



SYDNEY CROFT
TAKEN BY FIRE

'Croft redefines sizzle and spark with weather-driven passion'
Romantic Times

ROUGE
SUSPENSE

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About the Book

The final novel in Sydney Croft's paranormal adventure series

A product of genetic manipulation, Melanie Milan shares a body with her malevolent sister Phoebe. A sleek, blonde predator with a heart of pure darkness, Phoebe puts their body through the wicked underbelly of sex for thrills - when she's not igniting her pyrokinetic skills for an evil organization bent on taking over the world. Melanie rarely gets out to play - much less fall in love. But that changes when rival ARCO agent Stryker Wills shows up, with a mission to take out the woman who torched his partner.

An operative with rare abilities, Stryker soon realises that the woman he's about to kill isn't the murderous fire starter he's hunting. And as long as Melanie stays in control she's his best ally to bringing down Phoebe. But can he save one sister while destroying the other...?

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*.

Also by Sydney Croft

Riding the Storm
Unleashing the Storm
Seduced by the Storm

Tempting the Fire
Taming the Fire

TAKEN BY FIRE

Sydney Croft



Prologue

The acrid stench of burning flesh filled the air, tangling with the sound of screams and the sight of a man engulfed in flames. Gunfire rang out, clean, crisp pops that seemed distant and unimportant.

The man on fire was too distracting. He flailed, running blindly into trees until he hit the ground and rolled, but even as the flames began to snuff out, his movements flagged, until he was nothing but a charred, quivering lump on the jungle floor. Gray wisps of smoke rose from his body, reaching out to her, telling her the fire had done its evil work ...

Melanie Milan jackknifed upright in bed, her lungs seizing in terror, a cold sweat coating every inch of her body. Panic wrapped around her as she slapped a trembling hand down on the mattress, groping blindly for something familiar. Anything.

Please, please, let me be alone.

Sweet relief washed through her at the feel of her own satin comforter. Now that her vision had cleared of the dream-smoke, she could see the position of the alarm clock, the mirror near the foot of the bed, the window that was cracked to allow a cool breeze inside.

She was at the Rome apartment. Thank God. She never knew where she was going to wake up.

Usually, waking up in the body she shared with her sister was the nightmare, but sometimes, like tonight, her dreams were far worse than waking up in some strange bed, possibly with some strange man. Or woman. Or both.

The burning man's screams still echoed in her ears, and the foul odors clogged her nose. It didn't matter that she hadn't actually seen or heard the man burning alive. She knew it had happened, and she knew her sister was responsible.

Seeing Phoebe's memories as nightmares was one of the worst things about sharing a body and brain. Melanie wasn't consciously aware of anything that happened while Phoebe had control of their body, but sometimes, like now, Phoebe's actions played out on the movie screen of Melanie's mind.

This particular event had happened eight months ago—Melanie knew, because she'd suddenly come awake to take over the body after Phoebe retreated during a rare moment of terror. The first thing Mel had seen was the face of an extremely pissed-off man who was trying to kill her. The second thing was the dead, burned man on the ground, and she'd instantly known Phoebe was responsible.

And now, thanks to her nightmares, she was bone-chillingly aware of exactly how it had all gone down.

Melanie flopped back down on the pillow, afraid to sleep ... but what sucked was that she was even more afraid to be awake.

CHAPTER

One

ROME WASN'T A place where Stryker Wills was comfortable. Sure, the women were gorgeous, the food amazing, and fucking and eating were two of his favorite pleasures in life. But man, there was a lot of history here he could potentially destroy. The cathedrals and the Colosseum, not to mention the Vatican, had all survived hundreds, or even thousands, of years and he could take them out in one fell swoop with a flash of temper.

Knowing that made him more wary than usual. He'd been tense all morning, despite the beautiful women who'd been propositioning him as he ate at an outdoor café—he didn't like mixing business with pleasure. And this trip was business, pure and simple, as he tried to get a bead on the fire-and-ice woman, a split-personalities agent who'd killed his friend and nearly taken Stryker out—twice—eight months earlier in the Amazon jungle.

Stryker had been out for blood ever since—his easygoing personality fading into the background as his hunger to avenge his fellow murdered ACRO agent grew with each passing day.

Now the woman responsible for the murder was close. His hands fisted and he realized that he was no longer the

same man who'd left ACRO for this assignment all those months ago.

Itor operative Phoebe Milan had killed his supervisor and friend, Akbar Shatar, setting him on fire while Stryker watched, helpless to do anything. And when Stryker returned to ACRO after Phoebe escaped, he'd gotten his new instructions from Devlin O'Malley, head of the ACRO agency.

Kill her, Dev told him. No further discussion needed.

It was an instruction ACRO agents heard often. As an operative with rare abilities, Stryker had actually lived on ACRO's massive compound since birth, as his parents were also both longtime agents with the Agency for Covert Rare Operatives.

His parents had assumed he'd have abilities, but man, had they been surprised at both the type and the extent. Mating a telekinetic with an excedosapien with superstrength hadn't seemed like a crazy idea at the time—and most agents tended to marry other agents anyway. But the first time two-year-old Stryker's temper tantrum ripped a fault through the middle of his house, everyone at ACRO had taken quite an interest in him.

So yeah, he'd grown up within the organization and, thanks to that, he was one of the few agents with special abilities who didn't have major adjustment issues, but that didn't mean that sometimes he didn't feel intimidated by his own might.

He could cause earthquakes and volcanoes. Tsunamis too, of course. Mudslides. Avalanches. Thing was, once he started them, he couldn't stop them, so he had to make sure to put just the right spin on his power. Typically, if he was forced to use it, he'd start small. Really, really small, because hey, there was always room to advance to life-threatening.

But there was a downside to his gift—there always was, for all the agents.

Stryker didn't have to watch the news to find out about natural disasters that occurred globally. Most were underreported anyway, but he was conscious of every single one, no matter their size.

Mainly, because they pulled at his libido, an unfortunate and common side effect for any elemental. Mother Nature had a way of getting back at humans who could manipulate her world, and her nasty punishment for Stryker was a hard-on whenever someone used elemental powers around him—or when the planet rocked out an earthquake.

It was a constant—ranging from mild to highly uncomfortable—reminder that he had no control over Mother Nature at all, because even though he got advance notice, it came only mere seconds before the destruction, leaving no time to actually help any victims in the path of the oncoming natural disaster.

Most of the time, his sense of guilt was immense. More than once he'd gone to the ACRO scientists and psychics to seek a way to refine his abilities into an earlier warning system, but to no avail.

You can't beat yourself up over this, Dev would tell him, but Stryker would anyway.

Over the years, Stryker had watched men and women filter into ACRO—most dragged in, kicking and screaming until they could get their powers under control. He'd been there, done that with the control thing, and by the time he'd hit the all-too-volatile teen years, complete with raging hormones and plenty of testosterone, he'd gotten it. He knew, for the most part, how to keep his temper in check and, more important, the reasoning behind the why.

The next years found him learning to temper his ... temper, so he could use his power to help, not hurt. Because that's what ACRO agents did—they helped to save the world, thanks to their blend of extraordinary gifts.

Some could control the weather. Others could communicate with animals, some with ghosts, and there was a small army of men—excedosapiens—who had superstrength or -speed.

ACRO was a pretty cool organization that assisted the government in saving the world from evil—and from Itor Corp, its most dangerous enemy to date.

Dangerous not just because of its self-serving, take-over-the-world goals, but because of the operatives it employed. Operatives like Stryker's current target. Phoebe was the fiery bitch and her alter identity was the icy one; from what little information ACRO had been able to gather, it seemed that the icy personality was the more vulnerable of the two.

Stryker had seen that firsthand, would wake nightly from the same recurrent nightmare that played out as it had in real life in the jungle, with the icy personality pleading with him for her life—but he refused to let his resolve down.

He would kill her as soon as he got the chance, because his nightmares about the smell of burning flesh, and Akbar's screams of pain, were just as vivid.

"Can I get you another espresso?" The young waitress, dark and curvy, was asking, before peering into his eyes. "I'm sorry, signor, I don't mean to stare, but your eyes—they look like ... a kaleidoscope."

He nodded, had heard that before. His eyes were different, just like he was, crystal clear with a hint of blue and green, but the rest of him was classic all-American—blond, lean, and tall. "I'm all set here."

He stood to leave, ignoring the woman's continuing gaze, and that's when he felt it. A chill passed through the air, as if someone had poured ice down his back. But when he raised his head, he noted he wasn't the only one feeling the effects.

Spring had just hit and Rome was brimming with tourists. Although March in Italy was always iffy weather-

wise, Stryker knew this sudden chill had nothing at all to do with Mother Nature.

And still, his body responded as if a major earthquake was about to happen. A pull that got him up and moving fast, hands jammed in his pockets to hide his sudden arousal.

He did not want to get closer to that bitch—not like this, had not thought through the fact that her powers could be a major turn-on to him. Mainly because he hadn't been affected at all the first time they'd met. He didn't know if it was because of the horror of watching Akbar die, but this was an unfortunate development neither he nor his trainers had considered.

Shit.

He hated her—did not want to need sex because of her. He cursed her as he walked against the icy wind, taking in the icicles hanging off storefronts and the hoarfrost coating windows. He knew he was close.

His gaze strayed upward, and he caught sight of a woman on a balcony, a blond woman who waved her arms wildly and was apparently having a rather animated conversation with ... herself.

It was the ice lady, and although he much preferred her to the one who shot fire, he had to stop both of them. ASAP.

Quickly but covertly, he stashed all but one of his weapons and let himself into the secured building—illegally, of course—and headed up the stairs to the third floor.

Her icy door knocker gave her apartment away, if the film of frost on her door hadn't.

He drank the potion ACRO scientists had given him, the one that would render him immune to both of Phoebe's powers, albeit for only a few minutes, but it did nothing to stop his arousal. If anything, the salty liquid seemed to heighten his sexual needs.

He cracked his fingers. He could control himself for a few minutes. That would be more than enough time.

MELANIE MILAN KNEW she'd just done something incredibly stupid, but at the moment, she was far too pissed off to care. She was so pissed, in fact, that if her apartment—or, more accurately, Phoebe's apartment—were any higher than the third floor, she'd take a swan dive from the balcony just to teach her sister a lesson. A nice, long hospital stay would go a long way toward making Phoebe miserable.

All around her, the air had gone still. The mild March weather had taken a temporary vacation thanks to her temper tantrum, and on the streets below, in probably a three-block radius, it was winter again, complete with frost and ice. Shivering, but from fury, not the cold, Melanie went back inside the apartment, which had also gone chilly, because her fit of anger had started in the kitchen, where she'd found her pet goldfish impaled on the tines of a fork.

The fish was Phoebe's handiwork, a punishment for something Melanie wasn't even aware of yet. And now, because she'd just drained the battery on their special powers, Phoebe would devise another way to torture her.

She was so tired of this.

Cursing up a storm, she trudged to the bathroom where, sure enough, there was a note taped to the mirror—one of three methods of communication she used with Phoebe.

You stupid, lazy cow. You know I hate to find dishes in the sink. How many times do I have to tell you to make sure the kitchen is clean? And do the fucking laundry today. I want my favorite jeans to be clean and pressed.

Melanie's hands shook as she ripped the note in half and tossed it into the garbage. She was sick of being Phoebe's slave, sick of being abused, and sick of the face that stared back at her in the mirror. It wasn't hers. The long, blond hair was Phoebe's—Mel would prefer a chin-length cut. The

ice blue, bloodshot eyes that spoke of late nights and drugs that left Melanie exhausted and hungover were Phoebe's doing. Worst of all, the swollen lips that had probably done some wicked things to God only knew how many men and women were all Phoebe's.

Phoebe liked sex, drugs, and violence, often all at the same time, and it was always Melanie who paid the price when she woke up in the body Phoebe had used hard.

At least this morning Melanie had awakened in their own bed instead of some stranger's. That was always a plus.

Melanie tightened the sash on her robe, though even that wasn't hers, was it? Almost everything in the apartment, from the furniture to the clothes to the food, was Phoebe's. Every time Melanie bought something for herself, Phoebe destroyed it. Melanie's only possessions consisted of a few paperbacks and college textbooks in the nightstand drawer, and her mother's gold ring in the wall safe that Phoebe had promised not to break into.

Mel also had a few files on the computer—her college courses. It was stupid, she knew, but she wanted desperately to do something for herself, even if that something was an art degree she'd never use. Obviously, when she had possession of the body she and Phoebe shared for only around ten hours a day, the degree was going to take forever to earn, and at some point would require Phoebe's cooperation.

How Melanie was going to manage that was the question of the century. Especially when all they did now was fight and see who could hurt who the most. Mel had no idea how she was going to pay Phoebe back for killing her fish ... though as she eyed a pair of scissors on the counter, she wondered how her sister would like *really* short hair ...

The buzzing of a cellphone reminded her that she needed to get her butt in gear. The ringtone belonged to Itor's big boss, Alek.

Who was also their father. Not that he behaved like one. And why should he? He was nothing but a sperm donor who had jerked off into a cup so his semen could be used to fertilize an egg in a petri dish. Melanie had no idea how he treated Phoebe, but she knew very well how he treated her. The son of a bitch despised her, acted like she was a traitor, even though she had nothing to do with Itor, didn't know anyone inside the operation, and, really, didn't even know what the agency's entire purpose was. Phoebe had kept everything a mystery, and only by piecing together tiny chunks of information over the years had Melanie learned what little she did know.

Such as the fact that Phoebe was some sort of superagent, and Itor employed a lot of people like her.

Like Melanie, whose gift of ice was the opposite of Phoebe's fiery touch. But since Mel had refused to use her ability to hurt people—even after being tortured—Itor considered her useless.

Assholes.

Melanie might be useless, but she wasn't helpless. Eight months ago, she'd encountered Itor's enemies—and what was that saying, the enemy of my enemy is my friend?

Since then, Mel had spent every spare moment trying to find the people she'd seen in the jungle, had questioned Phoebe about them, had scoured her memories raw in an effort to glean any information about the group of individuals who might be able to help lift her out of this hellish existence. So far, she had very little to go on, but she wasn't giving up.

The cellphone rang again, and Mel hurried to the bedroom. The text message was in code, as usual, so she had no freaking clue what it said. If it had been important, there would have been nothing on the screen but an exclamation point—which meant that Melanie had best retreat into the darkness of her mind and force Phoebe out.

Thank God that wasn't the case this time. She'd just drained their abilities, and she needed to charge. Quickly. Before Phoebe took over and discovered that she couldn't use her gift.

The problem was that charging up meant finding a man, and not only was Melanie not practiced in that particular skill, but she wasn't allowed to leave the building. Phoebe had made some very dangerous enemies a couple of weeks ago when an arms deal went bad, and apparently the small but deadly organization was hunting her.

A knock at the door made her jump, which was silly. The building was owned by Itor, was supersecure, and when she glanced at the clock, she realized it was time for the mail, and she was expecting a new textbook.

Smiling, she opened the door ... and froze. The person on the other side wasn't an Itor guard delivering packages.

It was the very man she'd been looking for. The man who, eight months ago, had watched his buddy go up in flames, thanks to Phoebe. The man who had promised to kill her the next time they met.

She might have wanted to find him, but not like this, and a scream welled in her throat even as she tried to slam the door shut. But he was fast, and he moved inside with the speed of a striking snake, pinning her to the wall with his big body while fisting her hair in one hand and pressing the tip of a knife into the soft spot beneath her chin with the other. He kicked the door closed, and now she was completely, utterly helpless.

"So, Phoebe," he said in a smooth, calm voice that was far more frightening than if he'd yelled. "Wish I could say it was nice seeing you again. You should know that if you try to use your fire or ice, you'll end up with a blade in your brain. Got it?"

Oh, God. Wanting to find this man or the people he worked for was a huge mistake. Now she wanted to retreat, to let Phoebe out to handle this. Even without her gift,

Phoebe was lethal—Mel had seen videos of her sister fighting like some sort of martial arts master. This was the kind of thing Phoebe lived for.

But she would be beyond pissed that Mel had drained the battery, and the last time that had happened ... Mel shuddered.

No, somehow, she had to handle this herself.

“Well?” He pressed the knife, which had to be of a nonmetal construction to pass through the building’s metal detectors, into her skin a little harder. “Are we clear on this?”

“Yes,” she rasped. “Please ... I’m not ... I’m not Phoebe.”

His eyes, hypnotic, swirling with sparks of anger, narrowed. “Who are you?”

“M-Melanie. Phoebe is—” She swallowed drily, hoping he’d buy what was sort of a lie. “Phoebe is my twin sister. She’s not here. She’s at the market. She’ll be home soon.”

He smiled, his full lips peeling back from straight, white teeth, and wow, if he wasn’t the scariest man she’d ever seen—outside of her father anyway—she’d have been seriously attracted to him. “See, the thing is, I know she’s not at the market. I know she’s you.”

“We’re identical twins—”

“You’re the same person. Split personality.” He tugged on her hair as he moved in even closer, so the entire hard length of his body was pressed against hers. He was bigger, stronger, and if that was the point he was trying to make, he’d succeeded. “So if you aren’t Phoebe, why don’t you tell me who you are at the moment.”

Oh, crap. Very few people knew what she was, even inside Itor. Granted, this guy was wrong, but he was on the right track. This wasn’t a case of multiple personality syndrome. Broken down into the most simple of concepts, this was a case of one egg splitting into two and then being shoved together again in a lab. Melanie and Phoebe really

were two very different people fighting for control of the same body.

And unfortunately, Phoebe was a lot stronger, and had been for years.

"I told you, I'm Melanie," she insisted. "Who are you?"

"You don't remember?"

"I remember some." She jerked her head to the side in a futile attempt to break his hold. "But I'd remember a lot better if you took away the knife."

"Nice try," he said.

"You can't expect me to chat while I'm worried about bleeding out."

One corner of his mouth tipped up in amusement, which pissed her off, because bleeding out wasn't on her list of funny topics. "And you can't expect me to hand over the advantage so you can freeze me to death."

He shifted, and ... good God, did he actually have an erection? She squirmed, and yes, there was a definite hard bulge in the front of his pants that was pressing into her belly. How nice that the thought of killing her turned him on.

"I can't freeze you to death." She glared at him. "I'm out of power. Used it all up a little while ago, and it takes several hours to recharge." Took sex to recharge too, but he didn't need to know that.

One blond eyebrow cocked up. "Now, why don't I believe you?"

She exhaled slowly and tried to keep her temper in check. "Dunno. Maybe because you're an asshole?" So much for the temper.

He snorted. "Like I haven't heard that before."

"No doubt you have." She swallowed, winced at the bite of the blade in her skin. "Look, if I could turn you into an ice cube, I'd have done it by now, knife or no knife. So tell me who you are, and let me go."

There was a long, tense silence, and then he backed off, but he stood a few feet away, coiled like a spring, and she had the feeling he was ready to put her down if she so much as flinched.

"Name's Stryker. And I'm guessing you remember me."

"You tried to kill me in some godforsaken jungle. You think I'd forget that?" She raised her chin and met his unnerving gaze head-on. "Are you here to finish the job?"

He considered her question for a long time, which did nothing for her nerves. Finally, he moved toward her. Stalking her.

A fresh jolt of fear spiked through her as she retreated. His prowling gait backed her all the way into the kitchen, where she bumped up against the counter.

"Am I here to kill you?" he asked softly, in a voice that filled her with dread. "Honestly? Yes."

A ball of terror dropped into the pit of her stomach. She couldn't speak, couldn't even move as he inched closer. He could have been a little less honest.

"But I'd really rather kill fire-bitch, so get her for me."

Okay. Yes, she needed to get Phoebe. This was so beyond Melanie's ability to handle. Concentrating, she called out to Phoebe in her mind. No response, as expected. For the first couple of hours after Melanie woke up, Phoebe was often next to impossible to summon.

Please, Phoebe, wake up! Still nothing. Dammit!

"Well?" Stryker's voice was gravelly with impatience, and Melanie began to sweat.

"I can't reach her."

"Too bad for you, then." The hand holding the wicked-looking knife came up, level with her heart, only a foot away. "Did you enjoy it?" he growled. "Did you like seeing my friend burn?"

Hurt and murder swirled in Stryker's eyes, and she knew her life could very well end in about five seconds.

“I’m sorry ... I didn’t do it ... it was horrible.” Stinging tears welled up, but they didn’t drown out the visions of that man dying the way he had.

“You’re sorry.” He bared his teeth and stepped closer, pressing the tip of the knife into her breastbone. “Well, your *sorry* means jack shit.”

She couldn’t help it. She trembled so hard that the blade vibrated, punctured the fabric of her robe, and bit into her skin. His raw curse blistered the air, and he jerked the knife away.

“I’m not doing this with you,” he snapped. “Until Phoebe grows a pair and decides to show her psychotic face, you’re coming with me.”

Panic wrapped around Mel, squeezing until her breath was coming in shallow pants. She wasn’t stupid; she might not be safe right this minute, but at least she was in an apartment she knew, in a building owned by Itor. If she left with him, her chances for survival plummeted. “I can’t. I can’t leave. Phoebe will be mad. I have laundry to do, and I have to eat, and ...” God, she was babbling, but at this point, she didn’t care.

Stryker looked at her like she was nuts. “Phoebe will be fine.” He reached for her, but she wheeled away, knocking dishes off the counter.

He cornered her near the pantry, and terror ripped through her. “Please don’t. Please don’t make me go. I can help you—”

“This isn’t up for debate, and begging has no effect on me.”

Her gaze darted around the kitchen. A weapon. She needed a weapon. Anything. But there was nothing. He was going to take her, and she was going to die. Abruptly, defeat closed in on her like a shroud. Years of living only half a life collided with the knowledge that the only glimmer of hope she’d had—finding Itor’s enemies—turned out to be a letdown. Itor’s enemies wanted her dead, and

now she could do nothing but pray for mercy, something that had never, ever worked before.

"The thing with the knife," she rasped. "In my brain. Would it hurt?"

"What?" He blinked, clearly thrown by the question. "I guess I could make it hurt. Why?"

"Would you do it so it won't?"

"Look, if you cooperate—"

"I'm not going to cooperate," she said. "So just do it. But ... I don't want it to hurt." She couldn't believe she was asking her murderer for a favor. She really had lost it.

Stryker looked completely dumbfounded, but at least he'd lost that homicidal glaze in his eyes. He stared. Scrubbed his hand over his face. Took a step back, even. As if maybe her crazy was contagious. After a long moment, he made the knife disappear into his leather jacket.

"What's your game?" he said gruffly. "Phoebe isn't going to hurt you. I did a little research into your condition, and from what I learned, alters are formed to protect. Not hurt. At least, not hurt each other."

Laughing bitterly, she gestured to the fork-impaled fish near the coffeemaker. "That was punishment for leaving her with no coffee. You don't want to know what she did to my parakeet."

"Well, there don't appear to be any other pets she can kill, so what else can she do to you?"

"You can't even begin to imagine." She wrapped her arms around her body, mainly to hold herself up. "I mean, I give as good as I get, but she has her creepy colleagues on her side." Mel didn't have anyone, and hadn't since her mother died.

His gaze sharpened. "Her colleagues? You work for Itor too, don't you?"

"Only Phoebe works for them," she said tiredly. "I don't really know what they do."

There was skepticism in his voice when he said, "So you're saying you have no idea what was going on in the Amazon when you were there?"

She shook her head. "The last thing I remember before coming to in the jungle was being on a plane with Itor people who wouldn't say a word to me. And then I was in the jungle and there was that man ... and you were trying to kill me."

"Yeah, well, your buddy Phoebe and her Itor henchmen were planning to murder three dozen people, all to gain a powerful weapon." He paused as though expecting her to deny his accusation, but she knew her sister and father well enough to know that what Stryker was saying was no doubt true. When she said nothing, he continued. "Her team managed to slaughter some innocent people as well as kill my friend, and I'm here to make sure Phoebe answers for what she did." He gestured at her robe. "So get dressed, and come with me." When she stood there, paralyzed by indecision, he cocked his head, asked her softly, "Why did you ask me for help?"

Her heart nearly stopped. She'd forgotten how, in her confusion over what had happened in the jungle, her shock at the death and destruction, she'd whispered a terrified "Help me" to Stryker, even though he'd clearly rather have killed her.

"Because I was afraid." She'd been desperate, terrified, and grasping at the first glimmer of hope she'd seen in years. Itor's enemy could help her, right?

But then reality had set in at the murder in his eyes, and she'd cut her losses and run.

"Are you afraid now?" His voice was so deceptively quiet.

"Yes."

"Good," he said, as he shoved her toward the bedroom. "At least you're smart. Get dressed."

That she was out of options was now obvious. She'd have to go with him and either convince him to help her, or leave their fate to Phoebe. She brushed past him. "Don't want to kill me while I'm in my pajamas, huh?" Her gallows humor came out in a thin voice that only emphasized the danger of her situation.

"Behave, and maybe I won't need to kill you at all. At least, not right away."

She stumbled to a halt at the bedroom doorway. "What do you mean?"

"I might have other uses for you," he said, sounding almost disappointed, as though he really wanted to kill her, but a smarter though less appealing option had come to mind. "Now stop talking and start dressing."

His tone said there was no room to argue, and really, when it came right down to it, Stryker couldn't do anything to her that hadn't been done before. And if he wanted to kill her, she'd die. If he was some sort of good guy, she'd probably end up in a mental ward somewhere, and Phoebe wouldn't have the freedom to torment her.

So ... a mental ward or death.

Yep, things were looking up.

CHAPTER

Two

MELANIE WAS MAYBE the worst would-be hostage ever—or the smartest. Begging for death was a brilliant move to throw him off track, except Stryker didn't think she was kidding. At all.

She appeared genuinely afraid of her alter personality and, having met that Phoebe bitch personally, he could understand.

The forked fish on the counter confirmed that if what Mel told him about how her alter ego tortured her proved true, she was truly living a horror show existence. Having enemies was one thing, but sharing a body with one ... well, he could read the fear wafting off Melanie in waves.

If she wasn't totally shitting him. And while he'd listened in on the ACRO scientists discussing multiple personality disorder—though they'd also called it dissociative identity disorder—he still firmly believed that Phoebe and Melanie were both the same person—and they should be punished.

But he'd get a lot more satisfaction taking it out on that fire-bitch. And the only way to ensure he could take his time and maybe even torture some Itor intel out of terrified Mel before he met Phoebe again was to get her the hell out of here and into the ACRO safe house.

Melanie moved into the bedroom and attempted to shut the door between them.

He slammed a flat palm out, making contact with the door and pushing it wide open. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

She started at that, pulled the robe more tightly around her. He conceded her some privacy by angling away from her slightly, so he could still see her in his peripheral vision. She let the robe hang open as she turned to the side and slid on a pair of purple, lacy underwear. He couldn't miss the curve of her breast, the hint of a nipple, and he wanted to see her with that robe off completely.

Which was odd, considering she'd killed his friend and tried to do the same to him. Usually, he didn't find that such a turn-on.

Except Melanie ... she was different.

In the case of multiple personality disorder within special-ability types, the more timid personality is usually the dominant, the ACRO psychologists had explained to him. If she's stressed, the stronger personalities will come out to protect her.

Stryker was walking a fine line with that, but so far, the only woman in front of him was Melanie. And he sure planned on stressing her more, and soon.

Finally, she shook the robe off, keeping her gaze averted from his the entire time.

He shifted, his erection nearly to the point of painful, and fuck it all, he would need relief soon. Just because the woman's ice tantrum was over didn't mean that the atmospheric shift didn't fuck with his cock.

And he knew she'd noticed, both earlier and again now when she slid a furtive glance his way and quickly went back to pulling on a pair of tight, dark jeans and a black sweater cut low, with a pair of leather boots that he hoped like hell she could run in, if need be.

"I'm ready," she said finally.

He looked her over. "Good. Let's go."

He motioned for her to walk ahead of him. She hesitated, and then grabbed a jacket hanging off a rack by the front door.

"You're going to act like you know me," he instructed, his hand on the knob. "Slip your arm through mine. Smile. Pretend you're Phoebe."

They walked down the flights of stairs and out the front door of the building with no problems. The safe house was about half a mile away on foot, a nice stroll through some heavily populated areas, which would be great.

They just had to pass through two residential neighborhoods, the first of which was where he'd stored the gun and Taser, since he knew he'd never get them through Itor's security at the apartment. And they were there, right behind a Dumpster parked in a narrow alley, and so he tucked the Taser into the side pocket of his cargo pants and the gun in his front pocket.

Stryker felt a tingle of warning and he began to walk faster, even as the passages between the buildings became more narrow, closing in on them as quickly as the footfalls behind them did. Melanie kept up, and for a second he thought maybe they'd be okay, until ...

"Hey, Phoebe!" an angry male voice called out, and Stryker and Melanie both turned to see two men stalking toward them.

Too fast.

"Any idea who they are?" he asked.

Melanie looked between them and him. "Maybe ... and they don't look happy."

They didn't, were too close for a quick escape—and Stryker knew a fight was in his future.

"Phoebe, we're here to collect on the money you owe us."

"I don't owe you anything," Melanie told them.

“You lose at poker, you pay a price,” one of them said, his voice level despite clenched fists.

Stryker growled, “Why don’t you just back off?”

Instead of doing that, the taller of the two men heaved a small metal Dumpster into the air with one hand and slammed it back down to the ground with the ease Stryker had come to associate with an excedosapien—humans who possessed either superstrength or superspeed, but never both.

“They’re not Itor,” Melanie said quietly, and yes, Stryker knew that too, had seen the flash of a tattooed palm as the man began his Dumpster toss.

Things never really ever did go as planned, but this time, he knew he could be fucked royally.

These men weren’t Itor, but they could be just as bad. This was a gang of men and women with superpowers who had formed some kind of rogue upstart agency. Or, more accurately, a terrorist organization. He’d been warned about them thanks to The Aquarius Group, ACRO’s sister agency based in London, whose operatives were on standby to help him with situations like this.

Except he really didn’t have time for a phone call right now.

These men and women didn’t have any loyalty among them. Bonded by anger and the glyphlike ink on their palms, they fought dirty, had no desire to learn to control their strength or channel their powers appropriately.

And it looked like they pretty much wanted Phoebe dead. Unfortunately, Melanie would take the brunt of the action, although by the weary look on her face, she was used to this happening.

“Phoebe, you need to come with us,” Dumpster Guy said, his Italian accent thick with anger, and yeah, Phoebe wasn’t exactly the make-friends-easily type.

“You want me, come get me, assholes,” Melanie called back fiercely, and while Stryker appreciated the sentiment,

the invitation she'd tossed out would only make them angrier.

"Now's not the time to grow a spine," he muttered. He wanted to tell her to run, but if the guys had backup, they'd catch her. No, she was safer waiting for him, trying to stay out of the way and behind him. "If you want her, you'll need to go through me."

Widening his stance, he sank into a defensive position that gave them an eyeful of his pistol. He didn't want to have to use it, not out in the open like this, but letting these assholes know he had it couldn't hurt.

Dumpster Guy just grinned. It was the short guy who charged Stryker, slamming him easily to the ground, jarring the pistol loose and sending it clattering across the cobblestone paving. A railroad spike of pain shot up his spine and rattled his skull.

Strength. Definitely strength for both excedos, he thought groggily as he rolled away and shoved to his feet. Shortshit, his eyes glittering with blood thirst, threw a punch. Stryker ducked, felt the whisper of air caress his cheek as the blur of a fist flew by. Hungry for his own shot, he spun, driving his heel into the guy's sternum, and then he used the momentum of landing to make another sweep with his leg. Shortshit yelped in surprise and pain as Stryker's foot made contact with his ribs.

A satisfying crunch echoed off the surrounding walls, audible even over the sound of traffic at the ends of the alley, and yeah, it was worth getting the crap kicked out of him every couple of weeks during training with Ender and Trance in order to learn the excedos' weaknesses.

He wheeled around to avoid an incoming strike from Dumpster and thanked his lucky stars these guys were strong, but not fast. The trick would be avoiding a killing blow while taking them to the ground.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mel, backed against a wall. She held his pistol in shaking hands, and even from