



SYDNEY CROFT
TAMING
THE FIRE

'Sydney Croft is nothing short of brilliant'
Fresh Fiction

ROUGE
SUSPENSE

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About the Book

Power. Pleasure. Danger. It doesn't get any hotter than this.

He came to the underground London club for a night of extreme sex play with the enigmatic "Mistress Rik". But the Special Agent known as **Trance** is really on a search-and-rescue mission to keep her alive.

Part predator, **Ulrika "Rik" Jaegar** possesses feral powers that make her a danger to others - and to herself. That's why the Agency for Covert Rare Operatives (ACRO) wants to recruit her to their side. To do so, Trance will have to pull off the impossible: capture and control Rik, both woman and beast.

About the Author

Sydney Croft is the alter-ego of Larissa Ione and Stephanie Tyler, who came together to blend their very different writing interests into adventurous tales of erotic paranormal fiction. Though they love to write together as Sydney Croft, they also write individually.

As Sydney Croft, they are the authors of *Riding the Storm*, *Unleashing the Storm*, *Seduced by the Storm*, *Taming the Fire*, *Tempting the Fire* and *Taken by Fire*, which are all available from *Rouge*.

Other books by Sydney Croft:

Riding the Storm
Unleashing the Storm
Seduced by the Storm

Tempting the Fire
Taken by Fire

TAMING THE FIRE

Sydney Croft



CHAPTER

One

“YOU LOOK LIKE you need a daddy.”

Trance merely stared down the Bear who was dressed in all leather, and gave a shake of his head. Wrong sex and wrong preference, but he didn't mind the attention. He had an open mind when it came to anything concerning sex, but women did it for him and always had. That wasn't changing.

So no, he didn't need a daddy, but hell, if the right woman came along, he wouldn't mind playing the daddy and everything in between.

He didn't hold out much hope for the right woman, though, which made his whole wouldn't-mind speech easier to feed himself.

Besides, he wasn't here for a soul mate—he was on a mission from ACRO—the Agency for Covert Rare Operatives—to rescue a now free agent named Ulrika. She was on the run from Itor Corp, a powerful agency that also employed agents with special abilities. Her name meant “power of the wolf,” and she'd originally belonged to a small, rare European tribe of therianthropes, people who believe they are animals in human flesh. According to ACRO's cryptozoologists, therians claimed to shift, spiritually and psychologically but not physically—that could be proven—into their animal.

By all reports, Ulrika had lived in harmony with her animal soul until Itor got ahold of her, and mutated her powers without her consent. Now she was a powerful

shape-shifter who used sex to control the angry beast living inside of her, and if she had a chance in hell of staying alive, she was going to need his agency's help.

Which was why he was here, undercover and posing as a sub rather than his Dom preference.

This wasn't one of the worst clubs, but it wasn't one of the higher-end ones either. No, Ulrika would be hiding in a place where she could stand out without fear of being caught, and this underground London club was off the map.

He'd been watching her all night as he sat on the smooth leather stool in a stance that signaled available. Most of the Doms avoided him, as they should. Even tamping himself down, the wild streak practically throbbed from him.

But Ulrika was drawn to that. From what he'd gathered, she liked her men hard to handle. Probably because the tamer ones were unable to deal with what she had to offer during sex.

Suddenly, she appeared next to him, catching him off guard. He took a sip of his whiskey, as if he were the one who called her over, but she wasn't buying it. She put a strong arm on his, and he let her push his hand with the glass in it to the bar, where he opened his palm and surrendered it.

Kira, another ACRO operative, an animal whisperer, had been right about pegging tonight as the night. Ulrika was definitely on the prowl.

She slid a firm finger under his chin and forced it upward, as if appraising him.

No, this wasn't going to be easy.

He forced himself to stay still under her gaze. If she was a true, born Dom, she'd have known that he wasn't a submissive, not by a long shot. But from the files he'd briefed himself on before he left the ACRO offices, he knew Ulrika's need for sex overrode most of her other senses. Especially now, when she was scared and on the run.

He would be the one to bring her in, even if it meant posing as something that went against every one of his most basic survival instincts.

The wolf lady was beautiful—long, reddish-blond hair, piercing gold eyes. And yes, he purposefully didn't avert his gaze, because if he was going to pull off his role as a sub, it was going to be as one who was nearly untrainable.

"Eyes down, boy," she said, her voice sure and strong, with the barest hint of a German accent, and he shot her one final glance before doing her bidding. "You won't be an easy one, will you?"

"I'm not a boy," he said.

She chuckled lightly. "You'll be whatever I tell you to be tonight."

His cock jumped at her words.

"Are you worthy of that privilege ... boy?"

He wanted to strap her to a spanking bench and make her ass a pretty shade of red and then they'd find out who was worthy.

He bit the inside of his cheek instead of telling her that.

"You may speak," she said, her hand caressing his ass.

"I'm worthy. *Mistress.*"

"Good boy."

He brought his eyes up to meet hers again, and she merely raised her eyebrows at him. "Unless you'd rather call me *Daddy*, I suggest you lower your eyes and learn to love *boy.*"

He hadn't expected the sense of humor. She'd been watching him for longer than he'd thought.

He lowered his eyes, but only so he could stare at her perfectly formed breasts under the low-cut, gauzy blouse she wore. Much different from most of the leather-clad Mamas in this place.

She brought her cleavage close to his face. "Like what you see?"

He breathed deeply—her sweet scent belied what she really was underneath—part woman, part wolf ... and he was the perfect one to tame the beast he knew was inside that body.

“Yes. I like.” His voice was husky with need, and if she hadn’t been able to tell from that, all she needed to do was look down at the massive bulge between his legs, straining to be set free from the black pants he wore.

“Room three. Face the wall. And keep your clothes on. I want to have some fun taking them off myself.”

He nodded, pushed off the stool and walked toward the room without the requisite *Yes, Mistress*.

He heard her low growl follow him down the darkened hallway all the way to room three, with its heavy cuffs and chains hanging from the far wall. Which was exactly where she wanted him and the last place he wanted to be. No, he should be the one cuffing her, arms above her head, her breasts and body open to him for his pleasure.

Instead, his body would be in Rik’s hands.

She was part feral predator and all danger, to herself and to the outside world if she couldn’t learn to control the change. In order to help her do that, he’d have to first rein her in. Slowly. Without her realizing it.

He’d have to hypnotize her into wanting him to be her sub, again and again, because word on the floor was that Mistress Rik didn’t take the same sub twice. Ever. And since his skill as an excedo had, as far back as he could recall, included the ability to tame most people with one look into his eyes, he really was the perfect man for the job.

It had been three months since Ulrika surfaced on the scene following a botched assassination attempt on the head of ACRO’s new sister agency, The Aquarius Group. Ulrika’s failure to kill Faith Black had apparently led to her escape from Itor when her handler was captured. She was now on ACRO’s radar, and hopefully Trance could get her off Itor’s before they tracked her down.

Now he remained facing the wall, feeling her eyes on him. She'd picked one of the private rooms, which gave him hope that she wasn't into displaying him for the world to see.

He wasn't heavily into the BDSM scene—not anymore, but when he was in his late teens and early twenties, he was a frequent visitor to all the clubs, first in the Chicago area, where he grew up, and later wherever the Army stationed him. These days, he wasn't looking so much for controlled sex as he was a woman he could fall in love with. But there were very few women who would understand what he was or the job that utilized those special skills to the best of his ability.

It was kind of hard to explain to a date that you possessed the gifts of super-strength, better than average eyesight and the power to hypnotize most any human who looked you in the eye.

It was even harder for him to truly let go during sex—because Trance knew his own strength, and his worries about hurting a woman accidentally during lovemaking had stopped him from ever getting past the formal stage with any woman—sub or otherwise.

Rik's breath was warm on the back of his neck. He turned his head to let it graze his ear and she caught his lobe between her teeth, nipped just hard enough to make him turn his head back.

Her hands came around his chest—unbuttoned his shirt slowly. As she peeled it away from his shoulders, she brought her nose in to smell him, to nuzzle his neck and to nip the sensitive skin at the nape. His senses were on high alert, every touch of her fingers was like fire against his skin. His heart beat loudly, his mouth dried, and maybe this was all a mistake.

A hand caressed his balls and then his shaft through the fabric of his pants. He'd wanted to wear his usual leathers, but in them he was certainly not unassuming.

“You’re nervous,” she said.

He didn’t answer, didn’t have to. It was more nervous energy than actual fear, but it all worked in his favor. Enhanced his role.

She rubbed against his bare back since he still faced the wall, eyes down, as she hadn’t given him the command otherwise.

“Your safe word?” she asked.

“*Daddy.*”

Again, the deep chuckle. “You’re a funny boy. I have a feeling you won’t be as funny by the time I’m through with you, though. Are there things you’re not comfortable doing?”

Yes, this. All of this. “My tolerance is high,” he told her instead.

He didn’t know if that was actually the truth or not, but he had no way of knowing, having never subbed as many Doms did in order to learn how to better their role. He only knew that he preferred pleasure over pain, used restraints with his subs only to enhance pleasure ... He wasn’t into humiliation and, from what he’d heard, neither was Rik.

It would definitely be a learning experience.

“Tell me your name.”

“It’s Trance,” he said.

“That’s your real name?”

“It’s the name I use when I’m out playing.”

“Fair enough. Turn toward me. Arms over your head.”

He did as she asked. She pulled at the chains above him, shortening them so his arms would be held at the highest possible tension, while his wrists were caught in the soft leather binding.

She fastened the cuffs and his insides began to chafe almost immediately. His muscles burned slightly and he tugged at the chains, just the way she’d expect.

“Relax,” she said, putting her hands on his upper arms. But he didn’t want to relax. He wanted to come, didn’t

realize how badly until he was firmly held down.

“Turn your head—look at me, boy. I need to make sure you’re all right.”

He did as told, raised his eyes and let the familiar feel of vertigo take hold of him, a side effect of getting someone else under his control. Rik stared at him, cocked her head in confusion for a second before reaching for the zipper on his pants.

Yes, she’d restrained him, but the chains would never hold. Nothing would, except his own will.

THIS ONE was going to be special. Ulrika could feel it. Smell it. And, when she ran her tongue over the pulse point in his throat, she could taste it. Power flowed through his veins, the currents as strong as those of the river Elbe, where she used to fish as a child.

But those days were as dead as her people, and in the years since she’d been taken from her German homeland, she’d learned to tamp down both the memories and the grief, and concentrate on nothing but survival.

A large part of her survival depended on what she was doing now, with Trance.

Her touch as she pulled down his zipper was featherlight, and unexpected, if his quick intake of breath was any indication. Her own breathing hitched as his cock broke free from the soft black pants, and she resisted the urge to take it in her palm.

The man was a magnificent creature ... broad shoulders, rugged features, muscles carved from stone. A light dusting of blond hair coated his chest, which was as deeply tanned as the rest of him. Longish blond hair, shot through with darker brown, framed eyes as blue and clear as an Austrian mountain lake. Eyes that fascinated her, drew her in when he should be keeping his gaze averted a lot more than he was.

It had been a long time since she'd encountered anything like him. Usually her customers were either handsome or fit, but rarely both, and never to such extremes.

And before this life ... she didn't want to think about it. Yet for some reason she couldn't help it. The full moon always brought out the beast's fiercest urges, and her worst memories. Such as how Itor had destroyed her clan, had wiped her kind from the face of the earth with experimentation that only she had survived. Now they wanted her dead. After subjecting her to years of hell and forced service, they were tired of playing.

She, however, wasn't. The beast in her needed to play. If the beast wasn't kept sated, it came out, a rabid, uncontrollable thing that raged hard, killed indiscriminately and wouldn't give back her body until it wore out. She'd wake in strange places, aching and covered in blood that wasn't her own, her memory a black hole.

Sex kept it calm. Meat kept it fed. The act of dominating humans kept it happy.

She'd just eaten three rare steaks. One down, two in the works.

"Mistress?"

Her gaze snapped to his. "Did I tell you to speak?"

His blue eyes gleamed, and she held her breath, unable to do or say anything until he dropped his gaze. "No, *Mistress*." His crisp American accent was like a velvet whip on sensitive skin, and she felt it all the way to her sex.

This man was not a sub.

The realization found its way into her bloodstream as a rush of adrenaline. Excitement stirred the beast; nothing fired the blood like dominating an alpha, but warning bells clanged in Rik's head. Her mind raced. Itor wouldn't toy with her like this—they'd simply take her out, just as The Aquarius Group would—payback for her attempt at killing

one of their senior agents. No doubt ACRO would want in on the action as well. Heck, she had to assume everyone wanted her dead.

Caution had kept her alive for weeks, and she couldn't ignore her internal alarm, even if this turned out to be a false one.

Lightning fast, she pushed his face around so he couldn't look at her, and she scraped her teeth over his ear, not lightly or gently. "Tell me why you're here."

"To submit to you, Mistress."

"I don't believe you. Why do something so against your nature?"

His muscles tensed, and she smelled surprise rolling off him. "I want to know what it feels like to submit," he said smoothly, "and I hear you're the best."

"I am." She pressed against him harder, letting her stiff nipples rub against his chest through the fabric of her top. "I can make you love to be dominated. I can make you learn to crave it. To beg for it."

"Then teach me."

The underlying steel in his voice sent a shiver of feminine appreciation through her even as it raised the beast's hackles. She drew his head around and nipped his bottom lip, enough to cause pain but not draw blood. "'Teach me, *please*.' Say it. Now."

His moment of hesitation lasted no more than a second, but she once again made the mistake of looking into his mesmerizing eyes, the distraction so intense that she barely heard him say, "Teach me, please."

Nodding, she stepped back and allowed herself a leisurely scan of his body, from his bound hands to his chest, his slim waist where muscles strained, to his erection that jutted like steel from where she'd peeled back his fly.

"You will do as I say. Always."

"Yes, Mistress."

His tone was better, properly subdued, and she heated all over. As a reward, she slipped her fingers between his legs and drew his heavy sac forward so it bulged over the top of his fly opening. Hunger consumed her, but she'd ignore her need until Trance had been properly schooled.

"You will come when and *if* I allow it," she said, as she drew one long nail up his cock, tracing the deep blue veins that circled the shaft like thick vines.

He breathed out a curse, and at her arched brow, he said, "Yes, Mistress." Though he'd responded through clenched teeth, his voice had deepened, and she knew his hunger had climbed.

"Good boy," she murmured. "Very good." She scraped her nails over one nicely developed pec. "You should know that after tonight, someone else will have to instruct you. I don't do this for your pleasure, but for mine, and mine alone." She tweaked his nipple, enjoying his barely controlled intake of breath. "I don't do the normal exchange of trust and power. This is about power only. My power. Do you understand?"

"That's highly unusual, Mistress."

She stepped away. "It's how I work. If you object, I'll send you away now."

Several heartbeats ticked by before he finally gave her a slow nod. There was so much fight in him, and so much restraint. He was magnificent beyond belief.

Her loose clothing grew tight, confining, her skin aching for the hot, smooth contact of male muscle. She would touch him, but he would never touch her. No man would touch her with his hands, ever again.

Slowly, she stripped out of her blouse, noting the way Trance's gaze darkened at the sight of her breasts. They were bigger than they looked beneath the top, the nipples hard and stiff within the gold rings that circled them but didn't pierce.

She now wore only her skirt, high heels and the radio collar, a leather-wrapped steel casing full of electronics—a homing locator and a nasty shock mechanism a handler could activate with different intensities to either control her behavior or force her to shape-shift.

The good news was that outside the ten-mile radius of a handler in possession of a controller, the collar didn't work either to give away her location or to shock her. The bad news was that the collar couldn't be removed without the tiny bomb inside blowing her head off.

So yeah, she could tell herself that she could tamp down her memories, but every time she looked in the mirror, they looked right back at her.

Right now, though, her sub was looking at her, and she wasn't going to disappoint either of them.

Watching him, she cupped her breasts, pushed them together so he could imagine his cock between them, rubbing and thrusting, each upward stroke allowing her to swipe at the head with her tongue. She circled her peaked nipples with her thumbs until sensation swept from her breasts to her sex, which flooded with her juices.

Trance's throat muscles worked on a hard swallow, his nostrils flaring, and when his tongue snaked out to moisten his lips, she knew he was ready for the next step.

Dropping to her knees, she brought her mouth close to his cock so he could feel the stirring of her breath on his skin. No touching, though, except to peel down his pants. But when he rolled his hips toward her, nearly catching her mouth with his shaft, she sighed and reached for the leatherbound box behind him.

"Naughty boy," she murmured. "Time for your first lesson."

CHAPTER

Two

TRANCE WASN'T GOING to like this lesson.

Kira had warned him that his hypnotic powers might not fully work on Rik—especially once the beast within her emerged. If he could keep her calm and peaceful during these sessions, he could slowly win her over.

Still, it wasn't going to stop him from having to become Rik's bitch over the next few minutes.

Fuck. Just fuck.

"Did you say something?" Rik asked him.

Well, hell, no one said the job of an ACRO agent was easy. Definitely not, especially after seeing the cock ring she'd taken out of her bag of tricks. She wrapped the stiff leather around the base of his cock—it would keep him rock hard and stop him from coming.

"My boy doesn't like to be told what to do," she purred. "Doesn't like not being able to do exactly what he wants to, when he wants to. But in my world, you only get to do what I want."

"Do you want to come, Mistress? Because I can make you come if you put your hot, wet pussy on my cock—"

A squeeze and twist to his balls, coupled with a hard pinch to his nipple effectively shut his mouth. "You are not in charge here."

A drop of pre-cum had formed on the head of his cock—when he didn't say anything else, Rik took a long finger and spread the moisture, then pressed it lightly into the slit.

“So many possibilities—whips and chains—your skin would look so pretty marked with red.”

Safe. Sane. Consensual. Those words had been such a big part of his life for so long. But there was nothing safe, sane or consensual about this. He squirmed under her words, her touch, and she slid her tongue into the slit of his cock. When he gasped, she did it again and again and then stopped as if confused by what she'd done.

“Maybe some sounding. I think you'd like that—the cold metal sliding inside your cock until you lost all control of yourself.” She slid a finger along his ass. “Or maybe—”

No. No fucking way. He'd almost let the words slip out, but he held them back, held his breath and finally said, “Anything you want, Mistress.”

With that, she took his cock in her mouth and tortured him some more by stroking a slow, intimate rhythm.

“Yeah, oh, yeah, baby ...” he ground out.

“What did you call me?” She squeezed his balls in her palm again—hard enough to make him wince, and whimper with pleasure at the same time.

She was good—good enough to make him forget that this was a mission and just let himself go.

But this was a mission, and he had no desire to go back down this road again for real. Pretend was far safer—for him, for everyone involved, including the beautiful wolf woman who held his life in her hands. Being a submissive took a measure of control Trance did not have in these situations—his strength was better served when he was the one in charge of the scene. Otherwise, his reactions were far too volatile, and hurting anyone when he was in the throes of orgasm wasn't anything he wanted to do.

“Mistress,” he said through gritted teeth. “Make me come, Mistress.”

She chuckled, a sound that went up his spine, and then she stopped everything.

She was tugging at her collar. The collar in and of itself was an odd thing for a Dom to wear, but Trance knew exactly what the collar was all about. It was Itor's way of keeping her down, and they must've just sent through a major shock to her system. She was thrown off her game, and while that had saved his ass, literally, for the night, it made him angry enough to want to snap some necks at Itor.

It also made him realize that Itor might be closer than any of them thought. He'd have to work his magic, and fast, because she was ready to freak. If the beast came out now, he'd have no way to stop it—as strong as he was, he wasn't sure he could conquer Rik's wolf side.

But the beast didn't come out. Instead, she rose, her voice still steady and calm, and said, "Unfortunately, I have a prior engagement. I'd forgotten all about it."

And fuck it all if Itor was going to step on his game now, not after he'd been strung up like this. "I understand, Mistress."

"I can have someone come in—finish up here," she offered, but he shook his head. She undid the restraints quickly, but before she could unsnap the cock ring, he locked his gaze on hers.

"I don't want anyone but you, Mistress," he murmured, summoning just a thread of his hypnotic powers. "Want your permission to come. Please, help your boy."

She tugged at the collar again and then cocked her head and stared at him. He had to make her believe this was all her idea—giving her a command this soon would break the delicate balance of power he'd achieved thus far.

"You have my permission," she said softly. "Watch yourself, not me."

He lowered his gaze—his cock was bulging, begging for relief, the head red and angry as he began to touch himself.

"That's it, stroke yourself. Tell me how it feels."

"Feels so good, Mistress."

"I know you, boy. Know what you want—what you need."

“Yes.” His breath was fast now, his hand moving quickly, and he’d burst the cock ring off of himself if she made him wait much longer.

With one flick of a finger, she unsnapped the leather restraint, freeing him. He shot his load almost instantly, creamy, thick ropes of come hit his chest as he closed his eyes briefly and prayed he’d done the right thing.

He licked his lips and his voice was hoarse when he spoke again. “Mistress, thank you for letting me come.”

“You were a good boy,” she whispered.

“I’ll return. If you’ll have me.”

There was a long pause, and he held his breath, kept his eyes to the ground, as she hadn’t told him he could look up as of yet. This was a time to follow orders.

“I’ll have you—any way I want you,” she said finally. “Tomorrow night. The room at the end of the hall.”

When he heard the door close behind her, only then did he let himself sag to the ground.

LIKE ALL OF The Dungeon’s staff, Ulrika left through the back door. She hadn’t finished her shift, and the beast was raging with need. It was probably a huge mistake to not give it sex tonight, but she just couldn’t do it.

Something was wrong.

During her session with Trance, a mild buzz of electricity had vibrated through her collar, something that hadn’t happened in the three months since escaping Itor. The only reason she hadn’t bolted out of the club in a panic was that when Itor shocked her, there was nothing mild about it.

Chances were that the collar had developed a short or maybe someone nearby had a cell phone or MP3 player that operated on the same frequency. Still, the jolt had been enough to stun her right out of the play with Trance.

Which had sucked, because something about him made her all jittery and hot, as if she were coming down with the

mother of all fevers. She'd even taken him into her mouth, something she *never* did with any sub. And when he'd stroked himself off, it had taken a lot of discipline to keep from touching herself as she watched.

Not all of her clients—males and females—were looking for an orgasm. Many desired only to be dominated, to give in to a part of themselves that needed to please. Others wanted to get off, and for the most part, she could make them climax without ever touching their genitals with her hands.

As for her own orgasms, often she achieved completion by doing no more than spanking a sub. Rarely did she allow her clients to pleasure her, either with their tongues or cocks, but when she did, it happened while they were bound and helpless.

Funny, because even when Trance had been stretched out and tied up like a hunter's deer, there hadn't been anything helpless about him. His gaze had seduced her, his voice, smooth as brandy and a hundred times stronger, had intoxicated her, and his body, all hard flesh and silky skin, had robbed her of breath.

He wore sensual promise like a glove. She'd make him live up to that promise tomorrow. Sure, she never played with a client twice, but they hadn't completed their session tonight, and she was dying to get her hands—and toys—on him again.

Lifting her face to the night air, she sniffed, an instinctive action that went back to her childhood living in the mountains, and then later to Itor, when scenting, and identifying, a person before they arrived at her cell had helped her mentally prepare for whatever horrible thing they were going to put her through.

Now she smelled nothing but the faint odor of old grease from a corner fish-and-chips shop and the usual stench of vomit and piss from the alley behind the club. She moved

toward the street, which, at barely midnight, still ran loud with cars and pub-crawlers.

“Mistress?” A man stepped out in front of her from the shadowy recess of another building’s doorway, blocking her.

She smiled tightly, recognizing him from the club. She’d played with him once, weeks ago, and he’d been back every night since, trying to get her to play with him again. He’d been a satisfying enough sub, had liked his fun on the rough, humiliating side, which got the animal inside her off as much as anything, but his scent had been wrong, sour. With him, she’d fed her need to dominate, but hadn’t taken sex. This one had made her nervous in a way few people did.

“I don’t socialize outside of the club,” she said, moving to the side with the intention of stalking past him.

He blocked her path again. “I’ve tried to talk to you inside. Please, Mistress. I need you.”

Cold dread settled over her like a shroud. She’d dealt with nuts before, and they were generally easy to handle as long as she stayed in Dom mode. But this man ... Robert ... he didn’t strike her as a harmless nut as much as someone who was balancing on the edge of sanity.

“I’m sorry, Robert. But I can’t help you.”

His hand closed on her upper arm, and in a flash of violence she was dragged behind the club and slammed against the side of the building. The back of her skull cracked against the brick, momentarily stunning her. Robert’s heavy body held her in place, while one hand circled her throat. Panic welled up, her heart beating so hard she heard her pulse pounding in her ears. She could handle this, easily, if she allowed the beast out. She’d tear Robert apart, but it wouldn’t end there. Who knew how many innocents she’d kill before she regained control?

“I love you, Mistress,” he purred, his teeth scraping her cheek. “I need you to punish me. I’ve been very, very bad.”

It took everything she had to keep from trembling. His hands ... she couldn't bear them on her body. No man had touched her since *that day*.

The day she'd killed a man while in human form. The day that haunted her every night.

Now *she* did the touching. She had to do something, and fast, or the beast was going to rampage.

"Robert!" she snapped in her hardest Dom voice. "You will get down on your knees and bow your head to me while I consider how I'll punish you. Now. *Do it.*"

His breath caught, just a little hitch that told her he wanted to follow her command. His erection slammed into her belly, and a low groan vibrated his chest. "Yes, Mistress," he whispered, his eyes glazing over with anticipation.

Slowly, way too slowly, he went down to his knees before her, and bowed his head. This was good, but she couldn't get her hopes up. He'd be on his feet and on her before she could get out a scream.

Her mind worked quickly, measuring the distance to the street and the back door to the club. If she could knock him off balance, she had a shot at escaping.

"Kiss my shoe, worm. Lips only. No tongue."

With a shiver of pleasure, Robert doubled over. The moment his mouth touched her foot, she brought it up, crunching the toe of her walking boot into his face. She whirled, dashed into the alley as his roar of rage and pain followed her.

Something that felt like a bus hit her from behind. Her skirt tripped her up, and a scream lodged in her throat. She hit the pavement hard, and even as she rolled and jammed her knee between Robert's legs, his fist caught her in the jaw. Stinging pain bit into her cheek, and she tasted blood.

"Cunt," he spat through bloodied lips. "Who's getting punished now?"

Terror and too-fresh memories froze her muscles as he yanked up her skirt, but rage flew in on its heels. A curtain of red came down over her vision and her skin tightened as the beast clawed its way out. Oh, God ... it was coming and she couldn't stop it—

An enraged snarl echoed in the alley. For a split second, she thought the sound had been hers, until suddenly, Robert jerked. A hand yanked him upward so hard his head snapped forward and cracked against her temple. In an instant, Robert was facefirst in the side of the building. Trance had him in a headlock, and Jesus, the bloodcurdling snarl had been his.

“You fucking piece of shit.” Trance’s voice was a low, nasty drawl. “Come near her or this club again and I promise you, the cops will never find what’s left of your body. Do you understand?”

Robert went deathly pale, and even more so when Trance jerked him back and then slammed him into the wall again.

“Do. You. Understand?”

“Y-yes.”

Panting, Rik scrambled backward until she hit the bricks. She couldn't control her trembling as she sat there, trying to keep the beast at bay while Trance sent Robert packing, more than a little worse for wear. Later, she'd appreciate his brutal competence, the controlled, lethal power in his muscular body, but right now she needed to keep it together. The scent of Robert's blood in the air and the taste of her own in her mouth weren't helping things.

“Rik?” Trance eased toward her, slowly, as if she were a feral cat he didn't want to frighten away. Too late she realized that her eyes had probably changed, but she couldn't look away. His gaze ripped into hers, holding her captive in a way no rope, chains or manacles had ever done. “He's gone. Are you okay?”

His voice soothed her, brought her down gently and easily, until she no longer felt the itch to turn inside out and into a monster. A few feet away, he crouched on his heels. She watched him warily, managed to drag her gaze away to eye his hands, which she'd seen handle Robert with efficient skill, but which now rested tamely on his knees.

"I'm not going to touch you," he assured her, and she cursed herself for allowing her fear to show. "I just want to make sure you're all right."

She scrambled to her feet. "I—I have to go."

"I'll walk you."

"No!" She sucked in a shaky breath. With the cool night air came Trance's scent, earthy and male. He smelled like strength and power ... and safety.

She shook her head, because that was insane. There was no safe place for her on earth, and certainly no man could offer her that kind of haven. "Thank you. I'll take a cab."

"I'm walking you to a cab, then. No arguments."

She nodded, allowed him to walk her to the street, where he flagged a taxi that had been parked down the block. Only after she'd gotten in did she realize that he'd given her a command.

And she'd followed it.

CHAPTER

Three

DEVLIN O'MALLEY SHUT DOWN the computer in his office and contemplated going home, where the constant needs of the agency weren't ringing his phone, beeping on his computer or slamming into his office.

He'd been contemplating this for the past four hours—now it was almost midnight. And still he knew that even in the silence at home the constant needs of the agency would be bouncing around in his head, because thinking about work was a hell of a lot easier than thinking about Oz.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his chair, let the squeak of the leather comfort him. He was as at home here as he was in his house, but at least here he had a shitload of distractions.

Like the latest status reports from the dozen operatives on missions around the globe. Or the request for rare supplies from the Mystic Research department in the Paranormal Division. Or the scores of other issues from ACRO's other thirteen divisions, and countless departments functioning under their umbrellas.

Fuck.

He stood and stretched and grabbed a pile of folders to take home with him. The halls were cool and quiet—deserted save for security posted at every entrance and exit, a necessary means of keeping ACRO and her operatives safe. The men and women who kept him safe simply nodded as he walked past, knowing their boss didn't appreciate extraneous conversation—more often than not,

Dev's head was too filled with plans and he found greetings to be a distraction.

His car was waiting for him at the entrance to the building, brought around and checked thoroughly by ACRO staff who'd been alerted by the push of a button on his desk before leaving his office.

He drove the black bulletproof Hummer home, well aware that security followed him. Since getting his sight back last year he sometimes refused a driver, forcing himself to enjoy all the things he'd wanted to do when he was blind. He parked the big car in the driveway and looked around before letting himself inside his big, empty house and closing the door, surveying it more out of habit than worry—the ACRO compound had fortress-tight security, but that didn't mean he could get sloppy.

These days, it was all about forcing himself to do everything. None of it was working, although he put up a hell of a good front. ACRO was running as smoothly as could be—beyond Ryan Malmstrom's MIA status, all operatives were alive and accounted for at the moment. Granted, the situation changed on a daily basis, but Dev slept better knowing the whereabouts of all of the men and women in his charge.

Still, even with that knowledge, if he got into bed now, all he would do was stare at the wall of the guest bedroom. Since Oz died, Dev hadn't moved back into the master bedroom, but he had thought more than once about razing the entire house.

Marlena, his personal assistant, advised against it gently, as was her way. For now she'd persuaded him. But on nights like tonight, he wished he could tear it down himself, brick by brick.

The clock chimed at the same time the doorbell rang and he cursed as he stubbed his toe getting to the door. He fucking tripped more now than he ever did when he was

blind, although his second sight hadn't diminished when his sight came back.

A total stranger waited there on the other side of the door, impatience radiating off him even though he leaned against the door frame as if he hadn't a care in the world.

The man was take-your-fucking-breath-away good-looking, in a rugged, I'll-kill-you-if-you-look-at-me-wrong way.

Dev was pretty sure he was looking at him wrong.

How he got past security—and Dev's own second sight—was the first thing to enter Devlin's mind. In fact, the phrase *rip someone a new asshole* was at the forefront, and he reached for his cell phone to make a few calls. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm a new recruit. The guy at the gate dropped me here."

"What guy?" Dev growled as he dialed.

"I didn't get his name. He had dark hair. Dark eyes. Just said, 'Devlin will be expecting you.'"

The front gate answered Dev's call before Dev could respond to the stranger. "What can we do for you, Mr. O'Malley?"

Dev could barely breathe, but he forced his voice to remain neutral. "I'd like to know who authorized a new recruit to be dropped here."

"New recruit? Sir, that would never happen. There was a new recruit waiting here for transport, but he disappeared."

"Well, he's reappeared. At my house."

"We'll send someone immediately."

"Do that." Dev hung up so he didn't have to listen to any more of the man's excuses. "Gate security says you weren't given a ride. He says you simply disappeared."

"Some dude drove me here. Oh, yeah, he also said to tell you that it's spring. Like you wouldn't know that or something."