



MANDY M. ROTH

MISFIT

**IN MIDDLE
AMERICA**

MISFIT IN MIDDLE AMERICA

By

Mandy M. Roth

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Dedication:

To my mother who never once stopped pushing me to dream regardless what I was doing, and who told me that little girls can grow up to be whatever they want to be.

To my stepfather, who dedicated thirty years to law enforcement and who has been a member of our family for eighteen of those. And to my father whose scary movie marathons helped me to grow into the freak I am today.

Warning: This story contains graphic violence, explicit sex, adult situations, extreme gore, and is not for the faint of heart.

Chapter 1

I turned and looked at Jonathon Williams. I'd known him since I'd come to North Maple Ridge ten years earlier. I never dreamt that accepting the job of Chief of Police in a tiny, rural Midwest community would amount to this. If Jonathon's brother, Robert, hadn't been a witness to the crime, I'm not sure I'd have believed the body was Jonathon's.

The boy had grown into a man before my eyes. It seemed like only yesterday that he was coming over to build a fort with my son, Justin. I could still hear the two of them smacking sticks together, pretending to be defending the universe from the evil invaders.

Jonathon had been two weeks shy of his nineteenth birthday when he died. His life had been senselessly cut short, and it was my job to figure out who did it. I cursed silently to myself as I walked back to my jeep. Some days I really hated my job.

"Chief, do you need to see anything else, or can we bag 'im up?"

I turned and looked at Officer Braun. He was new to police work. He'd only been in it a year now. The pay here was decent, but he could have done much better in the city. His father had been an officer with our department, and that meant something. Braun looked a little green. I couldn't say I blamed him. The prospect of bagging up a body that's in pieces will make the best of men fall to their knees. This wasn't our first, and I feared it wouldn't be our last, so I nodded my head for him to finish up. Might as well learn to handle it now, I thought to myself as I walked away.

I opened my jeep door to head to the Williams' house to inform them of their son's death. Robert would need their support now, and I was pretty sure Mr. Williams would be able to offer it. Mrs. Williams, on the other hand, would more than likely be too distraught over the loss of her oldest boy to be much good to Robert. The boy had managed to survive a brutal attack and make it to the highway to flag down help. The paramedics were amazed that he was doing as well as he was. He'd lost a ton of blood. If he survived the night, it'd be a miracle.

"Excuse me, Chief Sisel, can I ask you a few questions?" I heard Beth Murray's voice before I saw her. I thought about jumping in my jeep and driving off, but that would only add to the hysteria. The last thing I wanted to do was be cornered by her. Beth was the town's lead reporter. Come to think of it, she was the town's only reporter.

She'd been born and raised here, and she knew everyone. I knew that she had gone to some fancy college on the east coast for a while, but after graduation, she headed home. I wasn't a native here, but I knew the area's appeal. I also knew that in Beth's world I didn't exist. I was a primary source for fact verification and that was it. If the town had had automated police records I was sure she'd never bother to speak to me, she'd skip me and look it up herself.

"You can ask. Doesn't mean I'll answer."

"I'd expect nothing less, Chief," she said, smiling. "I've learned to lower my expectations when dealing with you." I wasn't sure if she was being serious or not.

I watched her coming toward me with her blue jeans and tan sweater on. My eyes scanned the length of her body. I wished that she'd wear clothes that fit her better. I'd accidentally seen her once wearing a tiny black bikini. She was sunbathing in her backyard and I had responded to a call about a missing dog. I leaned over the fence to see if he'd run that way and found Beth lying there with the strings undone, leaving her pink nipples partially exposed to me. I could still remember the curve that her hip took, and the way her navel wanted to poke out, but didn't. Maybe if she showed off her figure a little bit more it'd hide that the fact that she had some serious personality quirks. I doubted it though.

By the looks of her now, she'd been awakened out of a deep sleep to try to get the scoop. I had to laugh when I saw tiny wisps of her blond hair come loose from its hair tie. During the day, she was always so put-together, but in the middle of the night, she was as real as the rest of us. That was good to know, although I had fantasized many a night that she slept in tiny black silk panties with a garter belt and fish net hose. But hey, what guy didn't think about that?

Beth was nine years my junior, but that didn't stop me from thinking about her--obsessing to be exact. Karen, my wife, had been gone since Justin was three. She said that we'd married too young, and that she needed her freedom. I agree we did marry too young. We were both just eighteen when she got pregnant. She saw it as the end of our lives. I viewed it as the beginning. It was hard for the first couple of years.

I'd enrolled at the Academy and was taking classes all day and working security at night. When I wasn't at school I was working. It was hard for us, but I knew it'd be better on us in the long run. Two weeks after I started my first police job, Karen walked out on me. She dropped Justin

off at the sitter's and I hadn't seen her since. Now, Justin was about to turn eighteen and getting ready to graduate, and I was chief of police. Maybe it had been for the best that she'd left.

As I watched Beth come closer to me, I wondered why I wasn't dating more. I wasn't old by anyone's standards. I'd just turned thirty-six and had a better build than most of my son's friends. Still, I didn't feel right dating. Karen was gone, and I didn't love her anymore, but I'd never gotten a divorce. At least I hadn't yet. It hadn't seemed important to me. My job consumed most of my time, and Justin was too high a priority to make room for a woman. I wasn't a monk either. I'd had sex since Karen walked out on me, but I'd never had a relationship. Until Beth, I never thought that I wanted one. Something about that feisty little blond made me want to force her to commit.

My mind raced back to a week earlier when I'd run into the city for a seminar. It was a two-day planned event that left me having to get a hotel room for the night. A few of us had decided to go to a bar for a drink. I ended up meeting a hot little number whose boyfriend was out of town for the weekend. I could still feel her lips around my cock. She was one of those women with extra full lips. The kind that make you wonder what sort of work she had done to achieve such perfection.

She spent most of the night on her knees making remarks about how 'gifted' I was. I grinned thinking about it. She'd been one of the rare few who begged me to come all over her face. I did, of course.

I tried to exchange names and numbers with her, but she'd been the one to insist on not doing it. Turns out her boyfriend was really a husband and she was just looking for a good time. I wasn't into being a home wrecker, and it had been eating at me since I'd returned home. I should have been pleased to finally get some action. I'd been on a two-year dry spell. It was hard to find someone willing to have a one-night stand in North Maple Ridge. The town was small, and I didn't need my character to come under assassination for banging the local women. Besides, I'd had my eye on one local since I'd arrived, and I wasn't even sure she knew my first name.

Beth shot me an odd look. I forgot that I was still staring at her. I looked away quickly and tried to pretend that I hadn't been ogling her. She stumbled right in front of me and I reached my hands out to catch her. I felt her toned arms in my hands, she moved slightly, leaving my fingers resting on her full breasts. I drew a breath in and let my eyelids fall lazily closed. It was all I could do to keep from going instantly hard. The last

thing I needed was to sprout a full erection while her body was pressed against mine. The woman already had a low enough opinion of me. I didn't need to add to it any.

"Damn, why can't these things happen on flat land?" she said under her breath, looking away from me and to the crime scene.

"Well, those of us with hearts wish they wouldn't happen at all."

She looked up at me. I knew what she meant, yet I put her in the hot seat. I could tell I'd caught her off guard. Damn. I hadn't wanted to make it any harder to be around her. It already seemed like the battle lines were drawn the moment we laid eyes on each other. It was her job to try to pry information out of me, and mine to keep everyone's private matters just that, private.

Beth pulled her body away from my grip a little slower than I would have expected. The edge of my mouth curved upwards. I wasn't grinning so much as I was sneering. I had to shake it off. I didn't want to be that guy, the one that creeps women out.

I did my best to push the thoughts of fucking Beth out of my head and looked around the scene. We had the place lit pretty well, considering it was in the middle of nowhere and at night, but it wasn't the same as daylight. I could clearly make out what was going on and my men had things under control. Beth let out a small noise when she saw one of the blood soaked sheets laying over a piece of the body. I turned to make sure she was okay. I didn't need anyone else throwing up all over my crime scene. The artificial light reflected off her eyes. I knew from sneaking peeks at her during a town meeting that her eyes were blue. I wondered if she ever bothered to notice mine. I had my doubts.

Beth seemed to live an active social life. She was definitely different from me in that respect. I'd seen her around town with her new boyfriend. He was one of those guys who like to look like they pumped gas for a living. Somehow, he'd managed to make the grunge look work for him. I'd never gotten onto that bandwagon. I liked people to know that I showered and cared what I looked like. This guy that Beth had been shacking up with was from the city and more than likely a musician of some kind. No, I didn't measure up in that area. I couldn't carry a tune to save my life. I could carry her if need be, though. My six-foot tall body was fit. Running every day saw to that, but I'd never seemed to be able to catch her eye. Sure, I managed to catch enough backlashes from her to keep me up at night, but that was it.

"So what do we have?" she asked.

I looked over at the area marked off with yellow tape. What we had was a set of murders. Three to be exact. They were all related, without a doubt. We had some psycho running around, tearing the youth of our community to bits--that's what we had. I didn't think it wise to put it in those terms, so I softened it up a bit.

"We have another one."

Her eyebrow rose. "Another one? You mean, like Becca and Christian?"

I nodded my head and thought of Becca Townsend and Christian Martin. They had been the first two murder victims. Three weeks ago, we'd found Becca's body near the edge of the river. She had been in the same state as Jonathon--decapitated, disemboweled, and then mauled. It was still up in the air if she'd been raped. There wasn't a lot of her left, and we'd had thunderstorms blow through the area the night she was killed.

A week after that, Christian's body was found further out in the woods. He'd just been accepted to State College with a full ride for football. He was the Martin's only child, and the last I knew, they were planning on moving closer to the college. Guess that wouldn't be necessary now. I hadn't spoken with them since I delivered the news of their son's death. I'm sure they blamed me for it happening. No, I hadn't been the one to commit the act, but I had been the one who neglected to catch the murderer after Becca's death.

Three gruesome murders in three short weeks had drawn the attention of the Feds. I'd received a call from them yesterday, letting me know that they'd be sending some men down. I welcomed the help and was happy to see more resources coming in. I think my positive tone had caught them off guard.

"Who was it?" Beth asked.

I frowned at her. She knew I couldn't release that until the next of kin was notified. She looked over at Braun kneeling in the bushes throwing up.

"Its bad then?" she asked. I looked down at her and wanted to shake her. Hell yeah, it was bad. One of the three worst crime scenes I'd ever seen. It wasn't her fault. "Off the record," she said, looking worried.

Now that was one I hadn't heard from her before. Beth liked to be the one who kept the town up to date. Promising to stay off the record was a big step for her.

"One of the Williams boys," I said.

She grabbed her mouth as a tiny gasp came out. I'd forgotten that her mother was a Williams. That made the boys her cousins. I reached out my hand to her. She moved past it and seized hold of my waist. Her hands slid up my back and she pulled on me tightly. I stood there, too shocked to hug her back, with my arms out in the air. I looked like I was being held up. I'd waited for ages to get her this close to me and then just stood there looking like Deputy Doolittle.

"Oh God, Adam. Aunt Maggie, does she know yet?"

I had to swallow. In all the years I'd known Beth, she'd only ever called me Chief Sisel. Hearing my name on her lips was magical, in lieu of the events surrounding the last few weeks.

"No. I'm on my way over to tell her and John now."

"I'm coming, too," she said, as she ran around to the other side of my jeep. I didn't have the heart to turn her away. They were her family, and if she was promising to keep this off the record, then it was fine by me. Besides, having her close wasn't turning out to be altogether that bad.

Chapter 2

Maggie and John Williams had taken the news the best they could. Their concern went to Roger, understandably, and I had a squad car come pick them up to take them to the hospital. Beth stayed there to contact other family members and to arrange for Jonathon's funeral.

I made it home in time to catch a shower. It'd been a long night and I was looking forward to washing the grime off and to making an attempt to remove the images of Jon's body from my brain. I turned the water to just this side of too hot and climbed in. I let it run over my neck and

shoulders. It was as I expected, instantly soothing, but void of any real therapeutic value. The only good it did was to allow me time to think more about Beth. I'd never met a woman before who I wanted to choke equally as much as I wanted to fuck. Thank God, my temperament's good.

Just thinking about the smell of her hair when she hugged me made my body stiffen up. I lathered my hands and went down to relieve the frustrated rod between my legs. It ached to be touched by her fingertips, to be cupped by Beth's sweet hands, and to be buried deep in her mouth. I grabbed hold of my cock, wrapped my fingers around it, and methodically stroked. Visions of Beth's naked body kept me in the mood and the soap worked wonders for easy workability. I had to steady myself with my free hand as my butt clenched and I projected come out and at the wall. Tiny droplets of warm water beat down on it, cleaning it as it went. That's what I liked most about showers; they washed away all the evidence.

I got dressed and headed down the stairs to see Justin before he headed off to school. I stood over the stove, carefully cracking eggs. I couldn't eat a thing, but Justin might be hungry. I heard him shuffling around upstairs, then heard the stereo come on. The sound of screeching guitars and men screaming filled the house. I didn't care for my son's choice of music any more than he cared for mine. Once, I had told him that I liked Pink Floyd and his response was "Pink who?" Yeah, I knew then not to bother with using music as a bridge between the generations.

"Hungry?" I asked, as I heard him bouncing down the stairs. I'd been on him since he was little to take them a step at a time. He was always in such a hurry that he took them four steps at a time. I tried it once, just to see if I could be as young and full of life as he was. I ended up in a soft cast for several weeks with a lovely pair of crutches to go along with it.

"No, I'm not hungry. I'll grab a bag of chips for later though," he said.

I reluctantly turned to see what he was planning to wear to school today. It was as bad as I feared. He was wearing a pair of cut-off jeans over black tights. Black boots and a matching black T-shirt finished off the ensemble. I didn't bother to look for earrings. I knew he had at least six. Thankfully, he'd stopped wearing the leather-studded dog collar around his neck. The heavily lined eyes and the dark lipstick were a little over the top, but I was learning to make exceptions. Despite his looks, and his sometimes odd behavior, he was a good kid. His grades had always been top notch and he didn't get in any trouble.

The good people of North Maple Ridge had never really warmed to Justin. He'd always been a little different from their athletically inclined offspring. He'd taken little interest in sports, focusing more on art and writing. He was planning to attend an Art Institute in the fall. I couldn't be happier for him. He was good at it. He came by it honestly. Karen had been an artist. I wondered if she'd be as proud of him as I was.

I convinced him to take a few bites of breakfast and to turn his stereo down. I waited for him out in the jeep. As much as I wanted to sit and chat with him, I knew it'd never happen. The harder I tried, the more he pushed me away. We'd spent year's fine-tuning our little routine. It worked well for us, and that's all that really mattered. Part of our day-to-day activity included Justin catching a ride with me. We lived just on the outside of town, and Justin was adamant that he would not be caught dead on the school bus. With the recent rash of murders, I was fine with taking him into town every morning. The high school was just down the street from the department, so it worked out well.

I parked the jeep and said good-bye to him. I watched him walking toward the high school with his Walkman blaring. Mrs. Milton, the town's busybody, was sitting outside her flower shop watching him closely, shaking her head in obvious disapproval. Justin gave her the finger and I put my head down and walked into the station. I'd have a talk with him when I got home about respecting his elders, even if they were a pain in the ass.

People around here didn't trust Justin. About a year ago, some local pets came up missing. We eventually found them dead and mutilated out near the edge of my property. This didn't prove much to me, since I owned over one hundred acres of woodland that surrounded my home. This, however, was proof positive that Justin was into the occult and a Devil worshipper in their eyes. It didn't matter that Justin was a state away, visiting Karen's parents when it happened. No, I still had to go down to town hall and talk them out of their witch-hunt. Beth had been a huge help in that matter, which had shocked the hell out of me. She had done some research and found that animal killings had been going on throughout the surrounding counties as well, and unless Justin was in the habit of stealing cars or flying planes, he couldn't have possibly been in all those places at one time.

The station was quiet most of the morning. Most of my men looked like they needed some sleep and a shower. In truth, they probably did. I'd told Braun and a few of the other responding officers to take some personal

days. I needed to put a call in to Dr. Singer to see if he could make some time to talk with my guys. They'd seen enough carnage to drive them insane, and it was my job to prevent that from happening.

I sat by my computer with a half-eaten turkey sandwich staring me in the face. I'd looked through every database I could get my hands on. I had a few leads, but none were serious. One dated back fifteen years. Bakersville, two towns over, had a body turn up with a similar MO. The identity of the victim remained a mystery, they knew that it was a female in her early twenties, but that was it. No missing person's reports had been filed and no clues had turned up. It sounded a bit strange to me so I put a call in to the sheriff over there to see if I could look over their records.

"Umm...Chief, there's a man lookin' for you. Say's he's with the FBI. Should I show him in, or...?"

I looked up to see Officer Finch standing in my doorway. The man was a buck o' five soaking wet. I still don't know how he ever made up his mind to enter law enforcement. He'd been with the department since before I came aboard and had always been a hard worker. Still, after ten years he seemed shy around me. The man acted as if I were liable to deck him at the drop of a hat.

"Sure, Finch. Thanks."

"No problem, Sir."

I waited as Finch showed a tall man into my office. The man wore dark gray slacks and a white dress shirt and tie. I suddenly felt underdressed in my tan slacks and navy polo shirt. I stood and extended my hand out to him.

"I'm Chief Adam Sisel. Make yourself comfortable." I motioned for him to have a seat. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please." He and I both looked up at Finch. He took the hint and went to fetch some fresh coffee. "I'm Agent Rudolph."

I nodded at him and pulled the case files from my upper desk drawer. "This is all I have, Agent Rudolph."

He leaned forward and put his hand out to open one of the files. "Rudy's fine. Has Forensics gotten everything back to you on the first body?"

"Becca's info is not all in yet." He gave me an odd look of surprise. "We don't have that kind of technology and resources around here. I've had to have everything sent down to Perrysburg." He let out a small "hmm" and thumbed through the files.

He stopped on the crime scene photos. Finch came in with our coffee and Agent Rudy looked like he wasn't in the mood for caffeine any longer. I'd have thought big-time federal agents were used to blood and gore. Guess I was wrong. I watched him loosen his collar, and bent down to finish the rest of my lunch. Agent Rudy took one look at me biting into my turkey sandwich and high tailed it out of my office in search of the men's room.

I used my napkin to not only wipe the mustard from my lip, but to wipe the smile from my face. As much as I hated to be petty, this was my case. I tried not to stoop so low as to point that out, but I was considering it until I heard Finch talking to someone in the lobby. A woman's voice rose above the bulletproof glass and sounded remarkably close.

"I know who did it. That there boy of his...he's protectin' him. I know he's got the devil in him. Thinks cause he's the Chief that no one will look in his boy's direction, but I do."

Damn. I recognized Mrs. Milton's voice and I knew the boy in question was Justin. She'd been point man in the attempt to get him put away for the animal mutilations. I headed out to see what she was rambling on about now.

The woman was in her early sixties and stood maybe five feet tall. Her hair looked bluish white, and her skin was a weathered light tan. From the outside, she looked like a sweet, innocent grandmother. On the inside, she was as mean as a rabid dog. She saw me coming and pointed at me.

"See, here he comes. He's gonna try and smooth things over. In my day, we beat the bad out of the children. We didn't sweep it under the rug and let 'em run around looking like the devil."

Finch looked at me as he tried in vain to hold little Mrs. Milton back. I nodded to him and he stepped out of her way. She came barreling at me with her tiny finger stuck out.

"I know what he is. I've got a cousin down in Rivers Edge, she told me about that boy's momma. She was up to no good, too. They say that the devil came collectin' her years ago too."

I felt like I'd been slapped. Mentioning Karen was more than I needed to hear today. I wondered who Mrs. Milton's cousin was in Rivers Edge. I knew what people there thought about Karen. They'd thought that Karen's parents had gotten a bad one when they adopted her. Karen was a wild child. We grew up in the days of spiked hair and punk music. Karen had symbolized every aspect of that. Her rebellion is what attracted me to her in the first place, and it was the main reason she'd abandoned her son and husband. She was a free bird and no one would change that.

"Good morning to you, too, Mrs. Milton. What can I help you with this fine day?" I asked.

She stopped and looked up at me. Her tiny brown eyes locked in, ready to strike. "That boy of yours, he's the one who's doin' all this. He's the one that called the Devil up from the ground. God can't help the child now. He's a bad seed, just like his momma...making them obscene hand gestures at me for no reason...that boy..."

I wanted to flip her off myself. "Now, Mrs. Milton, you came in here to accuse my son of being the one behind the...crimes." I couldn't bring myself to say murders. Justin would never be capable of such heinous acts, and I was ready to throw Mrs. Milton out on her plump ass.

"That's right. He's the one you ought to be lookin' at. The way he runs around here in all those chains and that black hair of his."

My hand ran through my hair instinctively. He'd gotten his black hair from me. That hardly made him the Antichrist. I took a step toward her. She backed away quickly.

"Don't touch me! The Devil's your boy. You'll do anything to protect him," she cried out.

Finch reappeared. "Chief, line two is for you. It's the school. They need you to come down. Something about Justin and his art class."

I gave him a nasty look. He could have at least waited until the religious fanatic was out of the station to mention Justin. Mrs. Milton had a look of great satisfaction on her face as Shelly, the dispatcher, led her into another room.

I turned to take the call and ran into Agent Rudy. He'd heard the whole thing. He had his game face on but it spoke volumes. He'd be watching

Justin now. I didn't bother to stop and try to explain. The damage was done. I headed out to grab the phone.

Chapter 3

Four hours later I sat across from Justin at the dinner table. He hadn't said a word to me since I'd picked him up. He didn't have to. His sketchpad lay next to me, unopened. When his principal had shown me what was in it, I had to fight to keep my shock from showing. I opened the black cover reluctantly and watched Justin for a response. He gave none. He sat with his head downward, eating his spaghetti.

I looked at the image of the fur-covered monster coming out of the ground in front of a very naked woman. The naked woman wasn't what bothered me, what bothered me was her incredible likeness to Becca Townsend. Justin had captured her features to a tee. He'd shown her lying on the ground, one hand welcoming the furred demon, while the other was planted between her legs as she readied herself, stroking her clit with a look of sheer joy on her face.

I turned the page, the next sketch showed the beast deep within the woman. Her head was tipped back, a look of pleasure graced her features. I looked at Justin. I'd never before wondered what went through his mind. Seeing this made me start to.

The third sketch was, by far, the worst. It showed the beast clawing away at the woman's stomach, tearing her to shreds. This hit a little too close to home with Becca's murder investigation and the school had thought it disturbing enough to call me. I was thankful that the principal was a friend of mine. He could have gone around me and the whole town would be on Mrs. Milton's crusade to blame Justin for the crimes.

"Justin, I can understand that you have a lot of feelings, concerning the...crimes, but Justin, drawing these? What in God's name possessed you to do that?" I had to fight to maintain an even tone. I was upset with him for feeding into the stereotype of him.

Justin looked at me, then the sketchpad, and shrugged his shoulders. I wanted to smack him off his chair. He had no idea how serious this was. People were scared and they were looking for a quick fix to the problem. They could sleep better at night if someone was locked away, it didn't matter if that someone was guilty or not.

"You've lost friends. It's hard, but..."

He stood up. The table rocked. I caught my glass of water before it tipped over.

"They weren't my friends," he said, as he stormed out the front door.

It was getting dark and I didn't need him roaming around alone. I went to grab my jacket and headed out the front door. I was shocked to see Beth Murray standing there looking out into my side yard.

"What can I help you with Beth?" I wasn't in the mood to deal with an interview, but I was polite nonetheless. She looked over at me. She was dressed in a pink sweater and a pair of gray slacks. Her blond hair hung loose around her shoulders. She looked gorgeous.

"Is he alright?" she asked, again looking off into the side yard.

"Oh, Justin...er...yeah...I guess so."

She turned and came toward me. "That's why I came out. I heard about Mrs. Milton's little display at the station and I heard about Justin's drawings."

Shit, Beth's career was getting information out to the public. This was the last thing I wanted running in the paper. I closed my eyes and counted to ten. My blood pressure rose quickly.

"Adam, I didn't come here for a story. I came for you."

I looked up at her. I didn't know what to say to that. She gave me a weak smile and looked in the direction Justin had run off.

"I thought you could use some moral support, but it looks like you could use some help finding him."

I checked my watch. Sunset was in another hour. As far as we'd been able to determine, the murders had all taken place sometime around three a.m. Justin was a smart boy and would be back long before then. It was

obvious that he was dealing with a lot and he needed some time. I'd give him an hour. Maybe two.

"You want some coffee?" I asked, silently hoping she'd say yes.

"No, but I'd love a beer."

Even better.

I laughed and opened the door for her. I smelled the vanilla scented shampoo she'd used as she walked past. I leaned into it, careful to avoid actually touching her. I knew that she didn't have a clue how much I wanted to run my fingers through her hair, to touch her soft milky white skin, and to feel what it would be like to be buried deep within the recesses of her body. Her attitude toward me did seem to be improving, but I wasn't sure that it'd last.

Chapter 4

After the initial awkwardness of having a woman in my house, I grew comfortable with Beth's presence. We made small talk at first, then moved into more serious issues. She told me about Eric, the guy she'd been dating. He was an aspiring actor who was just here visiting. She'd met him in college and they'd been trying to have a long distance relationship for a few years. His unexpected arrival two weeks ago made her realize how they weren't right for each other. I didn't press the issue with her, but it sounded like Eric had been sent packing.

I was surprised to hear myself talking so openly about Karen to her. My estranged wife wasn't exactly a topic I would have picked to talk about with her, but it felt right.

"Do you miss her?" she asked.

"No, I think that I'm happy she left. I just wish I knew that she was safe. Her own family hasn't heard from her in fifteen years. Justin goes and stays with them for a few weeks every summer. They're good people."

I glanced up at the clock. It was pushing ten. Justin still hadn't returned home. I looked over at Beth. Her cheeks were flushed from the alcohol. "You want me to drive you home?"

She tried to stand up. "No," she said, as she swayed just a bit. She hadn't had that much to drink so I was guessing that the stress of losing her cousin had weighed heavily on her. I stood and steadied her.

"Beth, I can't let you drive yourself...now, I'm not saying that you're drunk, it just wouldn't be very responsible of me to send you out on the roads right now."

She turned into my body and pressed her head to my chest. "I don't want to sleep alone tonight, Adam."

I found myself in the same 'about to be mugged' stance and looked down at her. "Beth...I...umm..." Her tiny fingers ran up and stopped on my lips. She held them there and gave me a stern look.

"Adam, don't stand here and pretend like you don't feel it too." Her voice was strong, yet low. "I tried to fight the way I feel about you, I did. Hell, I even tried to hate you. I'm no good at that, so I was left with ignoring you. It was my only defense, but when I saw you looking at me at the crime scene, I knew...or at least I thought I knew that you felt the same for me." She let out a tiny nervous laugh following her last statement.

I touched her shoulder and let my fingers brush through her long hair. "Beth, I..." I couldn't find the words to tell her that I felt the same for her. My heart was in my throat and I had to swallow hard just to be able to breathe. I did what seemed natural. I bent my head down and kissed her. My gut was tied tight, fully expecting her to reject my advances. Instead, her tongue met mine and circled it with a fiery passion. My fingers laced through her long blond hair, and our bodies pulled closer together. Her tiny hands slid up and under my shirt. I sucked in at first, not expecting them to be as cold as they were.

"Sorry...nerves," she whispered to me.

I lifted her off the ground so that I could reach her mouth better. She was at least a foot shorter than me and I'd end up with a hell of a crick in my neck if I didn't do something. I thought about laying her on the couch, but I didn't want her to think I was moving too fast. She pulled back from me

and was able to look me in the eye. I stared into the rich blue of her eyes and felt butterflies in my stomach.

"Adam..." It was all she said before her mouth flew against mine and she yanked hard at my hair. I went at her with equal force and found my hands under her sweater, cupping her bare breasts. I would have pulled away, but her hands moved lower, trying to unbuckle my pants. It was hard to pull away from her soft lips, but I did.

"Beth, we shouldn't. I don't want you to regret this in the morning. I..." I whispered. Her finger flew up to my lips.

"You talk too much Chief. How about you just shut-up and fuck me."

I didn't need to be told twice. I moved her tiny frame toward my room. I would have dropped and took her on the damn floor but with my luck Justin would walk in and find me banging the local reporter. I didn't need that.

I pushed the door open with Beth's help. She let out a tiny laugh as I tossed her gingerly onto my bed. I thought she was going to spring up and yell "just kidding," but she unbuttoned her pants instead. I dropped to my knees before her and helped her slide them off. Light blue silk panties were all that remained. I nuzzled my face close to them and Beth's hands move to the sides of my face. I looked up into her face to find her eyes fixed on me.

"Adam..." My name fell from her lips so softly that at first I wasn't even sure she'd uttered it.

I slid my fingers into the top of her panties and inched them down her body. I leaned forward and caught the sweet scent of her cunt, revealing her neatly trimmed blond curls in the process. My fingers moved separate from my brain and spread her legs apart before I could even think about it. Soft pink, plush folds stared back at me, welcoming me. I gave her one long lick, savoring the taste of her luscious cream before I moved my fingers over to pull back the layers of her beauty. She writhed under my touch. Every time my tongue ran over her swollen mound she let out a gasp and her inner thighs quivered. I drew her clit into my mouth gently and moved it around with my tongue varying between sucks and licks. She wriggled on the bed with such force that I had to slide my hands under her legs and cup her firm ass to hold her still. She pulled at the sides of my hair as she cried out my name.

My cock burned to be in her, to have her tight little pussy wrapped around it. I took a deep breath in and fought to control myself. First, I wanted her come on my face. I pushed two fingers into her silk binding and she clenched down on them. I sucked on her harder and increased my flicks across her. Her body seized and her thighs crashed into the sides of my head. It would have been uncomfortable if it wasn't for the wonderful taste of her hot come in my mouth. I pushed my tongue deeper into her, taking every bit that she had to offer.

She grabbed at the top of my head. "Adam, Adam...please, please, I need to feel you in me, I need to...."

I gave several more long licks before I stood to unbutton my pants. She tried to lean forward and help me but I pushed her back down gently. "No, I want to look at you."

She slid her finger into her mouth and let out a tiny moan. I watched her suck on it then pull it out slowly. My cock yearned for her warm mouth to repeat that very innocent, yet erotic act on it as well.

I kicked my pants aside and stood there stroking myself as she ran her moistened finger down her side and to the throbbing slit below. I moved forward and let the head of my penis rest against her fingertip. She pulled her glistening finger out of her soaked channel, grabbed hold of me, and rubbed the head of my cock over her wet entrance. I wanted to enter her, but I wanted to be responsible more. I pulled away to find a condom.

"No, don't stop."

"Beth, I can't...we need to be safe."

She leaned up and put her weight on her elbows. "I'm on birth control, and...." She looked to the side and seemed to debate going any further with her statement. "Would you believe me if I told you that I think we're meant to be together?"

"Humph...what like destiny?"

Her face reddened. I was worried that my skepticism might chase her off, but she reached down and stroked me more. "Yes, that's exactly what I believe."

I'd never been a big believer in all of that, but as I stood there looking into her blue eyes I knew she was right, somehow she was right. I pushed

myself into her slightly. She was so tight that I was afraid I'd hurt her. Thankfully, she was still dripping wet. I eased myself in a little more and then moved my body over hers, supporting my weight with my arms. She grabbed my lower lip with her teeth and bit gently on it, tugging it closer to her. I knew that she could taste herself on my mouth. She made animal noises as she tried to thrust her hips up to force me into her.

"Baby, I don't want to hurt you."

She bit down harder on my lip and it was just this side of being too painful. "Fuck me!"

Hearing Beth tell me to fuck her was all I needed. I pushed into her and felt her body ease open for me. She was so wet and tight that for a moment I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold it together. Having my cock pressed into her hot opening left me making noises to rival her own.

I gave in and pumped myself into her. She clawed at my back as I ground her into the bed. Each thrust brought new sounds of delight from her, and I bit my lip hard to keep from coming as her eyes rolled into the back of her head. Her hands slid down and she dug her nails into my lower back near my butt before wrapping her legs around me tight. I couldn't hold it anymore and slammed my body down onto hers, releasing my seed deep within her.

"I love you," I said softly to her. The minute I said it, I froze. There was nowhere for me to hide. I'd just admitted to loving her after sleeping with her one time. I'd never done that in my life. I would have taken it back but it was the truth. I'd been in love with her since I'd first laid eyes on her years ago. Sleeping with her only intensified my feelings for her.

Beth held me tight as I tried to pull away. She never said I love you too, and I wished that I hadn't slipped up the way I did. I was sure that I'd just ruined the greatest thing, besides Justin, that had ever happened to me. I managed to free myself from her clutches and rolled up and off the bed.

"Don't go, Adam."

I stopped and turned around slowly. Beth had moved to a seated position and was eyeing my still erect penis. How it hadn't shriveled and died from embarrassment was beyond me, but there it was, standing at attention and fully aware of Beth's seductive look.

"Let me touch you," she said, crawling toward me on the bed. Her breasts jiggled slightly and I felt a pang in my gut. I knew raw need when I felt it. I just didn't want to openly profess my love during it again.

Beth inched her way to me and extended her tiny arm out. She cupped my warm cock in her hand and licked her lips. "I want to taste you, Adam."

Who was I to argue with that? I took a step forward and she moved her face closer to me. She lifted my shaft and planted her face in my sac. She nibbled around it, pulling each ball into her mouth gently. I tipped my head back and savored every moment of her hot mouth as it slid over me.

Beth tightened her hold on my cock with her mouth and sucked hard until she reached the tip. I cried out in pleasure as she clamped down on the base and began the move again. Each suck, each pull, brought my balls tighter to my body. I reached my hands into her hair and held her head as she moved her mouth over me in a steady rhythm. She stopped quickly and nuzzled her nose into my sac. Her fingers moved around my wet shaft and she worked her hands down it, rubbing, and pulling it to the brink.

"Mmm, pre-come," she said, licking the tip of my penis. She slid her mouth back over me and I pulled back from her quickly. "Adam, I want to taste you," she said with a pout.

I groaned and picked her up and off the bed. "You've tasted, now let me finish in you again. I need to feel your pussy around me."

I didn't have to ask twice. Beth wrapped her legs around my waist and slid her hips down on me. I thrust into her binding, holding nothing back. She screamed out and raked her nails across my back. I started to pull out, afraid that I'd hurt her, but she held tight to me.

"Yes, baby, yes," she said, biting at my jaw line.

I rammed myself into her again and again. Her cries accompanied her kisses and I lost myself in the moment. Her vaginal muscles contracted on me as her orgasm hit. I let our bodies collapse onto the bed, still sheathed in her, and let her milk my seed from my body.

I closed my eyes and prayed that this moment would never end.

Chapter 5

"Are you ready?" she asked. I gave her a puzzled look. "Well, I assume you want to go find Justin, so let's go."

"No, we," I said, putting a lot of emphasis on we, "aren't going anywhere. You're welcome to stay here until I get back." I didn't think she'd actually be there when I got back after the mushy love feast I'd just pulled, but I said it all the same.

"Hmm...no. I'm coming with you, like or not."

I shook my head. I'd seen a woman make up her mind before--I was screwed. I grabbed my jacket out of the closet and handed an extra one to Beth. I pulled a gray sweatshirt off the shelf. It took me a minute to get my gun belt back on. I decided on my Beretta 9000S, double action, its ten-round capacity was appealing. I grabbed an extra magazine, and turned around.

Beth was looking at me suspiciously. I put my antique Bowie knife in my leg sheath. I'd always been fond of it. My father had given it to me as a young boy. Its ten-inch stainless steel blade and bone handle made every neighbor kid jealous. I'd planned to give it to Justin, but in truth, the boy seemed to be the last kid who needed to be armed.

I handed Beth one of my flashlights. She made a small noise indicating it was heavier than she thought. I smiled. Most civilian's idea of a flashlight is a two dollar plastic disposable one--standard police flashlights are heavy, shock resistant, and almost a foot long.

"Adam, honey, wait, I want to get my bag."

I waited for her to grab her bag out of her car. I wasn't sure why it was so important to her, but she didn't really give me any time to argue with her about bringing it before we headed out the door and in the direction Justin had last been seen heading in.

Chapter 6

"Justin!" I called out. No answer. It was pushing two in the morning and we hadn't found any sign of him. I was getting a nervous pull in the pit of my stomach. I had seen too much violence in the last three weeks to not be concerned. Beth tried to reassure me that he was fine. I wasn't buying it. Justin could be a handful sometimes, but not coming home was not one of his faults.

"Maybe he went back to the house," Beth offered.

"No, I don't feel like he did."

"What do you mean, feel? Like a hunch?"

"Yeah, I guess you'd call it that. But no, he's out here somewhere." I got strange feelings often and just knew things. I'd learned to never question it.

Beth's hand brushed mine. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to take that as a sign to hold her hand or not. Maybe she just bumped me. Her hand ran past mine again. This time I opened mine and her tiny hand came to rest in my palm. It was too dark where we were to see her face, and I was happy because that meant she couldn't see mine. I'm sure that I was wearing a nice mix of concern for Justin and amusement for having her still want to be near me. I'd feared that she'd regret what we'd done, but so far, so good.

"Adam...."

"Did you hear that?" I asked, whirling around in the direction that a muffled cry was coming from. We stopped. There was a faint whimpering sound in the distance. I pushed through the darkness. Tree branches caught the sides of my face. I tried my best to hold them for Beth, and keep up my fast pace. She yelled at me to go and I did. I ran hard in the direction the sound was coming from. Twice I had to reach out with my hands to brace myself from falling. The moon was full, which would have made seeing a hell of a lot easier if it wasn't for all the damn trees.

"By the air...earth...by three and...nine...power I bind." I heard Justin's voice. I called out to him but he didn't answer. I threw myself over a

fallen tree and narrowly missed landing on him. I hadn't seen him because he was curled in a fetal position on the ground. I dropped to my knees to examine him. He was shivering and repeating the same words over and over again, but other than that, he looked fine.

"Adam?"

"Over here Beth," I said, holding my flashlight straight up so that she could find me.

I put my hand on Justin's shoulder. He didn't look up. He curled tighter into himself as his chants sounded more and more desperate. The hairs on the back of my neck began to rise. I turned around. Expecting to find someone behind me, there was nothing. Uneasy, I unfastened my gun and made sure the safety was off. I felt something there. I didn't need to see it.

I saw Beth's leg coming over the log. I grabbed her and pulled her down to me. She began to cry out, but I brought my hand to her lips and whispered to her.

"Someone's watching us," I said. She nodded and looked around.

Justin sounded even more delusional. I went to touch him again. Beth caught my hand and stopped me.

"Leave him," she said, reaching into her bag. She pulled out the gray sweatshirt I'd brought for Justin and handed it to me. I covered him up with it, trying my best to not disturb him. I wanted to shake the hell out of him, so I was putting a lot of effort into this.

Beth pulled items out of her bag. She stood up quickly with a bag of something and mumbled as she threw handfuls of it around us on the ground.

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked.

"Forming a circle of salt."

"A what?"

"Adam, trust me," she said, moving her hand out and stroking my cheek. "I love you too."

I wanted to take her in my arms and feel her sweet lips against mine, but first things first. There was definitely something out here with us. Beth pulled away from me and walked around us slowly. When she was done, she bent down near Justin. "It's okay. We're here and we'll help. Come on."

Justin looked up at her. I was pissed. He'd ignored me, but seemed to hear her just fine. I had no doubt that it was selective on his part. Something snarled in the darkness. Justin scrambled to his feet. I drew my gun out and took a step forward.

Beth grabbed my arm. "No, don't cross the circle."

I looked down. I couldn't see any damn circle. I wanted to put a hole in whatever was making those noises. My gut told me that this was a dangerous situation. The salt line reminded me of a grade school dare. Cross this line and you prove something. I took another step forward. Beth and Justin grabbed me.

Wind swept around us fast and then was gone. I turned to look around. Beth was staring at Justin with her eyes wide.

"Did you do that?" she asked.

He looked over at her and nodded. "I think so, I'm not sure."

"That's a lot of power. How long have you had it?"

Justin looked at me. He looked ashamed. "Since I was ten."

I looked at him. What the hell was he talking about? I turned to Beth. She was babbling about the same nonsense. Great, strange people flocked to me. After I shot whatever the hell was stalking us, I'd get a button that read "Mecca for the Mental."

I sensed something near us. I yelled for them to get down. They did. A large shape came flying out of the woods at us. I dropped to one knee and centered my gun. I fired at the mass. It kept coming. I heard Beth scream. I readied myself for impact. The mass came within a foot of slamming into me, struck something that I couldn't see, and bounced backwards.

It took a minute for my head to register what my eyes were seeing. This mass wasn't a man, but it wasn't an animal. It was a mix of both, and then some. Its torso was a man's, its head was more wolf, its legs were

covered in scales and its feet were clawed. I'd seen this before--in Justin's drawings.

The creature wasn't moving. I took a step toward it, gun aimed firmly at its chest. I'd lost my flashlight somewhere in the midst of events.

"I need light."

"Adam, don't go out there!" Beth screamed as I stepped over the circle of salt she'd made.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Static energy danced along my skin. I fought to keep from wiping my arms and face off. A shudder ran through me, as I walked up to the creature's body. I couldn't see any sign of having shot it. I'd been in law enforcement for seventeen years and my aim was pretty damn good. There should have been some sign of hitting it.

The wind tugged at my back. I turned my head sideways to try to keep my eye on the dead creature, and still see Justin and Beth. Beth's mouth was moving, but no sound was coming out. I squinted, trying to make out what she was saying. We were standing only ten feet apart. She should have been clearly audible from that short distance. Justin's hands were raised, and he was looking up at the moon. Beth pointed at me, no, past me. I spun around. The creature was standing beside me, extending its arm at me. In a blur, I shot point blank into its chest. It lunged backwards and cried out. I fired twice more into it, just to be sure.

"Adam!" I heard Beth scream. I didn't turn this time. I waited for her to come up to me. She hovered behind me, afraid to come closer.

"What is it?" she panted.

"Not what, who," Justin said. This did make me look in his direction. He was looking down at the creature. Beth let out a gasp.

"Robert," Justin said, slowly.

I turned and looked down. No longer did the creature look like a half-breed man, it looked human, and this was a human I knew. Robert Williams, the third murder victim's brother. I instantly reached for a pulse, there was none. I'd hit my target every time. He was dead.

"But I..." I wanted to say aloud what I'd seen. I couldn't find the words.

"I know, I saw it too," Beth said, as she placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Me, too," Justin echoed. I turned and looked at him.

"You knew?"

He shook his head. "Not at first, no, but I had these weird dreams ... nightmares really ... several weeks ago. I drew the pictures then and shortly after it happened. I didn't know, I mean I didn't do anything. I knew that he and Becca were into dabbling in the dark arts. They'd even tried to get me to help them, but I don't do that...I'm not into that kind of shit." He took a step closer to Robert's body. "I think that he knew that he brought something evil over, through him. Look, he tried to stop it."

I looked down at what Justin was staring at. Robert's wrists were both slashed open. I struggled to find words to explain away what had happened. Nothing came to me. I closed my eyes and bent my head down.

I felt the heavy presence of something on my shoulder. "It's over, thank you," a voice whispered in my ear. I turned and looked at Justin.

"What?" I asked. "What did you say?"

Beth looked at Justin, then at me. "He didn't say anything."

"But I heard...I heard Robert," I whispered. As soon as I said the name, I knew it was true.

"Shit, Justin, I suspected your mother passed the craft on to you...I never thought that you may have got it from both parents," Beth said.

Epilogue

Beth and I are engaged now. None too soon. The little ones are due in a couple of months. I'm not sure how I feel about twin girls. If they're anything like their mother I'm in a boat load of trouble. Every time Beth bats her eyes at me, I go weak in the knees. Seeing her belly swollen with

the lives I helped create only adds to my hunger for her. I love her more than life itself. She was right; we were destined to be together.

Justin took the news of our marriage and the babies well. He's happy for us and is looking forward to corrupting his siblings. He's visiting an art school in Pennsylvania right now. That's fine by me. The further away from all of this he gets, the better.

The town accepted that Robert Williams was behind the murders. It made sense to them. He'd been Becca's boyfriend, Christian's best friend, and Jonathan's brother. Beth and I thought it best to leave out the bit about him worshiping the devil and channeling a demon. No, the Williams family had been through enough already.

Becca's tests came back positive for Jonathon's semen. Justin's dreams had been prophetic. It was hard to get used to knowing that my son had gifts that were out of the norm, but I was working on it.

I found out that while Beth was away at school she took up an interest in Wicca beliefs. She started practicing close to ten years ago but was afraid to let anyone in the community know. I can't say I blame her. They are a little close minded around here. After what I'd seen in the woods, I was taking an interest in the craft as well. A gun took it down, but household salt kept it at bay.

Beth had been reluctant to tell me that she'd researched Karen's past and she believes that the body found fifteen years ago in Bakersville is Karen's. I haven't told Justin yet. The police department there is running more tests to determine if it is her. I'm working through my feelings slowly. Beth is helping me every step of the way. She's supportive and knows that it's hard.

Mrs. Milton hasn't let up on Justin. Even with him miles away she's still harping about the devil being in North Maple Ridge. The irony of the old bat being right about someone bringing the devil up through the ground makes me laugh every day as I hold back from flipping her off. I am planning to tell her that she's pointing the finger at the wrong kid, though. Oh, hell, maybe I will give her the finger.

THE END

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Prologue

I lay in the field of flowers taking in the glorious scents. Violas were littered around me acting as a warm blanket to shield me from the cool night. The beauty of the shades of glowing and green and yellow pulled me to them. I plucked one up and put it to my lips, and took in a deep breath. Their fresh scent soothed me and made me feel at one with the earth.

Small white clouds formed against the sharply contrasting royal blue sky. I traced the edges of one with my fingers. I wanted to reach out and grasp it and cuddle it to my body.

I rolled onto my stomach and propped my chin up with my arms. My hair got caught under my elbow, and I freed it to relieve the tension on my head. From the corner of my eye I caught the fluttering of a small orange and black butterfly. It hovered above me a moment and I put my hand out toward it. Perching lightly upon my wrist, it sat motionless.

The white cottony clouds that I had been so desperate to hold turned gray. Suddenly, the sky grew dark and ominous. The crackle of thunder made the earth beneath me vibrate. Wind circled around me, pulling at the tiny blue sundress I wore.

There was a sharp pain in my wrist. I looked down--a gold snake lay in place of the butterfly. Like two tiny daggers, its fangs were firmly planted into my skin. Most people would flick the thing off, right? Well. I'm not most people; besides, this wasn't my first go around with the dream. I had been having the dream long enough to know what was to come. I braced myself. The ground beneath me gave way and I found myself spiraling into a bottomless pit. The darkness surrounded me, and I knew better than to bother to scream.

I heard the familiar sound of a woman's voice whispering to me. "You are the balance; you will bring light to the darkness."

Chapter 1

I pulled up outside of the main gate. The blood red sign that stood high in the air read "Necro's Magik World & Supernatural Theme Park." I hated the idea of being here but you do what you have to do to make a living. Prior to working as assistant to the City's Chief Paranormal Prosecutor, I hadn't been able to keep a job to save my life. I had tried a little bit of everything, from being a marketing director to stripping. Hey, a girl's got to make a living, right?

My friend Sharon got me the job at the Paranormal Regulators Law Offices. She had worked with my boss and now ex-fiancé, Ken, enough to pull some strings and get me a job. He hired me as his personal assistant, sight unseen. After a year of working for him, he started to catch on to the fact that I had some special skills. I started showing signs of extrasensory perception (ESP) at the age of sixteen and still hadn't quite gotten the hang of using them. They would manifest themselves in the strangest ways.

I spent one week home from work because I couldn't stand the noise anymore. I had started hearing what others were thinking and I couldn't block any of it. The inside of my head had so many voices going on I thought I was schizophrenic. Ken came knocking at my door after my third day of missing work. I confessed my problem to him and he took me to see some friends of his. They helped me learn to shield myself from outside interference, so to speak.

Ken then asked me out for dinner. I felt like I owed him a huge thank you so I went. We made a better couple than I thought we would at first. After a few months he finally managed to get me into bed with him. We were in his posh two-story townhouse, going at each other like animals. When I climaxed, I threw my head back and felt a burst of energy come over me. It was like my body was being ripped into a million pieces, not pain so much as it was pressure--a pressure that I had no alternative but to

release. Pictures flew off the walls, dishes crashed to the floor in the kitchen, and all of Ken's paperwork started blowing out of the window.

That was my first brush with psychokinesis, and it scared the hell out of both of us. That's when I revealed the fact that I was of magical descent, most likely faerie. I had feared it would scare him away. It did the exact opposite. He asked me to marry him.

I was a romantic fool, and believed I was truly in love. Things were so good for almost a year--that should have tipped me off. Then one night he told me he was going to stay home from the office. He said that he hadn't been feeling well and was going to rest. During my lunch hour I stopped off and picked up some lunch for him. I used my key and let myself into his place. When I walked into his bedroom he was busy pushing his long hard body into some redhead. Needless to say, I broke the engagement on the spot, along with two of his bedroom windows. Mess with a magical chic and you get some major clean-up when she is pissed, just a little motto I think all should remember.

Ken spent weeks trying to make it up to me. He kept claiming that he couldn't control himself, and he didn't mean for it to happen. I asked what the redhead's name was, and he didn't know. I gave him the choice of being friends or being enemies. He settled on just being friends, and that's the way we've been for the last six months.

Work's been keeping us pretty busy with the rapid rise in the number of supernatural-related homicides in the city in the last few months. Prophets were claiming it was the beginning of the end, and people were finding religion by the droves. I thought Ken's promotion was a curse. We'd been working sixty-five hours a week since he made Prosecutor, and there seemed to be no end in sight. We not only had the supernatural cases to deal with, we had everyday human cases to handle. It was the only way the City could justify having another Prosecutor. Tax payers would wonder why it was they had to pay for a Prosecutor who never saw the inside of a courtroom.

I focused on the task at hand, taking a look around Necro's Magik World. It had only been open for business for six years, but in that short time frame had managed to corner the market on ticket sales for theme parks. Someone had come up with the brilliant idea of having a theme park that revolved around the supernatural. By doing this the area had become a Mecca for the undead and magical creatures. At the park, demons didn't have to hide who they were. They were able to live among humans without fear of persecution and mass pandemonium. I'd even seen some

of the "employees" walking around downtown one night. No one looked shocked to see a vampire walking around them--just ran up and asked for their autograph.

Teenagers were heavy into imitating the undead, and of course, dead attire was all the rage. I wondered if creatures of the undead ever thought of sending thank-you notes to rock stars who ran around looking like death on stage. The more I thought about Hollywood, and rock stars, the more I wondered how many of the images weren't an act. I knew that there had to be a few celebrities that fell into the category of supernatural, I just didn't know which ones they were.

Necro's Magik World was huge, or so I'd been told. While the park spanned over four hundred acres, it wasn't all developed yet since they'd left room for expansion. They had picked the location wisely. They were close enough to the city to generate business, but far enough out to remain secluded and away from the watchful eye of others. People were eating up the idea of a supernatural theme park to the point that various spin-offs of it were popping up all around the world. There were restaurants, clothing stores, and, believe it or not, a website. But hey, who didn't have one of those, right? A computer literate Vampire, funny thought, huh! The park only operated during nighttime for obvious reasons. I didn't know too many vampires that would be willing to sit out in the sunlight to greet guests. Here's your ticket, excuse me while I burst into flames.

I still wasn't sure about the outfit I had chosen. I had decided on a pair of dark blue jeans, flare bottom, (they made my legs look longer), and at five foot five I took all the help I could get. I had debated on wearing long sleeves or short because of how cool the summer nights could get, and finally settled on a red short sleeve top. When I'd looked at myself in the mirror I realized how casual I looked and decided to dress it up a bit with some silver jewelry and ended up wearing black sandals. I had chosen blue jeans because I always felt most comfortable in them. I had also been told that red brought out my best features--my eyes and my hair. I was ticked that I hadn't brought a brush with me. I had left the house in such a hurry that I hadn't taken time to blow dry my hair. I fumbled around in my purse until I found a hair tie. I gathered up the front and sides of my hair and pulled it loosely behind my head. I wrapped the tie around it several times and did a quick check. Little black wisps fell from it and framed my face. That was just the way I liked it. I had been thinking of cutting my hair off again. It seemed rather silly because every time I did it my hair grew back to just above my rear end

within two months. My hair liked to be that long and didn't take kindly to my attempts at doing anything else with it.

Being awakened out of dead sleep by Ken's phone call did not suit me. I looked like crap. Sure, I was grateful that he'd ended my nightmare, but peeved that he'd wanted to go out in the middle of the night to question a master vampire. I made a mental note to sleep for two days straight whenever I got the opportunity, and to give Ken a piece of my mind.

I touched my face and decided that I didn't have to fuss with much. I had been blessed with flawless skin. It was, however, rather pale. I tried tanning beds and hitting the beach every day for a summer and I couldn't get myself to burn, let alone tan. I did my best to make up for the lack of color by adding a touch of blush to both cheeks and some lip gloss to my lips. I was so sick of everyone asking if I had collagen implants. I wanted to get a T-shirt printed that read, 'Yes, I do see the light of day, and yes the lips are real too'. I grabbed my purse again from the passenger seat and fumbled through it until I found my eyeliner. I was big on the whole lining of the top lid with black craze. Prior to its recent revival, I had been seriously out of date with the look, but did it anyway. I loved the way it brought out my eyes, and I was into retro.

Satisfied it was as good as it was going to get, I got out of the car.

When I swung the door shut I thought that the car had finally had it. It was an '84 Thunderbird and it had seen better days. The roof was dented beyond repair, and it had no floor in the back right passenger side. Every time it rained, my seat ended up soaked because the seal on the door was missing. I tried to remember to lay a towel on the seat when I got out, but every now and then I would forget. My absolute favorite thing about the car was that I had to use my best judgment to find the right gears. When you put the car in park you were really in reverse and when you put the car in reverse you went forward. Parking had always been a guess because the spot for it was somewhere above the letters on the dash. The only thing the car had going for it was that it was paid for and it still ran. I was worried about getting my student loans paid off before I bought a new car. I figured I'd be paying for my loans until I died at this rate, and considering the fact that I was pretty sure I had Si (pronounced shee) blood in me that was pretty funny. Most Si were immortal, creatures of magic. The banks would just love me!

I walked toward one of the ticket booths. It was made to look like a mausoleum. Gray granite rock covered it and mythical creatures were carved into its molding. The man sitting behind the counter looked like a

zombie. The makeup slathered on his face gave him the appearance of rotting flesh, and his costume looked as though he had just crawled from the grave to take my ticket--just looking at him made me smile. I assumed that they had real zombies working here, but this kid was obviously not one of them.

"Ticket please."

I tried not to laugh. He sounded so ridiculous. The make-up and wardrobe was one thing--the overdone enunciation on his words was just too much.

"Gwen Stevens. I'm here to speak with Pallo." I had to bite my lip to keep from bursting out in laughter. He didn't look amused and turned to pick up the phone. He hung up and looked back at me. "Mr. Pallo will see you shortly. Go through the red doors and downstairs, someone will meet you there."

Giving him a nod, I headed in the direction he had pointed me.

A gigantic limestone building loomed before me. The gray formed a sharp contrast to the small, landscaped flower beds that lined the walkway leading up to it. They were full of what looked to be lemon verbena and green sage. I thought it odd that someone would grow only herbs in a spot made for flowers

Stone gargoyles stood in the center of each bed. I felt myself shudder a little and wasn't sure why a flower bed would get to me. Truth be told, I really didn't like the idea of being at a place where they prided themselves on scaring the shit out of you, but Ken needed information ... bad. I really hated the fact that I was his 'girl Friday.'

It only took me a few minutes to reach the red doors. I stood around and waited for Sharon or Rick to show up. I had already been at the park for half an hour so I decided to give them another fifteen minutes. Sharon was usually late. She seemed to be on a whole separate time schedule. At the office we referred to someone who was late as running on "Sharon-time". Rick, on the other hand, had a military background and was always five minutes early. The fact that he wasn't here yet should have really bothered me, but it didn't. I was getting pretty brave in my old age, or pretty stupid.

My patience level was pretty low considering I had gotten little sleep due to my-oh-so pleasant dream. The fact that I was standing out here in the dead of night waiting for the people who should have been handling this

themselves didn't help much either. I gave up and used my cell phone to try and reach Sharon. I got her voice mail, so I left her a message telling her I was going to go ahead in and I'd talk to her later, and if I didn't call her back in an hour I was probably dead. That was my way of making light of the situation, but my gut told me that there was some truth to that comment.

I looked up at the red door. The last thing I wanted to do tonight was go into a room full of vamps, but if I didn't go now I would lose my nerve. I turned the knob and pulled the door open.

Instantly, I was hit in the face with the smell of dampness. I looked around and tried to get the nasty taste of stale air out of my mouth. I was standing at the top of a stairwell, which was lit by several torches sitting in sconces along the wall. The walls were stone and looked like the inside of a castle.

No, make that the entrance to a dungeon.

The steps were stone too, and rather steep. I wasn't sure how anyone who owned and operated a multimillion dollar business ended up in a basement, but I trudged onward anyway. When I reached the end of the staircase I found myself in front of a large, heavy, metal door. The medieval theme was really starting to get on my nerves. I knocked on the door.

The door opened quickly and a man stood there silently, looking at me. His six foot five frame took up most of the door way. White waves of hair spilled onto his shoulders. Large green eyes stared back at me. His face was soft, with baby fine features. The sweet smell of honey filled my head.

I had heard that vampires smelled nice, but this was ridiculous. I wanted to lick him just to see if he tasted as good as he smelled, but I held back. Good girl.

He was dressed like he'd just fallen out of the 80's. I half expected him to claim he was the guitarist for one of the big hair bands and not really a vamp at all. He had on black, painted-on leather pants. His white shirt hung loosely from his body and gaped open to the middle of his stomach. Even in the poorly lit stairwell I could see how smooth and pale his skin was. When I looked back at his face, he was staring at me wide-eyed. He looked puzzled and a bit surprised. Imagine that--I put a vampire off guard.

"I'm Gwyneth Stevens. Kenneth Harpel sent me down to speak with Mr. Pallo." I extended my hand out to him, but he just stared at it.

A few seconds went by in silence. I had the strongest urge to bolt back upstairs and out the door.

"Please come in," he said, stepping to the side. "We do not get many new visitors here. I apologize for my lack of manners."

I'd never met an honest to God gentleman before. "Thank you. I'm sorry for coming at such a late hour, but Lydia phoned our office requesting I come to see Mr. Pallo tonight."

His green eyes widened. "Yes, Lydia, umm, come in please. I will get Pallo for you."

"So, do you have a name or is Def Leppard mega-fan all right by you?" I asked, dripping with sarcasm.

"I am Caradoc." He looked puzzled by my attempt at humor. I had been told once that modern cynicism sometimes got lost on the older vampires and persons of magic. Guess that was true.

"Caradoc, the name doesn't sound familiar."

"Should it?" he asked me as I walked past him.

"No, I guess not. I just got the feeling that I knew you from somewhere."

Caradoc led me into a room with a large stone fireplace in it. Two red sofas sat across from each other. They were trimmed with beautiful gold leafing that made your eye follow the s-curve of the feet. A massive Serape rug covered the floor. Cherry end tables flanked each end of the red sofas. Candles sat on them and dripped wax down onto the rich wood. I had half a mind to walk up and put a coaster under them to protect the integrity of the tables. I got the feeling that no one else here cared, so I let it be.

The room had several doors in it. I had no clue where any of them went, so I kept my back near the exit. I didn't like leaving myself vulnerable, but the room didn't leave me many options.

"Please have a seat." Caradoc motioned to one of the couches. "Can I offer you anything to drink?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that. I was afraid to say yes and get a big glass of blood, and afraid to say no and come off as rude.

He winked at me. I wondered if he was flirting or just had something in his eye. My money was on hair spray--if he held true to his eighties ensemble. "Would you like a glass of iced tea?"

"Yes, please."

"Please make yourself at home."

I watched him exit out the door to my right and sat with my hands folded in my lap. I turned and stared at the large fireplace. Tiny pixies and fairies were embossed in it. They were all naked and each one wrapped itself around the one below it. I wondered how wise it was to be standing in a Master Vampire's living room alone when he obviously had a thing for naked creatures of magic. I was a life-sized version of that. I gulped and rubbed my palms across my jeans, trying my best to keep the nervous sweat that was building to a minimum.

I was getting a strange vibe from this place. It felt more like home than the apartment I'd been living in for the last two years. I had been in the place for less than fifteen minutes and I already felt like I could throw my feet up on the sofa and kick back awhile. I resisted the urge to do so, and turned to stare at a wall of red drapes. I was going to go pull one back when I heard a man's voice behind me.

"Sorry to interrupt you Ms..., but Pallo will be with you in a moment." I didn't sense anyone in the room with me so I jumped a little. When I turned around Caradoc was standing behind me. He realized his mistake of sneaking up on me and bowed his head down. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to startle you."

"No, you're fine. I'm sorry." I felt a little silly with a man bowing in front of me so I put my hand out to him. If Sharon were with me she would have shot me dead on the spot for being careless and trusting a stranger who also happened to be a vampire. I didn't feel that he posed any threat to me. For some reason I knew I could trust him. I let my fingers touch the top of his head and his head sprang up and he took a step back from me.

The door to my left opened and a man entered. He looked to be in his early twenties but I knew that if he was a vamp he was more likely to be in the hundreds. His hair was short and blond with pink tips. It looked as

though he used gel to spike it. He was wearing black from head to toe. He had on a T-shirt, jeans, and pair of black army boots. He definitely had the James Dean look down pat. When he saw me he froze in place. Gee, I was having that effect on a lot of people lately. He opened his mouth and stood silent for a second. I didn't want to play this game anymore.

"Pallo, I came here to speak with you regarding the hellhound homicides." My ability to be all work and no play came so easy. I expected him to start pouring his heart out about what they knew. What I got instead was his face looking even more shocked.

"Christ, Caradoc, she thinks I'm Pallo. What the hell's going on here? If anyone should remember him, it's her," he said, his voice thick with a British accent as he pointed at me.

Shoot. I thought that had to be the head guy--guess I was wrong. That didn't happen too often, so I was feeling a bit nervous. I usually just knew things that other people didn't. It had always proved to be an asset until about thirty seconds ago. I wanted to question him about my knowing Mr. Pallo, but changed my mind.

Caradoc stepped forward. I could tell he didn't want to touch me, and that was just fine by me. "I'm sorry Ms. Stevens." He put a lot of emphasis on my name and was staring hard at the James Dean-looking vamp.

"This is Jameson. Master Pallo will be with us momentarily."

Jameson, James Dean? I shrugged and laughed in my head at the irony. Jameson approached me with speed that no human could possess and extended his hand to me.

"Nice to meet you, Ms. Stevens." With the amount of attention they were giving my name, I had started to wonder if they thought it was an alias.

"Nice to meet you too, Jameson." His hand was cool to the touch. I pulled mine away slowly.

"James. I go by James." He smiled wide at me and I saw no fangs. I had never met a vampire in person before. I always assumed they walked around with these huge fangs showing. Guess I was wrong.

"Can either of you fine gentlemen tell me where Pallo is? I would love to spend another hour getting stared at like a circus freak, but a girl's got to get her beauty sleep you know. So, now that the pleasantries are out of

the way, can someone find Pallo or Mr. Pallo for me?" I turned to face Caradoc. I could sense that between the two he was higher up on the seniority ladder, but I wasn't sure by how much.

"He cannot help you find him, but I'm sure I can." The voice ran over the room and covered my body. It was familiar to me. I turned, expecting to see someone I knew.

A man walked out from behind James. He was around six foot tall and had a head of loose brown curls that hung almost to his shoulders. Normally, I think only men in rock bands should have long hair, but after tonight, I was willing to make a few exceptions.

This guy was leaking sexuality. Prior to this meeting, I hadn't known that was even possible. His face looked as though chiseled from stone. His pale skin had only the faintest hint of coloring. He had a strong chin with a small dimple in it, and his lips were full and looked soft, kissable.

I let my gaze slowly fall down his body. He wore no shirt. His shoulders were broad, and from where I stood it looked as though tiny freckles covered them. Muscles rippled down his stomach, forcing my eyes lower. My gaze slid down his smooth hairless chest to his midriff. He was wearing a loose pair of black pants.

God, could it get any better than this? They looked to be pajama bottoms, but I wasn't sure. I was too busy staring at the way his chest went from being completely bare to the start of tiny black hairs from his navel area down. He was wearing his waistband extremely low and I was positive he wasn't wearing any underwear.

I looked down to the floor and saw that he was barefoot. I did a quick second look at his body as I retraced my steps back to his beautiful face. The most intense pair of crisp, dark brown--almost black eyes were looking at me, wide. When I was finished mentally undressing him, I noticed the look on his face. Gee, what a shocker. He looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"Would you guys please tell me if I have a huge horn sprouting from my forehead?" I was tired and I was sure it was pushing at least three in the morning.

Caradoc spoke first. "No, Ms. Stevens you've not sprouted a horn as of yet. Why do you ask? Is this something we should watch for?" his

sincerity made me burst out into laughter. James and the mysterious tall dark and handsome vamp laughed as well.

"Everyone I've met so far has stood there staring at me like a deer caught in headlights. What gives? Where the hell is Mr. Pallo? I'm done for the night boys. It's been fun, but I really must be going now."

"I am Mr. Pallo." The drop dead gorgeous one said. "Pallo is fine. I am sorry if we've upset you, but you remind us of someone we once knew." He tossed his hair out of his face with his hand and stepped toward me. "My apologies for looking like I just rolled out of bed, but I have been sparring in the gym. I wasn't expecting any visitors."

When Ken told me that I was going to see a guy named Pallo, I pictured a six hundred year old vampire who still spoke like he was in the Old World. Pallo didn't seem much into using contractions, but his English was perfect.

"I'd have thought that Lydia would've told you I was coming. She phoned and requested that someone be sent down immediately to speak with you. Two others were supposed...." I didn't finish my last sentence I wasn't sure it was wise to spill the beans about being here completely alone with no sign of back-up coming. My patience level was growing very thin. The only thing that helped me keep my grip was that I was surrounded by three of the sexiest guys I'd ever had the pleasure of laying eyes on. Did I also forget to mention the fact that they could probably kill me before I knew what hit me?

The room fell silent. I noticed Caradoc and James exchange glances. Pallo was the first to break the silence. "I have not had a chance to speak personally with Lydia in some time now. My apologies. Please stay. I'll answer whatever I can Ms....?"

"Ms. Stevens. Thank you," I said.

"Yes, of course, Gwyneth Stevens. I have seen your name in the Nocturnal Journal recently for your office being involved in the break up of a Ghoul-fighting ring." He took a step toward me, "Most impressive indeed, Gwyneth."

This poster child for dead and doable saying my name made me want to melt, and in some ways I did. I've heard that vampires could persuade members of the opposite sex to fall for them with ease. Knowing this should have prepared me for the way I was starting to feel, but it didn't.

I looked into Pallo's sweet dark eyes. I wanted them to be looking down at me, staring at me while his body moved in and out of mine. I wanted to run my fingers through his wavy brown hair, to hold it while he brought my body to its climax. I wanted him now. I had to concentrate on not leaping across the room and straddling him. I pushed the desire down and felt how strong his pull was. Thankfully, I was stronger.

"Why are you fighting me?" Pallo asked.

"What do you mean?" I thought I'd play the dumb blond routine for a minute.

"You are trying hard not to come near me, like I mean you harm," he said. I guess the dumb blond routine doesn't work well, especially when you're a brunette.

"Look, no offense, but you could be a homicidal maniac for all I know. After all, you are a--" I stopped short of saying vampire.

"True. But why would such a lovely young woman come alone to a maniac's house in the middle of the night?" he asked. He was smiling so sexy that I had to fight with myself not to jump his bones then and there. Of course, I was willing to settle for a dry hump--Nah.

"Okay, you've got a good point. I must be crazy to come down here with a room full of vampires anyway, so why even bother with the shenanigans?"

"The shenanigans you refer to were merely a test. I do not want any of my staff revealing information to someone not associated with the likes of us."

I was well beyond the point of feeling the need to be polite. "Well, I'm so happy that I passed your little Club Bloodsuckers initiation test, but I would really like--"

His hand came up suddenly, motioning me to stop. Surprisingly enough, I did. He must have thought my last comment was amusing because he started to laugh. It was quite possibly the most perfect laugh I've ever heard.

"Well I'm so happy to be your entertainment for the evening, thank you, and good-bye!"

I started toward the door. Pallo stepped in my path. Under normal circumstances a vampire standing in front of me would scare the hell out of me. This time it just pissed me off.

He stepped close enough for me to touch, put his hand out and brushed mine. I flinched a little. Even though I had mentally psyched myself up for meeting vampires, I couldn't bring myself to not be scared of what they could do.

I started to pull back, but his touch felt familiar to me. He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it gently. His lips were soft. I let my protective magic fall. Warmth flowed over my body. Suddenly, my insides felt like a thousand tiny fingers were moving throughout me--caressing me. Pallo's hands never left mine, yet I could have sworn that he'd just rubbed my most vulnerable spot. I gasped and felt my body react to him. Damp, and breathless, I felt my hair lifted up and I saw his do the same. I yanked my hand back, as if I'd been scorched.

"Nice to meet you too," he said. He was grinning at me. He planned that.

I smiled back, trying to look nonchalant, as if this sort of thing happened often. "Do you do that to all the ladies?"

He leaned in so close that I thought he was smelling my neck, or worse yet, about to bite it. I put my hands up and touched his chin. His skin was so smooth. Ken had always had a five o'clock shadow by ten in the morning. This guy was like touching a porcelain doll's face. I felt his breath on my neck. I wasn't sure my legs were going to hold out if he got much closer.

"I only do that to the pretty ones. And in my two hundred and seventy-five years on this earth I have only met two worthy of that show," he whispered.

I gave his chin a little push, and he stepped back.

"Can we just get down to business?" I asked, faking annoyance, but wanting another hair-raising experience. Who wouldn't?

"I will get down whenever or wherever you would like."

I felt my heart skip a beat. I was so mad at myself. I was letting this two hundred and seventy-five-year-old corpse smooth talk me. But God, he was a good-looking corpse. I walked up to him. Two could play that

game. I slid my hand across his chest. I really hoped this plan didn't backfire. If it did I would end up dead--so what the hell.

I like to think of myself as being fairly attractive, and if he insisted on playing the Mr. Sexy game, I'd play along and then get the hell out of there. I knew before my fingers touched him that he had two tiny scars under his right nipple. This did not surprise me. I figured I could have caught a glimpse of them--he did have his shirt off after all. But I knew how he had gotten them.

"Been avoiding picking fights with sailors I hope?" Words came into my head and I heard them fall from my lips. I was used to getting random visions of events in peoples lives, but this was different. No vision had come to me. I just knew this to be true. I couldn't explain it. I pulled my hand away from him quickly, completely freaked out.

He looked at me a little shocked, then smiled. I was starting to really like that devilish grin. "Yes, I learned my lesson."

"A punctured lung will do that to you." I grabbed my mouth. For some reason, in my head, I thought this would solve my problem.

Pallo leaned into me--his lips brushed the back of my hand. My knees were getting weaker. Six months without sex was starting to take its toll on me. "Yes, one can learn almost any lesson if pain is involved." His deep voice moved over me, around me, through me.

Oh, he was good!

He shrugged and smiled. He definitely knew something I didn't, and he wasn't about to let on to what it was. The cocky routine was starting to get to me. I was flirtatious by nature, but this was getting on my nerves. I wanted to ask about the hellhounds and go. I wanted to leave this place and never look back. I wanted to run my hand over his chest again. Hey, cut a girl some slack--it's not all that often that the poster boy for every woman's deepest sexual desire takes an interest in you. The desire won out. I felt his smooth chest one last time and stepped back.

Pallo's hand reached out and touched my hip. I pushed it away lightly, unsure who I trusted less, him or me. He smelled good enough to eat and that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to swallow him up. Problem was, I knew what this guy was, and he would think of me as the main course.

Nevertheless, I wanted to know how it felt to have his body pressing against mine. I could feel his lust for me as well. I knew he was thinking of more than just pressing himself against me. I could see it in the way he smiled at me and in the way he moved near me. His movements were like ripples in water, so smooth, so sure of where they are going, so full of purpose, so making me horny.

I shook my head and cleared my naughty little schoolgirl thoughts. "I'm sorry, but I really just wanted to get some information in regards to some hellhound related incidents that we've had recently."

That a girl--keep focused on work and not on Pallo's glorious body.

He smiled at me, and I could tell that he wanted to pursue this newfound attraction more, but then he spoke and had apparently decided against it. "What is it that you want to know?"

I was shocked. He was going to give me some answers. "Well, for starters, do you know where we can find the Keeper of the Hounds? He has managed to elude us so far."

I caught James giving Pallo an odd look out of the corner of my eye but decided to ignore it. Pallo's head fell back slightly and he began to laugh. The sound of his laugh wrapped around my body and made me tingle in places that I didn't even know I had. I shuddered and fought to maintain control. "I'm sorry Pallo but I really don't see how people being slaughtered by some crazy guy and his puppy slackies is amusing."

He looked at me and grew quiet. "I am sorry. It's just that you seem very confident that the Keeper is male. Are we really that destructive that you would automatically assume it was our doing?"

"I'm lost--you mean as a vampire or as a guy?"

"I am referring to men in general, Ms. Stevens."

"Well, sorry to disappoint, but I really don't have a low opinion of men. I'm not one of those women who run around all day male-bashing. I think they're just great. I'm just going off of the information I was given, and sources on the street are saying male, so that's what I'm sticking with." My tone was definitely harsher than I had wanted it to be, but I was exhausted.

Pallo looked very smug and sure of himself. He kept pushing a strand of his curly hair behind his left ear. "Your informants are wrong, and I would be very reluctant to listen to them further."

As great as that sounded, the reality was that informants were getting harder and harder for the PR Dept. to come by. They were disappearing left and right, never to be heard from again. The few that Ken had left would have to do, simply because there were no others to turn to. I got the sense that Pallo picked up on this, because he motioned for James and started to speak to me. "Come here tomorrow at dusk and I will tell you more about the Keeper of the Hounds".

"Can't we just do it tonight?" No part of me wanted to come back to this place again.

He smiled and motioned upwards. "I'm afraid that Mother Nature's rising sun will prevent me from going into further detail with you tonight. Please come by tomorrow and I will speak with you then. James will walk you to your car Ms. Stevens." With that, he turned and walked out of the room. Hmm, so much for good-byes. Secretly I was hoping for another hand shake. Touching his skin made me feel alive. It was official-I really, really needed to get laid.

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