand still on the switch, "You were checking out my butt."

A heady rush of brashness obscured her better judgment and Ashe just shrugged, knowing she'd been busted. Her breath caught in her throat as Mystral suddenly turned and leaned back against Ashe.

"Well now you can't see it anymore, so there." She straightened and made a move as if to walk away. Before Ashe could stop herself, she reached out and wrapped her arms around Mystral's slender form, pulling Mystral hard against her. Ashe's arms rested just under the swell of Mystral's breasts and Ashe's own chest was pressed up between her shoulder blades. Mystral let out a gasp of surprise, but didn't fight her. Instead, Mystral raised her head just enough so the clean lines of her throat were revealed. The movement ignited a spark inside of Ashe.

"It doesn't matter if I can't see you," Ashe whispered. "I can still feel you."

In Ashe's embrace, Mystral took in a deep breath.

As if moving underwater, Ashe freed one hand to brush aside Mystral's hair and lowered her head to seek the tender skin of her neck. The darkness around them gave the scene a secret, undercover air that Ashe found irresistible. It was agony to keep still as Mystral leaned back and pressed against her. Ashe couldn't fight the feelings that raced through her. Even as her common sense screamed at her to stop, Ashe pressed her lips to the sweet spot just under Mystral's earlobe. She closed her eyes at the first contact. Mystral's pulse throbbed under her lips and Ashe dropped lower to kiss the side of her neck. She was drunk with the feeling of Mystral in her arms, the resilience of her body against Ashe's. She didn't want to let go. Ever.

Mystral shifted but didn't move to break the embrace. She turned her head

just enough so that Ashe's lips met the silk of her cheek. Ashe's body trembled with the effort it took to keep from lunging to meet the slow, inexorable turn that brought Mystral around to face her. For a long, aching instant Ashe held herself still, both of them breathing heavily, parted lips barely brushing. They were standing on a precipice, and that moment was the last chance to turn back.

Ashe heard Mystral's hoarse whisper once more, "Don't move."

This time, she didn't. Mystral rose up and her lips came fully against Ashe's. The instant connection was a breathless spiral, the electricity of the contact like a bolt of lightning that raced from Ashe's chest to her knees. The force of it nearly bowled her over. Mystral's scent was clean and sweet, the kiss as gentle as a breeze. Ashe didn't dare to move. She wouldn't be able to hold back the flood of desire once the dam had burst.

A single heartbeat later, Mystral broke the kiss. She held Ashe's hands in hers and took a step backwards as she said, "Take me home, Ashe."

Only able to give the briefest of answers, Ashe followed Mystral from the bakery.

On the ride back, Ashe's truck smelled a whole lot more like vanilla and caramel than usual. When they reached the safehouse, Ashe automatically walked behind Mystral. She scanned the road and hallway until they reached her door.

"Come in for a bit," Mystral said. She gave Ashe a quick look over her shoulder as she unlocked the door.

Ashe's heart jumped. She knew she should refuse. Walk away with a curt goodnight, but she couldn't.

"Just for a minute," Ashe said. She took a slow breath as the door closed behind her.

"Great, how about a cup of tea or something?" Mystral was already over at the kitchen cubby, busy filling the kettle. "I owe you at least that much for helping me out tonight."

The scene was so comforting and so familiar, Ashe felt her guard slipping. The room was pleasantly warm so Ashe took her long coat off and hung it up on one of the hooks behind the door. Behind her calm façade, an electric charge raced through Ashe's body and twitched through her fingers. The memory of Mystral's lips on hers filled her brain with static. Ashe shoved her hands in her pockets and leaned against the wall of the kitchen cubby. Mystral held two boxes of herb tea, one in each hand as if weighing them.

"Which one looks good," she asked, "Cinnamon Sunset or Orange You Adorable?"

"Good naming sense," Ashe said. "I'll have the cinnamon."

"Yeah, me too," Mystral said. She poured hot water into two mugs and dunked in the tea bags; however, she left them on the counter and instead turned to Ashe with an unmistakable look in her eyes. Pure desire. Ashe's back was against the wall. Mystral was entirely too close and Ashe needed to put a bit of distance between them. She glanced around for an escape route.

"Look, what just happened back there," Ashe blurted out. "I shouldn't have

done that."

"What do you mean?" Mystral breathed. Her eyes were dark, her attention focused on Ashe. Under the direct gaze, Ashe was very aware of each breath Mystral took. "I seem to remember it was mutual."

"It was wrong. It's not going to happen again." Ashe swallowed and fell silent. She couldn't think of anything to say other than trite lies.

"Why are you stopping this?" Mystral's voice was tight with pain. "Is it the conflict of interest? Ashe, please tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it."

"There's nothing you can do."

"If things were different," Mystral's voice dropped, nearly to a whisper, "Would you still be here?"

In her struggle for clarity, Ashe found her voice. "Mystral, if things were different, I would never have met you."

"I'm glad things aren't different then," she said with a fierce conviction. "I'm glad I met you. I treasure every minute I've been with you. And I want to be with you, Ashe. This doesn't have to end."

Ashe felt her chest constricting. Mystral was so close, almost pressed up against her. A deep shiver of desire gripped Ashe. She was a hairsbreadth from breaking.

"Do you know how much I want you?" Mystral said in a whisper that cut through all of Ashe's defenses and pushed her over the edge.

"I have an idea."

Ashe reached out and in the span of a heartbeat, Mystral was in her arms. Mystral pushed Ashe hard against the wall with primal hunger. The rush of desire that flared through Ashe from the action burned away all the uncertainty. Ashe didn't move as Mystral brought her hands up to cup Ashe's face. She trailed one thumb over Ashe's bottom lip for a breathless instant before she surged forward and kissed Ashe. This time there was nothing soft or sweet about the kiss. Ashe took Mystral around the waist and pulled her close as Mystral's hands lost themselves in her hair. The soft gasp Mystral gave ignited Ashe. Her body responded to the caress and her movements grew rough with need. Ashe wanted Mystral with every part of her. Every breath and every thought sang with exaltation.

They were as close as two clothed people could be. Breast met breast, hips and thighs came alive against each other as they sought release from the tensions that had been pulled so tight between them. Ashe opened her mouth to Mystral's insistent tongue. She wanted more. Ashe stroked her hands up from Mystral's waist and took one of Mystral's hands in hers. Ashe lowered it from her shoulder and guided Mystral's fingers to the swell of her breast.

The feeling of Mystral's hand on her wrung a moan of yearning from Ashe. For the first time in her life she wanted to submit to someone's touch. She wanted to give all of herself to the woman in her arms.

Then it hit her.

Ashe jerked back to reality. What they were doing had to end. A deep shock that was almost painful jolted through her as she pulled away. Mystral's breath was hot against her mouth, her eyes fluttered open as Ashe took her by

the shoulders and moved her away as gently as she could. Still the sight of Mystral's stark expression ripped a hole in her heart.

"Don't look at me like that," Mystral said. The hurt in Mystral's eyes sent a lance of agony through Ashe.

"I can't do this," Ashe said.

"Don't say that. Please."

Ashe backed into the middle of the room to put as much distance between them as she could in that narrow space. Her voice caught in her throat.

"Ashe, I'm in love with you."

The words burned like ice. Ashe felt like she'd been punched. "You aren't." Ashe forced the words out. She needed Mystral

to understand. "You just think you are because you're scared and I'm here, helping you. It's not real."

Ashe flinched as Mystral's head came up, her eyes desperate and fierce.

"Tell me right now," Mystral said. "Tell me to my face that *you* don't feel anything and I'll believe you."

Ashe shook her head. A spray of black bangs fell into her eyes, stinging them.

"I'm sorry, Mystral," Ashe rasped. She winced. Everything Ashe wanted to say, she couldn't. The only thing she could say was *sorry*.

Mystral's hand went to her face as she spat a curse that cut Ashe's soul.

She couldn't take any more. Ashe grabbed her coat, not able to make her shaking fingers do more than clutch at it. With one final look over her shoulder that she wished she hadn't taken, Ashe said, "Lock the door behind me."

She stood in the cold hallway until she heard the bolt slide into place. Something had died within her. With everything that had happened until that night, Mystral had stood strong against it. As her life and those dearest to her had been callously picked over and subjected to damning examination, she'd kept her head up. She'd joked and laughed in the face of fear. Even after she'd lost her beloved motorcycle and had been forced out of her own home without time for a backward glance, she hadn't let it bow her proud head. It had been Ashe who had broken her. Ashe alone had brought her to tears.

Chapter Fifteen

ASHE FOUGHT THE feeling that she had left a piece of herself back in that room as she went out to her truck. The engine purred in the still night air. She drove with no destination. A buzzing sound cut into the test pattern of her thoughts and Ashe dug through her bag for her phone. For a split second she wished Mystral's number was on the screen.

Ashe pulled over and answered the call. It was Birdy. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure," Ashe said. She grabbed her notebook from her bag and fell into professional mode. She relished the excuse to shut herself down. "What's up?"

"I'm not sure how helpful this will be." Birdy's voice was soft, hesitant. "I don't know if I should even be saying this, but on the twenty-fifth, there was a, well, an incident that maybe you should know about."

"Talk to me," Ashe said with her pencil poised.

"Monica on the first floor was closing up last Saturday around one and someone was outside, like just kicking the hell out of the dumpsters."

"Okay."

"It was more like someone going ballistic, saying stuff like 'that little slut' and 'I'll kill her'." Birdy paused. "I remember that too, actually. Raised a hell of a noise. I thought it was just some drunk person. Sometimes people get like that, you know. Anyway, Monica said she knew who it was."

Ashe sucked in a breath.

"It was Ray," Birdy said. "Look, it could be a coincidence. There were a few other events and things going on that same night and stuff happens in all of them. I don't want to get anyone in trouble, especially someone, you know, from our side of the fence."

"It's all right," Ashe said. "I'm not going to jump to conclusions without concrete evidence." However, things were becoming clear. The pieces were falling into place. "Thanks Birdy."

"No problem," she said.

After ending the call, Ashe sat in her truck for a moment, the phone forgotten in her hand. It made sense, in a horrible way. Feeling rejected from a community that appeared welcoming to everyone else, Ray had latched onto Mystral, maybe he'd seen a deeper relationship where there had been nothing other than kindness. The outburst that night could have been because of Ashe. The shock of the realization took her breath away. The notes had started after Mystral's breakup with Lily, who had reappeared in the singles' scene with a vengeance, and had escalated after Ashe had appeared to be with Mystral at the event. Killing the lights and laying in wait at Mystral's apartment was the stalker's plan to eliminate herself from the equation.

Somehow the stalker had found out where Mystral lived, and the event seemed to be the key. The attack at Mystral's apartment had to be a spur of the moment thing, otherwise the stalker would have come with some kind of weapon instead of just making do with the fire extinguisher in the hallway.

Mystral said she always made sure all the events she played at were inclusive, meaning a trans guy would have no trouble entering if he wanted to. Even though Ashe hadn't seen him at the venue, it didn't mean that Ray hadn't been there. Ashe's obvious presence had just forced him to be more discreet.

Ashe rested her head on the steering wheel and fought to calm the panic that rose up in her throat. He must have gotten Mystral's address from the delivery boxes that contained the borrowed sound equipment. She hauled on the steering wheel and wrenched the truck back onto the road. She floored the gas pedal as the truck roared down the quiet streets, heading toward Yamaguchi Investigations.

She didn't even bother to put on her coat before she barreled into the office. Her abrupt arrival caused Kieran, who was standing unfortunately close to the door, to drop a stack of papers. She shouldered past him and landed with both hands on Yakkun's desk.

Yakkun looked up in alarm. "What's going on, Ashe?"

"I've got some new info for you," Ashe said. Her breath was still coming in short gasps from her dead sprint up the stairs. She ignored the chair Kieran helpfully dragged over for her and gave a quick summary of the information she'd come across while still on her feet.

"Okay." To his credit, Yakkun took the information calmly and jotted notes as she spoke. He looked up once Ashe had finished and said, "Thanks. Now we've got something we can work with."

"Great," Ashe said. She straightened up and took a step back. She pulled out her wallet and chucked her P.I. license onto the desk.

"What's this?"

"I'm done. You take it from here on in." She was already in the hallway before Yakkun caught up with her and shoved his body into her path.

"You can't just leave like that."

"Yes I can," she said and fixed him with a dangerous glare. "Move."

"What's wrong? Come on Ashe, we go way back. You can tell me anything." Yakkun managed to block the hallway with his inoffensive body but Ashe was beginning to crack. She had to get out of there, and fast.

"I said move, dammit!"

"Ashe." Yakkun's voice held a note of understanding that made Ashe recoil. He looked at her for a beat more before he said, "It got personal, didn't it?"

"Yeah," she said. The word fell like a rock. "It got personal." With that, she reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder.

He let out a grunt of pain as she shoved him against the wall and out of her way.

She didn't remember the drive home and came back to herself as her truck lurched to an ungainly stop in the parking lot of her apartment. Ashe felt dizzy and couldn't keep her breaths even. She kicked the door open, only to have something small and plastic clatter to the ground. Numb fingers picked it up and she found herself looking at a CD. As if in a dream, she opened it and saw the handwritten message for the first time.

To Ashe, yours forever, Mystral.

Something broke within her and she bolted out of the truck. Her fingers clutched the CD case until the corners cut into her skin. She didn't stop until she was back in her apartment where she stood unflinching under the harsh spray of her shower. As her strength gave out, Ashe sank down and cradled her head in her arms. Her shoulders heaved as her body was wracked with desperate sobs until she felt like she would drown.

THE NEXT DAY dawned even though Ashe wished with all her heart it wouldn't. She fed herself coffee and tried to choke down half an apple before she gave up and headed to work. In the wake of the storm the night before, she was numb as if her feelings had blown like an overloaded fuse.

For once Ashe was glad of the monotony of her job, which kept her from thinking. She was in the middle of typing up a list that didn't need to be typed when she felt someone come up behind her.

Instead of her usual defensive reaction, Ashe just gave an annoyed sigh and turned around in her chair. Kevin stood a judicious distance away, holding a file folder out as if it was a shield. "What do you want?" Ashe didn't even try to assume the proper level of respect.

With a flash of relief on his face, Kevin edged closer. "It's come to my attention you've requested a transfer to Accounting?"

"That's right."

"Any reason why? Are you unsatisfied with your work here?"

"It's 'cause she can't take the fuckin' heat and is gettin' out of the kitchen."

"That's enough Pam!" Kevin snapped. Even through her apathy, Ashe was impressed. The supervisor was actually supervising. Face red, Pam went over to the photocopier and started slamming things onto it.

"It just seems like I can be more useful there, and I am certified as an accountant after all," Ashe said. She hated Kevin for having that discussion right in the middle of the office which invited snarky comments from the peanut gallery. For an instant, she had a vision of making her certification into a little badge she could flash at people. Accountant on the case. Mystral would get a kick out of that. Ashe fought the grin that threatened to derail the situation as well as the fresh shot of pain that accompanied it. Ashe kept her tone neutral as she said, "It's just a request. You can always turn it down if I'm needed here more."

"Actually, I think it's a good move," he said. "We'll miss you here in Planning, but I'll send my recommendation along to Diana. I'm pretty sure they've got an opening for you, so get your stuff together in case they want you to start right away."

"Okay, thanks." In her surprise, Ashe dropped her defensive, hunched over posture. After Kevin returned to his office, for the lack of anything better to do,

Ashe started going through the flotsam and jetsam that she'd managed to accumulate over the past half year. For some reason she had seventeen red pens and only three paperclips. She had just picked a bunch of stray staples out of the bottom of one of the drawers when she heard Pam's nasal voice.

"What's with the suit all of a sudden? It's a bit early for Halloween."

"Why do you care?" Ashe wheeled her chair back enough to give Pam a calm look. Pam stood a safe distance away as she fed herself cookies from a Ziplock bag in her hands.

"You turning into a guy?"

"It takes more than a good suit to do that," Ashe said. "And I don't think what anyone in this office wears has anything to do with you, unless you're the fashion police."

"Yeah, whatever." Pam stared rudely for a while more before she asked, "Gonna go chase some ladies in that getup?"

Ashe got slowly to her feet and towered over Pam for a long moment before she said, "As a matter of fact, yes I am. Thanks for asking."

There was a sudden rustling and Ashe had the uncomfortable, prickly feeling of a hundred people dropping their pretense of work to stare at her. She hadn't meant to say what she had, but Ashe wasn't going to take it back. She would be loud and proud. With a cold ache in her chest, Ashe dedicated her impromptu coming out to Mystral.

"Anything else you'd like to know?" Ashe asked as she turned back to her task.

"Don't fucking peek at me in the locker room, okay?" Pam said. She backed up with her cookies clutched protectively to her bosom. "And don't even think of hitting on me."

The absurdity of it all hit Ashe and she burst into wild laughter. She collapsed limply over her desk, where she held her head and laughed until her stomach hurt. Tears streaming from her eyes, Ashe choked out, "I'll try to restrain myself."

CLEANING HER DESK took all morning and Ashe was more than ready for some fresh air when lunch rolled around. She was halfway across the grounds, en route to her favorite practice spot when she noticed something odd and stopped in her tracks. Three men and one woman stood at intervals on the concrete stairs and all of them were looking at her. Ashe recognized two of the men as Don Romanelli and Ric Branch from her department and the other one she seemed to remember was in Quality Control. The woman was a young engineer named Cassidy Petreshock, who Ashe had been partnered with during a sensitivity training session they'd both been conscripted into for various office misdemeanors. While Ashe had a passing acquaintance with all of them, she couldn't imagine what business they had with her. Maybe they were just hanging out or something. As she came closer, Cassidy trotted down the steps toward her with a hopeful smile.

Ashe was irritated at the fact she'd been ambushed. She'd been looking forward to a bit of alone time to let off some of the pent-up energy office work gave her. Ashe abruptly changed directions as she decided to head over to a stone wall that was fun to climb.

"Hey, don't go!" Cassidy darted after her.

"What do you want?" Ashe tried to keep the annoyance from her voice, but she didn't do a good job of it.

"We've been watching you," Cassidy said. "You come out here and do cool jumps and stuff."

"So?"

"We were talking and we all think it's really cool." She glanced at the three guys who faced Ashe with various degrees of the same earnest expression. "We want to do that too. We'd really like it if you could be our teacher."

While Ashe's face was busy doing a *Huh?* expression, Ric said, "You know, like for fitness or something." He grabbed himself by the love handles with a look of distaste. "Sitting on my ass all day isn't the greatest for keeping in shape. My wife's starting to talk about putting me on a diet. A beer-free diet."

Ashe regarded them with a furrowed brow as she tried to make sense of the situation. "So you want me to teach you parkour?"

"Yeah, that's the idea," Cassidy said. The others nodded along with her.

"As long as none of you gives me any crap," Ashe said, slowly looking around at the little group. "You know, because I'm —"

"Gay?" Cassidy finished with a grin. "Um, newsflash, we already had a very strong inkling before you said it. I mean, it's kind of obvious. I think the only person who was surprised was Ric."

"I wasn't surprised." Ric gave Ashe a nod and said, "I was impressed. You wear a suit better than any guy I've ever seen."

Ashe just replied with a knowing smirk.

"So what do you say?" Mr. Quality Control piped up.

"All right," Ashe said with a shrug. Everyone in the group seemed decent enough. "I don't mind showing you some of the basics. I'm no expert or anything, though. And don't even think of suing me if you have a heart attack or bash your knees or anything."

"Hear that guys?" Cassidy whooped. "We got our teacher!"

For the rest of the lunch hour, Ashe demonstrated landings to let the novices get a feel for heights as well as how to fall and other safety techniques. When it was time to head back to work, Ashe was energized and glowing from the exertion. They parted with cheerful promises to meet up the next day. While her personal life had self-destructed, at least things were looking up at work.

The black cloud she had been trying to keep at bay resurfaced as she found herself alone in her truck at the end of the day. Unable to face the emptiness of her apartment, she headed down to the docks and pulled into the lot behind Jax's place. A bunch of cars were already there, indicating brawl night was in progress. She slung her workout bag over her shoulder and jumped out of her

truck. By the time she'd exchanged greetings with Jax and gotten changed, the brawl was in full, glorious melee. Jax minimally supervised a number of pairs who were whaling away at each other, regardless of race, age, or gender.

Ashe pulled on her lightly padded gloves and joined the fray. She bumped fists with a burly man who had muscles like bowling balls under his dark skin. They both dropped into defensive stances. He was the first to attack, catching her low across the ribs with a roundhouse kick that Ashe leapt to deflect, protective of her healing injury. Ashe struck back. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him off balance, at the same time she attempted a leg sweep that didn't really work but got him off guard enough for her to land a couple solid punches before she was driven back by another kick.

She lost herself in the rhythm of the fight, dancing out of the way of attacks while launching her own. Her breath came hard, sweat dripped into her eyes and stung them. Not wanting to think of Mystral, Ashe gritted her teeth and dipped out of the way of a flying elbow. She lashed out with a back kick that landed solidly and elicited a brief grunt. She would not think of the way she'd left Mystral, not think of that last instant she'd looked back. Mystral clutched onto the kitchen counter as if it was the only thing keeping her on her feet, tears streaming down her face, her expression a mask of pain. Ashe had done that to her.

Mystral had offered her heart and Ashe had stomped on it. Ashe shook the damp hair from her face with an impatient motion. What had she done? She had destroyed something fragile and precious. She didn't deserve someone like that, but Mystral was all she had ever wanted. And Ashe had summarily rejected her.

Better her than you, right? The words screamed in her mind. Something snapped inside her and Ashe felt a rage like nothing else explode within her. It was true. Ashe had been afraid to give Mystral the chance to break her heart so she'd done it first. Her vision narrowed to a pinpoint, energy raced through her. She was unaware of anything else until she was abruptly jolted back to the present.

"Red light, Ashe!" Jax shouted in her face. "Red fucking light!"

Ashe looked around herself and saw her fighting partner crouched down on the mat at her feet, both hands over his head. Ashe's own hands were balled into fists. Her arms trembled with thwarted adrenaline.

"You're not in a good headspace, Ashe. Take a breather," Jax snapped as he shoved Ashe back a step. He bent down to help the man to his feet. "You okay, Joe?"

"Yeah, fine," he said.

"Sorry. I just, I don't know. I'm sorry." Sorry seemed to be the only thing she could say recently. With a wave of regret, Ashe held out a hand. Joe clapped it with his own and pulled her into a sweaty hug. He gave her a friendly back pounding before he released her.

"No worries," Joe said. "It's not often I get my ass kicked so good."

Jax handed him a towel, "Take five minutes on the bench, Joe, and then get back in there." He raised one hand in a beckoning gesture and a short, compact

woman came over. Her hair was tied up in a bandana and she was breathing hard from her own fight. He handed over the whistle from around his neck and said, "You've got the floor, Lani."

"Sure thing," she said. She gave a short tweet on the whistle and waved to the assembled fighters, directing them to find new partners.

"Look, Jax," Ashe said, "I'm sorry." There it was again.

Sorry. She was full of more *sorry* than she could express.

"Uh huh. You wanna hit someone?" Jax turned away and scooped up two punching pads. He slipped his hands into them and held them out. "Hit me, okay?"

Ashe dropped into her stance and let go with a series of punches. Jax held strong against them.

"So what's the deal?" he asked as he directed Ashe to sink an uppercut into his left pad.

"Nothing, just blowing off steam," Ashe gritted between panting breaths.

"This got something to do with that girl you brought here the other day?" Jax let his arm roll back with the force of Ashe's sudden backhand smack. Ashe didn't reply and he continued, "I saw the way she was looking at you. What happened, you put an end to it?"

"I didn't let anything even start."

"Why? She's a knockout. Tough as nails too. I can see you with someone like her."

"She's my client, Jax."

"That's not the only reason," Jax said.

Instead of replying, Ashe pulled in her elbows and beat out a fast tattoo of jabs. She didn't care about the sweat rolling down her face or the burn of her muscles. Once she was out of breath, she paused and bounced on the balls of her feet. She waited for her pulse to die down a bit before she said, "I didn't want to waste my time on something that wasn't going to last." Ashe swallowed the sharp pain that rose in her throat as she said, "It's just a crush. She's not ready for something long-term."

"She tell you that?" Jax's eyes were piercing over the flurry of Ashe's punches as she renewed her attack.

"She didn't have to."

"So you took it upon yourself to decide what was best for both of you without even asking what she wanted?" Jax fell back a step as Ashe drove a fierce jab into the pad. "Real gallant of you, Devon."

Ashe reeled at the sting that came with the words and hissed, "Mystral's young. She's got years ahead of her to play the field and I'm sure she won't want to waste them on me. She's not into anything serious."

"I don't know. She's got a job and her own place, right?"

Seems serious enough to me."

Desperate and aching, Ashe said, "Jax, she's only twenty-eight." The fight left her and she dropped her hands. She rubbed a hand through her hair and turned away, shoulders falling.

"Hey, what was your mother doing at that age?" With the ease of a career

fighter, Jax darted across Ashe's path to cut off her escape route.

"What's that got to do with anything?" Ashe fixed him with a confused glare.

Jax doffed the punching pads and chucked them aside. "All I know is that at twenty-eight my mother had already made a promise to stay with my dad and they had one kid and another on the way. Plus a mortgage and a collie. You know what? They're still together and my dad's a lot more of a pain in the ass than you are. Twenty-eight is not as young as you think it is." Jax paused with a grin before he continued in a more serious tone, "What I really think, is you're trying to bullshit yourself into not getting involved. I know you, Ashe, better than you think. I've seen you pull this before but I've never seen it get to you like this. I think Mystral deserves a chance to at least tell you what she wants."

"I can't do that," Ashe said.

"You don't get it." Jax faced Ashe squarely. "It's not about *you*."

The words landed in a tender place and made her stagger back a step. Her chest heaved as Ashe tried to recover her stance. She didn't want to have that discussion. What did Jax know? Quite a lot, actually, she had to admit.

"You're gonna be okay," Jax called after Ashe as she escaped into the changing room.

While Ashe didn't agree, she wasn't in the mood to discuss Mystral anymore. It didn't matter. What they had was over and there was no need to drag it back to life, like a relationship zombie. The thought of zombies almost made Ashe smile before she closed her eyes against the painful knowledge that Mystral had left yet another mark on her. One that wouldn't fade anytime soon.

THE NEXT FEW days came and went in a slow whirlwind, divided into little parcels of mindless work, parkour practice, and coffee breaks punctuated by meetings. The bruises faded but the memories didn't. Any time Ashe felt like she wasn't suffering enough she put on Mystral's CD and let the agony of self-reproach come.

The weekend was spent in a white-walled funk with Ashe sitting on her sofa as the minutes dragged like nails against her skin. The hours until Sunday night seemed interminably long, and Ashe welcomed the start of the work week. At least at the office, she had something to drown out her thoughts, as well as a new hobby.

Ashe passed any free time she had amusing herself by baiting Pam into making horrendously obvious slurs against not only her but everyone else who apparently "chose" to be a minority in some way. Ashe realized that as Pam's primary target, she was keeping the other people Pam regularly bullied under her radar.

Possibly as a result of their workplace sparring, her request to transfer departments came through with surprising rapidity. Ashe moved into the office on the third floor and immersed herself in numbers and percentages as

she was put in charge of dealing with imports from their Asian suppliers.

Before Ashe was aware of it, Friday evening had come around again. She skulked around the office for as long as she could and only relented to leave after being shooed out by the cleaning staff with a number of brooms. In the empty parking lot, she sat behind the wheel of her truck and regarded the bleak expanse of yet another weekend with the horror normally reserved for giant spiders and anything having to do with the Department of Motor Vehicles.

With an air of desolation, Ashe started the engine. She didn't know where she was going except that she couldn't go back to her empty apartment just yet. She couldn't face another weekend like the last one. She was also fighting a worried, itching feeling that she couldn't let go. Why would Ray go after Mystral so single-mindedly? The young host that she had met had been aggressive and angry, not hesitant to lash out with violence, but most of that had been her own fault for baiting him. Something just didn't seem right. The obsession wasn't about acceptance. She mulled over the facts of the case, unable to distance herself from it. It was about the music. Someone wanted Mystral's music and wasn't willing to share it.

The pieces fell into place and Ashe got a sick chill. Music was the key to drawing out the stalker. Rave by the Docks was taking place that night. Yakkun wouldn't go ahead with the plan, would he? It was unthinkable. Not after she had told him in no uncertain terms she would not allow it. But Ashe was no longer on the team. She couldn't stop him. The thought made Ashe catch her breath. She had to know. There was one way she could find out as well as take care of some measure of the empty, aching feeling that was eating her from the inside.

Ashe had survived on a few uninspired variations of boiled spaghetti and sauce from a package for far too many days and she was starved for real food and non-hostile company. Soon she was wrestling with the stubborn sliding door of May's Kitchen. Even as it galled her, some part of her wished to see Yakkun sitting at the counter, his smiling face harmless as he offered a joke or some stupid comment.

However Yakkun wasn't there. May didn't seem overly surprised to see her and Ashe guessed that was because either Yakkun hadn't told her about Ashe's departure or she was a master of the art of discretion. Both were equally probable. The only other customer paid their bill and left while Ashe was getting settled in her usual spot. Soon she found herself under the unnervingly direct stare of the restaurant's owner. Ashe at once knew where Yakkun had gotten his powers.

"*Doushitan?*" Expressing her concern with a softly spoken "What's wrong?" May leaned both elbows on the counter.

"*Nande ikinari?*" Ashe knit her brows as she asked May about the sudden question. "*Ma, iiya. Shimpai shintoite?*" She told May not to worry in her lilting Satsuma intonation. The words were more for Ashe's own benefit than May's. Ashe was nervous and jumpy and definitely worried. She didn't want to know

but she couldn't turn her back on the matter.

"*Isshou janai no?*" May didn't need to say who she thought Ashe would be with. Ashe knew May felt Mystral's absence just as much as Ashe herself did. The room was empty without her.

"No, I am not with her," Ashe said in English as she fought the sting that came to her eyes. She got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. A cold chill that not even the scalding tea could chase away. "Why?" Ashe asked breathlessly. She wished with everything she had the answer wasn't the one she feared.

"I thought you'd want to be there." May leaned over the counter and picked up a thin leaflet. She offered it to Ashe as she said, "It's her first big event, after all."

Her heart stopped. Ashe leapt to her feet. She grabbed the paper and stared at it.

"Tomo-kun dropped it off earlier this week," May said. "He said they made up a new batch especially for her. Doesn't it look professional?"

Ashe felt all the strength leave her body. It couldn't be. But there it was. Mystral's picture, the name Phoenix emblazoned across it, unmistakable, right under the title: Rave by the Docks. Ashe checked the time on the old clock on the wall. The event had only just started. There was still time.

Without another word, Ashe grabbed her coat and bolted from the warm confines of the restaurant. Only one thought was on her mind: get to the harbor as fast as she possibly could.

Chapter Sixteen

THE TRUCK RAMPED up over the curb and lurched to an ungainly halt. Half a pylon decorated the hood, the other half was lost somewhere between there and the perimeter of the makeshift parking lot. The warehouse loomed in front of her like a slumbering giant. Ashe ditched her truck and barreled through the gaping doors. A group of guys with glowing bracelets up and down their arms catcalled her but Ashe didn't even spare them a glance. Pounding music filled the air and hit her in the gut. She recognized the song. She had tortured herself with it for the past several days and every beat was burned into her soul. Ashe didn't even bother to wonder why Mystral would play her demo CD instead of mixing live as she shoved through the throngs of gyrating bodies on the crowded floor until she got to the front of the room and leapt onto the stage. It was a telling lapse of security that nobody stopped her. With the house lights down and the fog-thick air electrified with lasers, visual navigation was practically impossible and was probably why nobody realized the DJ booth was unoccupied.

Ashe bit back a growl of frustration. Mystral's CD spun in the player and albums littered the floor. Her mind whirled. Mystral would never just leave her precious vinyl lying around like that. A quick scramble through the booth revealed a dropped penlight, still switched on. A piece of paper taped roughly to the wall caught her attention and Ashe grabbed it.

You're the one making a move on someone's lady N
Nothing's gonna get in my way,
Not even a poser stud like you.
If I can't have her nobody will.

Panic gripped her. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think. The stalker had Mystral. She was too late. Again. She clutched her chest and staggered off the stage. A familiar shape came out of the fog—Yakkun. Rage consumed her. Ashe grabbed him roughly by the collar.

"You asshole!" Ashe screamed in his face. "You lost her!"

"Ashe, I didn't know—"

"You fucking goddamned well did know," Ashe spat. She drew a fist back, only to have it seized in a strong and uncompromising grip from behind.

"Easy now," Gus's voice said in her ear. "Decking people's not going to solve anything."

"This is on your head! All of you!" Her throat hurt from the wild shriek. Ashe still had one hand on Yakkun and she considered kicking both him and Gus in the nuts just so they knew a fraction of the pain she felt. The flash of anger peaked and Ashe had a moment of clarity. She was standing at a crossroads and she had the power to choose the correct path.

At once, Ashe put up both hands and backed away. Lashing out would

only waste time. There was a chance they could still reach Mystral before it was too late. Ashe grabbed her Bluetooth and stuck it in her ear. She allowed herself the luxury of one deep breath before she said, "We can't let the stalker get away with Mystral. Yakkun, take Gus in your van and get ready to haul ass the second I tell you. Have Kieran and Shauna scour the venue in case the stalker's hiding out here." Ashe raised her head. "I'll take a look out from above. Mystral's depending on us. Let's do this."

Ashe met the two men in a quick three-way fist bump before she whirled and weaved back through the crowd. In her wild flight off the stage, she'd caught a glimpse of the VIP area and she had a hunch someone who could help her was there.

"Oh thank God!" Ashe heard the words before she saw the blocky shape of Thomas's wheelchair appearing through the laser-split fog.

"What did you see?" Ashe asked him without preamble. The look on his face was enough.

"Someone took Mystral away," Thomas said in a rush. "It was only a couple minutes ago. Whoever it was said she was drunk but she didn't look drunk. She looked scared. She grabbed onto my chair and they shoved her off really rough-like. That's when I knew something was wrong. It wasn't one of you guys."

"Can you describe this person?"

"Kind of big, wearing a hoodie." Thomas raised his chin with pride. "Just look for someone limping. I hit the gas right when they passed me and smashed them on the legs."

"Good man," Ashe said. "Did you see any weapons?"

"Not really, but I don't think she'd go with them otherwise."

"Which direction did they go?" Ashe's body twitched with the need to move.

Thomas nodded over to the main entrance. "Over that way. I'm sorry, I couldn't follow them. The crowd—"

"Hey, it's fine," Ashe said. "I wouldn't want you following that crazy person anyway. Leave that to the pros."

She didn't waste another moment before she took off again and pounded down the narrow alley between the warehouse and the building she'd selected as her lookout. It was taller than the surrounding ones and had a handy fire escape. She got a running start and made a leap. Her outflung hands managed to grab the bottom rung of the ladder and she hauled herself up until her feet could find purchase. She heaved herself onto the landing and clambered up the iron stairway. At the top, she dashed onto the roof and looked out over the cluttered harbor area that sprawled out on all sides. The wind whipped her trench coat around her body, but Ashe paid it no mind. Desperately, she searched for any vehicle or person that looked out of the ordinary, willing her instincts to guide her. Ashe sucked in a breath and froze. At the edge of the milling crowd, Mystral's brilliant flame-colored hair caught Ashe's attention like a beacon.

"Hang on sweetheart, I'm coming," Ashe murmured as she scrambled to call

Yakkun. She was already running for the edge of the roof when he answered. She barked out, "Found them. They're about twenty meters out, heading north on a service road parallel to the warehouse. They're on foot for the time being. Get your ass out there and cut them off. Do not let that bastard get Mystral into a car. I'll meet you there."

She had only barely registered Yakkun's affirmative response when she cut the connection. She kicked up a spray of gravel and threw herself over the edge to land on the roof of the adjacent building. What followed was the most punishing parkour of her entire life. Ashe slid down the sloped roof and caught herself on the railing of the fire escape. Her heart pounded with adrenaline and she focused only on what was right in front of her as she jumped from the fire escape to the roof of the next building, which was a low storage shed. Ashe grabbed onto the edge of the roof and swung herself over the side before she let go and dropped to ground-level. She landed hard on both feet and was off on a dead run. She fought the panic that sent a rush of mad tears to her eyes.

She wouldn't be too late. Ashe swore on everything she held in her heart and soul she would get there in time.

Ashe's breath burned in her lungs. She didn't slow down as she rounded the corner and came upon the two, who had their backs to her. The stalker had an arm around Mystral's body in an obscene parody of intimacy. Ashe put on one last mad burst of speed and let out a primal scream. At Ashe's shout, both of them turned. Mystral's face was streaked with tears but the moment she saw Ashe, her expression changed to hope and she made a move as if to pull away. The attacker grabbed her harder and pressed a knife to her throat. Mystral flinched violently as the tip of the knife met her skin and both of them stumbled. The sharp movement caused the stalker's hood to fall back. A fat yellow braid hung over one shoulder. In the harsh glare from the industrial floodlights, Ashe saw the face of Mystral's tormenter for the first time.

"Kelsey!" Ashe's shoulders rose and fell with her heaving breaths. The voice that came from her throat was a hoarse, almost subhuman growl. "Let her go."

"Just get the fuck out of here!" Kelsey shouted.

In response, Ashe lunged forward and Kelsey roughly dragged Mystral back with her. The distance between them was down to only a few meters. Another half-step back and Kelsey's injured leg buckled. She staggered and spat a curse. The knife at Mystral's throat wavered.

Ashe froze. She held a hand out. "That's far enough. Stop this now." Her eyes locked with Mystral's. The trust she saw in Mystral's expression was all she needed to crystallize her plan. Once more, Ashe raised her voice and said, "You're nothing, Kelsey. Just a deluded kid. You're not even worth the time it would take to kick your ass."

"Shut up!"

Ashe took another step forward.

"Stop!" Kelsey's voice held a note of unhinged panic. Still grabbing onto Mystral, she jabbed the knife in Ashe's direction. That was what Ashe was waiting

for. Her entire body tensed.

"Mystral drop!"

Mystral did. In a split second, she went completely limp and her body landed on the damp concrete with a hollow clatter like a discarded doll. The sudden shift knocked Kelsey off balance and she fumbled the knife and nearly dropped it. Kelsey looked down at her empty arms in horror. Ashe's lip curled in feral victory. She closed the distance between them in a single leap. The fear in Kelsey's eyes only fed the fire that drove her. Ashe didn't even bother to look at the knife as she backhanded it out of Kelsey's grip and grabbed her by the front of her hoodie.

"Get down," Ashe snarled. She didn't wait for a response as she hooked the back of Kelsey's knee and threw her to the ground. Ashe grabbed both of her wrists and held her down with a knee in the middle of her back. Face to the pavement, Kelsey started crying in big, wet hoots. From behind her, Ashe heard a screech of tires followed by slamming doors.

Big hands came into her field of vision. "We got this," Gus said.

Reality came back into focus. Ashe whirled and dashed over to where Mystral was huddled against the wall of a nearby building. Not daring to even breathe, Ashe threw herself down onto her knees and enfolded Mystral in a crushing embrace. She cradled Mystral's head against her and fought the heaving breaths and the mad tears of relief that stung her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Ashe whispered against her hair. That word again. Ashe meant it with her entire soul. "Mystral I'm so sorry. I promised I wouldn't leave you and I did."

"You came back for me." Mystral burrowed her face into Ashe's shoulder. "I knew you'd come. I knew you would always be there for me."

"I was almost too late." Ashe pulled back and held Mystral's face in her hands. She smoothed away dusty tear tracks. The emotions she'd fought so hard to shut down came back full force. She couldn't keep silent any more. "Mystral, you are such a strong, beautiful person and I treated you horribly. I can't believe I let you go. I almost lost you. The way I acted was selfish and stupid and I hope you can forgive me."

"Of course I do," Mystral said.

"Sweetheart," Ashe breathed the word. "You did great. You were really brave tonight."

"I didn't feel like it."

"You were amazing," Ashe said.

She released Mystral from the fierce grasp and drew back enough so she could hold out a hand to help Mystral rise to her feet. Even after they were both standing, Ashe kept Mystral's hand in hers, reluctant to break the contact. A cutting breeze blew off the water, sending Ashe's trenchcoat into a wide billow. Mystral shivered and for the first time, Ashe noticed Mystral was only in her clubbing outfit. Ashe let go long enough to shrug out of her coat and drape it over Mystral's mesh-covered shoulders. Her hands rested on the lapels. Underneath Ashe's palms, Mystral's breathing was deep and even, her

gaze unwavering. Ashe felt like they were the only two people in the entire world.

A flurry of motion brought Ashe back to the present.

"Come on," Yakkun said as he prodded Kelsey to her feet. Her hands were restrained in front of herself with zip ties and Gus had a grip on her shoulders.

Gus steered Kelsey toward the van. "Don't try anything funny, now. You'll only make it worse for yourself," he said.

As she passed behind Mystral, Kelsey locked her knees and stopped her forward motion with a lurch. Her face twisted with rage and hate. Ashe just cocked an unimpressed eyebrow at her over Mystral's shoulder. In response, Kelsey lunged in Gus's grip and began a filthy tirade. While there was so much Ashe wanted to say, once Kelsey started running her mouth, she knew there was only one thing to do.

She cupped Mystral's face and leaned closer.

"Are you sure?" Mystral moved back slightly. "Right here? In front of everybody?"

"Absolutely," Ashe breathed. She closed her eyes and kissed Mystral with a lingering softness. The nightmare was over. She had gotten there in time. Ashe hadn't failed and the woman in her arms was proof of that. Nothing else mattered, nobody else existed in that single, sweet moment of bliss.

"Sorry to interrupt," Yakkun's voice broke into Ashe's pink bubble of happiness. She turned to glare at him. Immune to her annoyance, he stuffed his hands into his stadium jacket and used his chin to point over to where Shauna and Gus were herding a balking and cursing Kelsey into the van. Kieran followed with Kelsey's knife in a plastic bag. Yakkun continued, "I just wanted to say we're heading back to base where we'll have a bit of a discussion with Ms. Brook before we swing by the police station. Are the two of you gonna be okay on your own?"

"Yeah, we're fine." Ashe brushed a strand of hair away from Mystral's face. Her heart jumped as Mystral leaned into her caress with a happy sigh. After a moment, Mystral turned from Ashe to Yakkun.

"Could you tell Thomas everything is okay?" Mystral asked. "He must be worried."

"Will do. *Yoku yatta na.*" Yakkun congratulated them on a job well done and clapped Ashe on the shoulder before he walked away.

As the sound of the van faded away, Ashe said, "Come on, I'll take you home. Are you okay? You're not hurt?"

"Nah, I'm good. Better than good," Mystral said with her usual cheerful grin. She linked her arm through Ashe's as they started walking back toward the warehouse. Even as she basked in the warmth of Mystral at her side, Ashe had a momentary flash of guilt and fought the urge to groan and hold her head in shame. She owed Ray a gigantic apology. Like, kneel down on the floor and grovel gigantic.

THE RIDE BACK was silent and a bit awkward. The truck purred to a stop in the parking area of Mystral's building. Ashe killed the engine and paused with both hands on the wheel. Her heart ached with emotion. She couldn't look at Mystral. At once, her thoughts were cast back to the first time she'd sat in her truck with Mystral beside her. Her heart pounded, her body sang with the rush of heat that flooded through her. She ached to take Mystral in her arms.

However, there was something she needed to clear up first.

Ashe chewed her lower lip before she spoke. "I said I wouldn't leave you but what happened tonight, and what you've been through these past few weeks, it's going to leave a mark on you. I don't want to be a constant reminder of that. I want you to get over it, leave it behind you forever. Maybe, I don't know." She fought the crushing fist of ice that grabbed her chest as she forced herself to continue. "Maybe we shouldn't do this."

"Ashe don't say that." Mystral reached out and took both of Ashe's hands in her own. She tugged gently and Ashe turned to face her. Mystral had such pain etched on her face that Ashe mentally cursed herself for hurting Mystral yet again. When Mystral spoke, her voice was low and strong. "Yeah, it was a shitty situation but if nothing good comes from it, then why did it happen? I'm not religious or anything, but I want to believe there is some reason to this screwed up world we live in. I need to believe there's some good to balance out all the bad stuff."

Her throat felt tight and Ashe couldn't find the words to reply.

"I mean, because of this stalking crap I made a bunch of new friends like Yakkun and Thomas, and I had my first ever mainstream event," Mystral said. "I learned how to defend myself and what the heck konnyaku is. And I met you."

The look in Mystral's eyes started to unravel Ashe's last thread of control.

"Do I have to give all that up just so I can forget what one random crazy did to me? If I do that, she really will have won. Fuck her. I'm not going to let her wreck my life. Or yours either." Mystral let go of Ashe. She twisted her fingers together in her lap. She sat still and held her head up. "If you don't want to be with me, *really* in your heart don't think this could work, I'll accept your decision. But if you say goodbye to me tonight, don't do it because you think it's 'for the best' or whatever bullshit justification you tell yourself. I'm leaving this up to you and you have to do what *you* want."

What she wanted. Ashe caught her breath. Mystral was wrong. This wasn't about her, it was about *them*. And this was her last chance.

"I'm not the easiest person to be with," Ashe said. She cleared her throat and stifled a sudden nervous urge to fidget.

"That's where you're wrong," Mystral said with quiet conviction. "Being without you would be so much harder. I meant what I said then, and I still mean it now. I love you Ashe. I know you told me it wasn't real, but it is. I didn't fall in love with you because of all that bodyguard stuff, but in spite of it."

Ashe dredged up the last shreds of her resolve and faced Mystral squarely.

"If this is really what you want," Ashe said.

"Yes it is. I want this," Mystral said, unwavering. "I want *you*, Ashe."

Under the intensity of Mystral's gaze, Ashe's resistance crumbled. Ashe shifted so her posture wasn't quite so stiff and said, "I promised I wouldn't leave you, and I won't. Not until you ask me to."

Ashe wasn't sure she'd said enough. She wasn't sure even where to start.

"I'm not going to ask. I don't want you to leave me," Mystral whispered. Ashe was startled as Mystral dragged a hand across her eyes. She gave Ashe a watery smile and said, "Sorry. It's just I can't believe you're here. And I really want to kiss you again."

Ashe caught her breath. "Why don't you?"

Mystral leaned across the seat until she was almost nose-to-nose with Ashe. The air shimmered with the tension between them. She lowered her gaze to Ashe's lips and said in a low, sultry voice, "Not here. Come upstairs with me to my room. My private, soundproofed room."

Ashe didn't need to be invited twice. She gallantly hefted Mystral's gear bag and for the first time they walked up the stairs side-by-side.

They made it as far as the sofa where Ashe sank down with the space of a breath separating her from Mystral. Ashe's breath came faster. Her body was primed to react. Mystral reached out. Ashe held herself still as gentle fingertips brushed her face and stroked down with impossible softness to her lips. A surge of desire filled Ashe. Her body came alive and she trembled with the need to feel Mystral against her, the urge to give up everything of herself to this woman. Mystral hadn't even kissed her and already Ashe was on fire. Mystral's touch claimed her and healed her. Ashe reveled in the way Mystral's fingers resonated with the bond between them. Mystral reached the knot of her tie and pulled the silken material open with a liquid hiss. The unfurled length of silk slipped to the floor. Mystral slowly popped the top button of Ashe's shirt. She trailed her fingers down Ashe's throat. The touch sent ripples of electricity thrilling through Ashe's taut tendons and she let out a soft moan. Mystral stopped just south of Ashe's collar. Her fingers rested ever so lightly on the second button.

With one last, blistering look up into Ashe's eyes, Mystral lowered her head and kissed the exposed skin. Her lips ghosted over Ashe's throat as she said, "I want to get this off you."

Ashe lifted her chin. "Please," she rasped, her voice hoarse with desire.

She arched back as Mystral's fingers went from button to button until Ashe's shirt was fully open. Ashe sat up straight so Mystral could slide it off her shoulders and toss it aside to join her tie. Ashe didn't even hesitate before she pulled her undershirt over her head. Free of her outer clothing, Ashe drew Mystral to her and cradled Mystral's head as her mouth moved over Ashe's skin, tasting and teasing.

Ashe lay back and guided Mystral to lie over her. Mystral continued her slow exploration and dropped down to where the swells of Ashe's breasts were held in the supple grey sports bra. She paused and glanced up once more to meet Ashe's eyes in a wordless plea.

In response, Ashe took Mystral's hand and lifted it to cup her softness. The first contact sent a fist of tension through her and Ashe's head went back as she bit off a whimper. Just the feeling of Mystral's fingers on her had broken some barrier she'd cherished for far too long. Mystral bowed down and held Ashe in both hands. She reverently kissed the aching hard nubs, first one then the other, her lips hot on Ashe even through the fabric.

Ripples of arousal pounded through her. A great, slow heat was building deep in her belly and Ashe couldn't stand it anymore. She moved so her lips were just brushing Mystral's ear and whispered, "You're making me crazy. Get up here and kiss me."

"I wanted this for so long, I don't want it to be over too quickly," Mystral said with a catch in her voice that seared a raw streak through Ashe's heart.

"You get more than one chance," Ashe said. She shifted under Mystral's weight as the growing pressure within her became almost painful in its intensity. "I may be forty, but I still have enough stamina to keep up with you."

"In that case..." With a low chuckle, Mystral crawled her body up Ashe's. She tangled her long fingers in Ashe's hair before she tenderly and languidly pressed her lips to Ashe's.

The touch she'd been aching for ignited Ashe. She growled in frustration as Mystral dropped tiny kisses over her, never lingering for longer than an instant. Her tongue swiped gently over Ashe's lower lip and she was away again, dusting kisses down Ashe's throat.

"Dammit, Mystral! I'm not made of glass," Ashe gritted.

She surged forward to catch Mystral around the waist and push her back against the cushioned-covered armrest. Mystral let out a happy yelp at the abrupt change and went willingly. Ashe brought her mouth down over Mystral's in a crushing, hungry kiss. Her hands swept down to cradle Mystral's firm backside over the scratchy material of her skirt.

Under the onslaught, Mystral held back nothing. She pulled Ashe's body between her spread legs and opened her mouth to Ashe's insistent intrusion. Their bodies rocked together and the kiss got sloppy and ravenous. Mystral gave a moan deep in her throat as Ashe plundered her mouth. The air was thick with the sounds of their fevered breathing and the smack of hungry lips as they crashed together and parted, only to meet again as if neither could bear to be apart. Ashe couldn't get enough. Until she'd tasted Mystral's lips, Ashe had never been one for prolonged kissing. Now, however, she loved having Mystral's mouth on hers and didn't want to stop.

After a long, wet interlude of heated lips and searching tongues, Mystral broke the kiss and threw her head back. Ashe used that opportunity to latch onto the skin of Mystral's throat. The heady tang of Mystral's sweat filled her senses.

"This is so good." Mystral's voice hummed through Ashe's entire body as she said, "I love you, Ashe."

The words sent a jolt through Ashe that must have resonated through Mystral as well because she reached down and brought Ashe up to face her. "I

don't expect you to say it back just because I did," she said in a breathless rush. "And I want you to know I'm not going anywhere. I can wait. Just let me say it again. I love you."

The admission was so clear and so simple that Ashe caught her breath. Not able to find the words, Ashe let her body do the speaking for her and leaned down to capture Mystral's lips in another long, deep kiss. The heat she felt resonating from the secret spot between Mystral's thighs echoed in her own. She was teetering on the edge.

Even though her body screamed for her to continue, Ashe pulled away. She caught up Mystral's hand in hers and placed it over her heart. Their fingers twined together.

"Mystral, you don't know what you do to me," Ashe said. Her chest heaved with her deep, gasping breaths. She felt her own heartbeat thundering through their clasped hands. "Are you okay with where this is going? If you want to stop, you're going to have to tell me right now."

"Oh hell no," Mystral said with a wicked gleam in her eyes. "Don't you dare stop what you're doing."

Ashe swallowed the waves of desire that welled up from the look in Mystral's eyes as she gazed up at her, lips swollen and wet.

"All right, I won't."

She had to stop speaking as Mystral sat up and pulled them together for another kiss.

"Stay with me tonight," Mystral whispered against her mouth.

Ashe just nodded.

"Get up then. I want you in my bed." The decisive tone sparked a shockwave of desire in Ashe. Mystral's gaze didn't waver as she said, "I'm going to give you a proper loving and I don't want that to happen on this sofa. At least not the first one."

The reality of what was happening hit Ashe hard. Once she crossed that room and lay down on Mystral's bed, there would be no going back—which was perfectly fine with Ashe. There was no other direction she wanted to go. Aware of Mystral's eyes on her, Ashe stood on trembling legs and reached for her belt buckle.

"Let me get that," Mystral said in a husky purr.

In the span of a few heartbeats, Ashe was stripped down to nothing more than her boxer briefs, sprawled out on the soft bedcover. Mystral sat on the edge of the low bed with her back to Ashe. She looked back over one shoulder for an instant before she pulled the clasps of her bustier open and lowered her head as she yanked off the sheer mesh top. Ashe caught her breath, once more mesmerized by the tattoo and the enticing curves under it. Still facing away from her, Mystral rose to her knees and took off her skirt and stockings. She finished by sliding her panties over her hips and down her long legs.

"Beautiful," Ashe whispered as if speaking aloud would break the spell and the vision of perfect beauty before her would vanish.

She shook with the need to touch Mystral, to claim her body and make her cry out in ecstasy. Desperate to feel Mystral with her entire skin, Ashe surged

forward. She wrapped her arms around Mystral's waist and pressed herself fully against Mystral's bare back. The shock of skin on skin drove all reason from her mind and Ashe gave a hungry growl as she sucked and tongued the delicate skin of Mystral's neck. Under Ashe's mouth, Mystral's breath hitched. She started to rock back against Ashe.

"Touch me," Mystral panted.

Mystral dragged Ashe's hands up to cup her breasts. With a moan of longing, Ashe held her for an instant and marveled at the heavy softness before she found Mystral's tight nipples and circled them with her fingertips. As they pebbled and knotted under her touch, a wet thickness welled up between her legs. She couldn't hold back any more. Ashe spread her knees and straddled Mystral's hips. She arched forward and back, moving along with Mystral. Her breath came hard and fast as she ground herself between Mystral's hip bones.

Suddenly Mystral turned and pounced. Ashe found herself flat on her back, legs spread with Mystral lying between them. The feeling of Mystral on top of her with almost nothing between them was intoxicating. Ashe had never felt so helpless or exposed. She arched back with a groan.

Mystral dropped a series of hot kisses over Ashe's face and throat, then she stopped and pulled away. She studied Ashe's expression and said, "Let me know if there's anything you don't allow." She brushed a bright wave of hair from her face with a slightly awkward expression Ashe found completely endearing. Mystral hoisted herself up on her hands and continued, "It's just, um, I've only been with more femme types and I don't want to do anything that, you know..."

"That bruises my fragile butch ego?" Ashe reached up and trailed a finger over Mystral's lower lip. Her mind was full of what she wanted to do with those lips and what she wanted them to do to her. "Sweetheart, nobody has ever made me feel the way you do. Nobody has ever made me want to do the things you do." Nervously, Ashe wet her lower lip. "So that means I'm all right if you want to top me. Very all right."

"So old school, but so fucking hot," Mystral said in a low voice. She reached down and tugged at the waistband on Ashe's boxers. "I want these off. Now. I want to see you and touch you. God Ashe, I want to know how you taste and I want to know how you come. I want to hear you begging me for more. And I'll give you everything you want."

Ashe caught her breath in absolute awe. Lily had been right about one thing anyway. She let Mystral strip her bare and ended up with both hands trapped over her head and Mystral pressing down on her. Ashe threw her head back in pleasure as Mystral moved against her. While Mystral held her hands in a crushing grip, Ashe wrapped her legs around Mystral's hips, drunk on the feeling of Mystral's supple body against hers. She surrendered completely as she met Mystral's deep, searching kiss.

Mystral made good on her promises and took Ashe to heights she had never believed she could reach. Then Ashe paid her back in full and the advantages of being in a double top relationship became clear to both of them.

What felt like a lifetime later, they snuggled together in Mystral's crumpled bed, wrapped around each other like a pair of octopi. After they'd gotten enough of activities in the bed, they'd moved onto the sofa, then the kitchen and had ended up in a very entertaining shower. Ashe had never been more thankful for soundproofing, especially when Mystral demonstrated how talented she was with her double-jointed tongue. Cradled in warmth, Ashe felt sated and more relaxed than she had ever been in her entire life, but she was concerned about Mystral who had lapsed into silence as they'd gotten back into bed.

"Are you okay, sweetheart? Do you think you'll be able to sleep?" Ashe asked and dropped a quick kiss to Mystral's damp hair.

"I don't know," Mystral said. She laughed softly and snuggled into Ashe's arms. "You completely tired my body out but my mind's still processing everything that happened today."

"Understandable," Ashe said. "It's been a rather eventful day."

"You can say that again." Mystral sighed. "I want to forget all the bad stuff, just for tonight. I'll have lots of time to think later, but I want to enjoy our first night together with no shadows."

"How about this," Ashe said. "I'll tell you a story that will certainly put you to sleep. Just close your eyes and listen to my voice."

"Okay, as long as it's not the Perverted Adventures of Horny McSluttybutt or else I can't guarantee either of us will sleep tonight."

Ashe had to laugh at that. "No, it's not that kind of story.

Have you ever heard of BEPS?"

Mystral shook her head.

"It stands for base erosion and profit sharing," Ashe said. She settled back against the pillows and stroked one hand gently up and down Mystral's back. The well-laundered T-shirt was soft against her skin. Mystral's chest rose and fell, pressing against her with every breath. "It's a planning strategy where a corporation with branches in different countries shifts income from a high-tax area to a low-tax area so they can avoid paying the higher rate of tax. While it benefits the company as a whole, the practice is generally detrimental to the..." Ashe let her tone fall into a low, gentle tone as she explained the intricacies of the tax scheme. She hadn't even had time to get into the various loopholes when a tiny snore indicated Mystral had indeed been lulled into sleep.

Ashe leaned down and gave her one last kiss, just above the ear.

"Good night Mystral," she whispered. Ashe dropped her tone to barely more than a breath as she said, "And I love you too."

Epilogue

WITH ONE HAND, Ashe tilted the rearview mirror and regarded her reflection. The blood-spattered apparition that looked back at her earned a nod of satisfaction. She glanced down and adjusted the stethoscope hanging around her neck. After a moment's pause, she opened a third button on her tightfitting shirt. A freezing rush of air greeted Ashe as she opened the door of her truck. The sky was clear and clogged with stars. The late-November wind held the bite of snow. She hugged the white coat to herself before she stepped out. She braced herself against the cold and muttered under her breath as she rummaged around in the backseat. A minute later, she emerged with a bulging supermarket bag.

She hustled up the driveway and the first thing she saw was Kieran's dead body lying on the porch. She paused and took in the scene. His legs were bent at strange angles and he was bloody and gnawed-looking. His shirt was ripped to shreds. Red gunk spilled out of it.

Suddenly he shifted, a gawky, unnatural rictus. His bloodcrusted mouth opened and an unholy groan emerged, "Come in, friend. We have drinks in the kitchen and cupcakes on the table. I see you've brought the popcorn."

"That I have," Ashe said. She shivered and hopped from one foot to the other. "It's freezing out here, you crazy zombie. How long were you lying there?"

"Since Yakkun spotted your headlights." Kieran sat up and held out one hand to allow Ashe to haul him to his feet. As he stretched out his limbs, spaghetti rained down on the porch from his shirt. "Aw shit," he said. "Liam's gonna kill me. His grandma made that welcome mat!"

"Give him a few mind-blowing orgasms and all will be roses," Ashe told him. "That approach has worked on me a number of times. Just ask Mystral."

"Good idea," Kieran said. He opened the door and gestured like a butler of the undead. "This way please, madam."

The warmth of the room welcomed Ashe and she rubbed life back into her arms. She answered the volley of greetings and looked around for Mystral without success. Attesting to her presence, the table was indeed decorated with a large number of cup-cakes. They were frosted in a variety of disgusting colors, most of them dripped with red or green sauce, and Ashe saw more than a few eyeball-like things serving as garnish.

She had just handed the popcorn over to Yakkun when Mystral came pelting into the room. She froze in the doorway, eyes wide and face wondrous. Ashe looked back at her. Mystral was as gorgeous as ever in ripped overalls and a plaid shirt. Her bright hair was stuffed into a baseball cap and she was similarly bloodspattered.

"Oh my freaking God," Mystral said. She made no effort to hide the fact she was checking Ashe out. "You came as Doctor Hope! I can't believe it!"

"What? I know she's your favorite character."

"You didn't think I'd dress up as her?" Mystral asked.

"No. I knew you'd choose Billy," Ashe told her. She straightened her white coat with a satisfied smirk.

"How did you know that?" Mystral walked around Ashe and graced her with an all-over appreciative look.

"Because after he gets turned, instead of braaaaains Billy says boooooobs," Ashe explained. She turned around and caught Mystral in mid-ogle. She reached out and lifted Mystral's chin with a gentle finger. She dropped her voice and said, "And I happen to know for a fact that everybody is shamelessly eavesdropping so I think we should continue this discussion at a later time."

"Good idea," Mystral said. She made shooing motions and the members of the small crowd who were hovering around them with interested expressions disbanded.

Ashe found a spot for herself and Mystral on one end of Kieran's sofa. He and Shauna came around with beers and sodas for everyone while their boyfriends helped Yakkun hook up the VCR and projector. Once everything was in place, Gus hit the lights and they started the movie. Mystral and Yakkun threw themselves down in front of the screen and kept up a non-stop commentary while everyone else ate zombie cupcakes and tried not to get too grossed out by all the splatter in the movie.

During the intermission, Ashe went into the kitchen to get some more ice for her cola and was surprised by Mystral coming up behind her.

"Hey foxy," she murmured and nuzzled her face into the crook of Ashe's neck. "Has anyone told you that you rock a white coat?"

"Not before now," Ashe said. She turned around and gathered Mystral up against her. "I'm glad you like it."

"Ooh yeah, I love it," Mystral said. She picked up Ashe's drink and took a sip. Then she fished out a ice cube and drew her tongue over it in a suggestive way that had Ashe gaping before the cube slipped from her fingers. "Oops!"

"I'll get that," Ashe said. She let go of Mystral and bent down to scoop up the fallen cube. She jumped as a foot landed lightly on her shoulder. As cold water leaked through her fingers, Ashe looked up. Mystral was leaning back against the counter with an evil smirk on her face. Very deliberately, she turned her ball cap around backwards.

"Stand up," Mystral said in her intoxicating, husky voice.

Very aware of the weight on her shoulder, Ashe straightened her knees. She expected Mystral to drop her foot after a moment, but she just met Ashe's eyes and stayed in place. Ashe drew in an amazed breath as she rose to her full height and Mystral's leg was extended in a vertical splits against her.

"There are a few benefits," Mystral said and trailed a finger down the opened front of Ashe's shirt, "to dating an ex-gymnast."

"That's for sure," Ashe said in a breathless croak. Mystral's fingers tangled in her hair and she pulled Ashe closer. Mystral nipped at Ashe's lower lip then swiped her tongue over the place she'd bitten. Their lips came together after that, hard and fast without any space between them. Mystral trailed one hand down Ashe's back

and over her hip before she slipped up the front of Ashe's shirt.

Ashe freed a hand and grasped Mystral's. She guided Mystral to lay her palm over her rapidly beating heart.

"This is for you," Ashe whispered between kisses. She drew Mystral's fingers lower to brush over her hardened nipple. "And this too."

"Oh, wow," Mystral panted into Ashe's mouth. "I won't be able to concentrate on the movie after this."

Ashe just shrugged and slowly kissed a line down Mystral's neck. Desire filled Ashe. Her breaths got deep and ragged and she was acutely aware of Mystral's body against hers.

Mystral kept her hand on Ashe's breast and kneaded her flesh with evident enjoyment. Ashe bit down on the moan of need as she rocked her hips forward. She knew they would have to stop soon, but she was enjoying the position she was in far too much.

A heavy thud brought Ashe back to reality and she pulled away from Mystral to see Gus lying on the floor, sock feet in the air and both hands over his eyes.

"I didn't see anything!" he said.

Ashe went over to Gus and prodded him with her foot. "Get up. We were just getting some ice."

"Is that what people call it nowadays?" Gus sat up and extended a hand. Ashe grabbed it and roughly yanked him to his feet. He treated them to a toothy grin. "How about I help you ladies 'get some ice'—ow!" His finger-quote gesture ended abruptly as Ashe unleashed a punch on him. He grabbed his shoulder. "Kidding! Just kidding!"

"What are you doing here?"

"I lost the toss so I had to come in and tell you intermission's over. Come back to the party and we'll start part two."

Ashe just grunted at him. Gus backed out of the kitchen with both hands up. With a frustrated sigh, Mystral threw her baseball cap onto the counter and raked her hands through her hair. Ashe stifled a smile and turned to leave the room.

"By the way," Mystral's voice stopped Ashe in the doorway. She stopped and looked back to where Mystral was standing with her hands twisted together. "You know the offer I got from Precipice Records? The one from the scout who heard my demo at Rave by the Docks? I just wanted you to be the first to know I decided to take the deal."

"You did? That's great!" Ashe rushed back into the kitchen. She grabbed Mystral in a crushing hug and spun her around. She paused and looked at Mystral. "I hope you don't get tired of your boring old accountant girlfriend once you've become a famous dance club superstar."

"Hardly," Mystral said. She drew a finger down Ashe's face and traced her lower lip. "No matter what happens, I will never get tired of you. And in five minutes, Pierre is going to call me with an 'emergency' and I'll have to drop everything and race to help him out." She nodded with a studious expression. "Since I came on the bus, I will need to ask for your assistance in driving me. Although I'm afraid we may get lost and end up at my place. In

my bed, specifically. Think you'd be up for that?"

"Absolutely," Ashe said. She shifted against the frustrated heat between her legs and glanced down at the tacky fake-blood drenched shirt. "I can't wait to get out of this costume."

Mystral raised her eyes from her cell phone and said, "I can't wait to get you out of it either."

With a laugh, Ashe swept Mystral up in a sweet, brief kiss. She was complete. She was redeemed. The endless possibilities of the future stretched out in front of her.

Phoenix wasn't the only one to rise from the ashes.

The End

About the Author

Mildred Gail Digby has a BSc in geology, however Takarazuka, pachinko, and no laws against drinking beer outside lured her to Japan where she currently lives. Her favorite thing to do is add lesbians to any situation and make a novel about it. She dreams one day of working as a professional beer taster and devotes a good deal of her time honing her skills in that area which, to an uninformed outsider, appears to be simply drinking a lot of beer.

She shares her non-angst-filled life with her wife of nearly ten years where the most excitement they have is deciding where to eat and forgetting where they parked their bicycles. Mildred is a sucker for oddball characters, opposites attract, and women getting what (and who) they want. She will squeeze a happy ending out of anything and still blushes when she writes love scenes.

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