

Excerpt from *Under the Moon...*

## **Chapter One**

*Society views goddesses the same way they view psychics—most people don't believe in us, and since there are only about a hundred goddesses in the United States, skeptics rarely have occasion to be proven wrong. Some people have open minds but still no reason to seek to use a goddess's talents. If you choose a public career as a goddess, you join in the responsibility for image maintenance. Help us keep public opinion positive.*

**—The Society for Goddess Education and Defense,  
Public Relations Handbook**

When Quinn Caldwell's cell phone rang, she assumed one of her clients needed an appointment or a Society member had a question about next week's annual meeting. It took her a second to pull her attention from the paperwork on her desk, another three to register the name on the screen.

Nick Jarrett.

Her spark of joy at seeing his name quickly changed to concern. He wouldn't be calling for anything good. Quinn plugged her ear against the noise from the bar outside her office door, held her breath, and flipped open the phone. "Nick?"

"Quinn." The rumble of his vintage Charger's engine harmonized with Nick's voice. "Service isn't good out here so just listen."

She knew it. "What's wrong?"

"We have a problem. I'm coming early. I'll explain when I get there. I won't have a very good cell signal most of the time. I'm at least a day away, so stay close to Sam, and don't..." His voice cut in and out before disappearing altogether.

Quinn's skin prickled. She closed the phone, frowning. Nick never came until at least the week before new moon, when she was most vulnerable. In the fifteen years of their relationship, he'd never come a whole week early.

Something big had to be happening.

Quinn was the only goddess whose power source was the full moon, which meant she was only fully able to use her abilities for the seven days around it. As the month waned, she grew more “normal” until the new-moon period, when she had no ability to tap the power.

That was when Nick appeared. Never now.

“Who was that?” Sam’s solid, warm hand landed on her shoulder, and he dropped a pile of papers on the desk in front of her. Quinn blinked at the shift from the surreal nature of the phone call to the mundane clutter of her narrow office at the back of Under the Moon, the central-Ohio bar she’d inherited from her father. It was her main business, a connection to the parents who died within months of each other twelve years ago, leaving her without any real family.

It also kept her connected to the public between power cycles. The goddesses who made a living with their abilities mostly relied on word of mouth to find clients, and Quinn’s bar, centrally located for locals and travelers, had enough people channeling through it to give her customers for both businesses.

“Nobody,” she said, still lost in thought. She shook off the fog. “I mean, Nick.”

Sam’s eyebrows disappeared under his dark, shaggy bangs. He crossed to his smaller but far more organized desk near the office door. His chair squeaked when he dropped into it. “Nick called you?”

“Yeah. He’s coming early.”

“Great.” Sam glowered and mumbled something under his breath. “Why? The moon is barely waning gibbous.”

“I don’t know. The signal dropped.” She worried her lower lip. Stay close to Sam. Why? The order was protective—and after all, Nick was her protector, so that was his default mode—but what did she need protection from? She rubbed her right forearm, the phantom ache a reminder of the first time Nick had been assigned to her, that “goddess” wasn’t a synonym for “invincible.”

Sam sighed. “When is he getting here?”

“I don’t know that, either.” She rested her head on her hand, her elbow on a pile of folders on her worn oak desktop. The full moon would completely wane by tomorrow, taking most of her power with it, so she’d worked steadily for the last week, using mostly telekinesis

and her healing ability to help her clients. She hadn't slept enough to balance the depletion of her normal energy, and her sluggish brain resisted the apprehension buzzing in her now.

"We'll have to wait until he shows up, I guess." She shook off the mental fuzzies and focused on Sam. He watched her, longing mixing with concern in his light brown eyes.

"How long did you sleep?" he asked.

She stifled a yawn. "Seven hours, six minutes."

He shook his head. "That's not enough."

"Gonna have to be. It sounds like we have a full house tonight."

"It's busy for a Tuesday," he acknowledged. Murmurs and laughter mixed with the jukebox music filtering in from the main room. It was still early, too.

"Bets and Katie are both sick, so they probably need us out there." She stood and stretched, closing her eyes briefly and arching with her arms high. He didn't answer. "Sam?" She caught him staring at the stretch of skin bared by her sweatshirt and tugged it over the waistband of her jeans. Heat seeped through her, dragging tingles in its wake. Did he notice her skin flush?

He gave himself a little shake and pulled his gaze away. "Yeah.

Yeah, I guess." But he scowled.

Quinn propped her hands on her hips. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He sat up and shifted papers on his desk, but she knew it wasn't "nothing."

"Sam."

He sighed. "We need to talk. You've put me off all week, and now we've got Nick..."

Shit. She had hoped Nick coming early would put an end to this debate. She dragged her cotton apron off the back of her chair and busied herself tying it. "I'd better get to work."

But Sam didn't get up. His voice was low and deep when he said, "Why didn't you come to me?"

Her hands stilled, and she avoided his steady gaze by checking for her order pad and pen. "You know why."

"I'm still here." He stood and came around the desk, and she couldn't help but look at him now. He dwarfed her, filling her vision, his scent flooding her senses, feeding the grinding need she'd battled for weeks. She kept her lids shuttered so he couldn't see the inevitable dilation of her pupils and take the reaction the wrong way. Her moon lust knew what Sam could give her, her body giving a Pavlovian response to his nearness.

Tapping her power source had a price. As energy flowed through her, it depleted her resources like exercise depleted an athlete. Instead of needing water and vitamins to balance her body, Quinn needed sex. She'd never understood why, but her body had always been recharged by that primal connection to another human being. She hadn't had that for three months now, and the longer she resisted, the more difficult it got.

So Sam's long legs, ridged stomach, and broad chest all called to her. Quinn's hands flexed, anticipating the silk of his shaggy hair bunched in them. Only a few minutes, a voice whispered in her head. That's all it will take. For balance. A moment of thought, of remembering the heat between them, was enough to make her crave it again. Her mouth watered as she watched Sam's long-fingered hand track up his chest and around the back of his neck, a move she knew

was calculated.

That didn't matter. She took a step toward him, then forced herself to stop. She'd told Sam three months ago that she wouldn't use him anymore and had held fast to the decision no matter how willing he was. It had been six years since she'd first had sex with him, and she'd only recently understood the damage they were doing to each other. Sam didn't believe she could stop, but she had fought the moon lust for nearly twelve weeks. Tomorrow would end this full-moon

cycle; she'd have it completely under control, and it would get easier next month. It had to. Yeah, because it's been a cakewalk so far. But she didn't have to convince herself—she had to convince Sam.

"I've told you. What we're doing isn't fair. You've stopped dating, stopped even looking for—" She hesitated, uncertain how to phrase it.

"I don't need to look for it." His tone was hard with conviction, and Quinn closed her eyes, despairing.

"That's my point," she said. "I'm tying you up, and you deserve better."

"That's a matter of debate, and you don't have to suffer because of it."

Her laugh didn't need to be forced. "Not having sex isn't suffering."

"For you it is."

He'd closed the distance between them, and though Quinn knew she didn't move, her body seemed to surge toward him in agreement.

She breathed in the remains of the aftershave he'd used this morning and wavered. He smelled so good.

A shout came from the other side of the paneled door, jerking Quinn out of her trance and replacing it with guilt. She couldn't give in. Sam cared too much. And so did she, but not in the way he wanted.

"We'll talk about this later," she said as the racket outside the door escalated.

"You bet we will." He set his jaw and opened the door, striding out ahead of her.

Quinn followed, her heart and body aching. She immersed herself in taking drink and snack orders from the bikers crowding around four-tops and stroking cues around the two pool tables, but being busy didn't distract her mind. When she wasn't detouring every trip around the room to peer out the front door to see if Nick had arrived, she was fretting over Sam.

He was her best friend and more. The son of a goddess, he'd been fresh out of college when he came to her six years ago looking for a job. He'd designed his education around becoming his mother's assistant, but she'd died soon after graduation. Sam believed she'd put too much wear and tear on her body using her power to help others.

Since he couldn't save her, he'd found Quinn.

She poured a pitcher of light beer for a group of Tuesday regulars and watched Sam help Katie deliver a full tray to a celebrating bowling team. He'd become indispensable within three months of her hiring him. He did research for the full-moon jobs on topics as wide-ranging as agriculture, medicine, geometry, and psychology. He also managed the bar and her schedule—managed her so she didn't deplete her resources too fast or take on jobs she shouldn't.

He caught her watching as he carried the tray back behind the bar and flashed a dimple. She couldn't help smiling back, but then quickly bent to wipe down an empty table.

When she needed to recharge during the full moon, he volunteered. He joked that it was the best perk of the job, but they never discussed a long-term plan, assuming they'd take things as they

came. Like Sam would meet someone he wanted to be with, and they'd stop.

But it hadn't happened. Quinn realized that Sam didn't flirt with any of the women who came through the bar, and he kept his relations with her staff professional. He never pushed her when it wasn't full moon. There was only one reason a guy would settle for that, and she couldn't give him what he needed.

She considered and discarded a dozen speeches as she drew ale, poured whiskey, and brushed up against Sam whenever she had to get to the register. She was acutely aware of the tightness of her nipples, the sensitivity between her legs that grew whenever their bodies were near. As the moon rose, even as weak as it was, it tugged on her like the tides. Desire surged and ebbed, but it took concentration on her lingering guilt to force the latter.

The bikers, transients who'd been well behaved and heavy tipplers, waved as they left at twelve thirty. To Quinn's relief, the place was empty of customers within fifteen minutes. For a moment, she watched the waitresses and busboy wiping down tables and flipping chairs while Sam counted cash at the old-fashioned register.

Resigned to the coming confrontation and wanting to get it over with, she said, "Why don't you guys go home? We can handle the rest of this." No one argued. As they filed out, chorusing their good nights, Quinn braced herself for Sam's first salvo.

"Did you talk to Nick again?" he asked, surprising her.

"No." She ducked under the bar pass-through and crossed to the door to lock it, peering out the small pane of glass onto the gravel lot for the millionth time. "I tried to call, but I still can't get through."

"He's never come this early before." Sam flipped one of the heavy oak chairs up onto a hewn and polished tabletop. "What do you think is going on?"

"There's no point speculating." She went to the other side of the room to help him. "Let's not start listing all the possible reasons. That's too stressful." She didn't want to tell Sam that Nick had told her to stay close to him. That would increase his worry and maybe keep him from going home. She desperately needed some space to get through the next few hours without giving in to the moon lust.

"Okay. So we'll talk about us." Sam pulled down a chair and sat in front of her.

"Can I say no?"

He just looked at her.

"Fine." She sighed and half sat on a nearby table. Sam waited, his eyebrows raised, his mouth cocked, as if he already knew what she was going to say and found it absurd. "You're twenty-eight, Sam."

"I know how old I am."

Quinn folded her arms. "I'm ten years older than you."

“I know how old you are, too.”

“I don’t want to keep you from fulfilling your destiny.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “And what’s my destiny?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She steeled herself, ignoring the slow roll of need in her gut. “It’s not me.”

He sobered. “Quinn…”

“No, Sam.” She made an effort to keep her voice steady. “You deserve a chance to find someone right for you. But that’s not the main issue.” She sighed. “It’s time.”

She didn’t want to talk about the way he’d been watching her. She recognized something in him that she’d buried deep inside herself, didn’t even acknowledge anymore. The belief that there was nothing else out there that could give him what he was missing. She’d tried to fill a hole in herself with Sam, using the moon lust as an excuse, not realizing it or seeing that she was creating a matching hole in him.

And now she couldn’t believe she’d been so blind and selfish.

“I don’t get it.” He spread his arms wide. “I’m not looking for someone else!”

“That’s the problem!” she shot back. “I’m holding you back from finding something real and lasting. A relationship with a woman who won’t relegate you to one week every month, for one thing.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “You need me.”

He meant it in a general sense, but it resonated physically. Need of the more carnal variety pulsed in half a dozen places. Quinn clenched her thighs, shifted her folded arms, and fought the impulse to reassure him. She’d told him the first week he worked for her that she would never lie to him. If she said she didn’t need him, he’d recognize the deception, and that would hurt him more than not being needed would.

“I’m not going to die if I don’t have sex,” she said instead. “I’ve managed three months already.”

“Yeah, and it took its toll. You had to work harder to do the same things this month, didn’t you?”

“No.” That wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t completely true, either. When Sam raised his eyebrows, she said, “I got tired faster. But I need more sleep, that’s all. I should be able to manage this another way.”

Frustrated, she pulled the bar towel off her shoulder and slapped it on the tabletop behind her.

“You’ve tried,” Sam said. “You told me so, back when you first hired me. It never worked, and the need grew. So why do you think it will be different now?”

“Because I’m older.”

“And more powerful. Wouldn’t that make the need worse?”

Damn him, he had an answer for everything. “I’ll find someone else.” Her gut twisted. The consequence of her heritage would be much easier to deal with if she didn’t care whom she slept with, but she always had. As much as it balanced her physically, sex with strangers or acquaintances left her more emotionally bereft, especially after her parents died.

Then came Sam. He’d filled so many holes in her life. Business manager, friend, family. Quinn knew that if she let him, he’d take that even further, marry her and raise children with her, and as blissful as the fantasy was, it would never be as perfect as he wanted it to be. She couldn’t love him the way he deserved to be loved.

“Who else?” He spread his hands and looked around. “Where are you going to find a guy like me? Available whenever you need him, able to take what you give—and give what you demand—and be safe? Not in here, I’ll tell you that much.”

Quinn didn’t respond. He was right. She’d tried before. She’d figured one-night stands were every guy’s dream, so it would be easy.

But too much got in the way. Locals wanted her to do it on their schedule. Basic standards, like avoiding disease and not having sex with attached men, were impossible if she targeted travelers. Most of all, though, was the compulsion that grew as she got older and used more power. The sexual need for mental and physical balance wasn’t something she could rein in once unleashed. Sam was the only man who had managed to withstand the intensity long-term. The only one

who hadn’t called her a freak.

Sam sprawled in his chair in front of her, his long legs so close, the frayed cuff of his jeans brushed her ankle. To keep from moving away, she gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles cracked. Retreat would be an admission that she couldn’t handle it. “I’ve managed fine so far.”

“Have you?” He held out a hand, a knowing in his eyes that she couldn’t refute. The moon had risen hours ago, close enough to last quarter that she could do only the smallest tasks, but it fed her passion.

I have. The words caught in her throat. Her palms itched, wanting her to reach out and touch him. Take in the smoothness of his hot skin, get her close enough to breathe him in again. She’d climb onto his lap with the friction of denim on denim, his hard thighs between her legs, the rails of the chair digging into her knees. For an instant, the image was so real she thought she’d done it, given in. She blinked and found herself still standing, the involuntary ache almost unbearable. She curled her fists harder around the table edge until her knuckles ached, determined not to make the hallucination reality. She finally managed a nod to answer his question.

“Really.” He pushed out of the chair and slowly unfolded his body to stand inches away, deliberately testing her. She held herself still, hoping he couldn’t see the pounding of her heart beneath her white button-down shirt. She closed her eyes as he gathered her in to him, his arms loose around her back.

Her hands rose to rest against his chest. Her fingertips dug in to the resistant muscle, and her breath came out almost as a groan. Tension eased out of him as her body gave in, relief sending tingles head to toe as it curved toward him. “Dammit, Sam.” Her thoughts blurred under the intensity of Sam’s body heat. She couldn’t fight it anymore. Fight him.

“Tell me what you want, Quinn.” His voice rumbled through the swishing, thumping pulse in her ears. She dragged her focus back from the soft fabric beneath her palms, the delicious pressure of his hardness against her belly.

“What?” she managed to gasp.

“I’ll do what you want. Whatever you want.” His lips brushed her ear. Tingles erupted and danced across her skin, but what he’d said, what he was doing, penetrated. The offer wasn’t just for wild sex. Though he could take advantage of the lust raging through her, he respected her decision. Which brought home all the reasons he didn’t deserve the wrong choice.

She leaned back, unable to look at him, her arms trembling with the effort of denying them both. The guilt almost overwhelmed the need. “I’m sorry, Sam.”

He eased away, his hands sliding from her back to her upper arms, making sure she was steady, and then dropping when he'd put a foot of space between their bodies. "You're sure." Not a question.

Quinn nodded and finally met his eyes, regretting the sorrow she'd put there. "I have to do this. Please, please understand."

He sighed and twisted to replace his chair on the tabletop. He stood with his back to her for a long moment, one hand still on the leg of the chair, before facing her again. "I won't push anymore. Just...promise me you won't..." He waved a hand. "You know. Get yourself into trouble."

Her voice squeezed past the burning thickness in her throat. "I promise."

They worked in silence to finish closing, their usual easy tandem punctuating the finality of her decision.

When they were done, Sam nodded and looked around, hands on his hips, clearly at a loss. "Okay. I guess I'm going home, then. You're all right?"

Nick had told her to stick close to Sam, but there was no way she could ask him to stay now. She wished she knew how much longer Nick would be.

"I'm fine," she lied. "Thanks." She nudged him toward the door, turning him away from her so he couldn't see the tears filling her eyes.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Lock up after I leave."

She closed the door hard behind him and twisted the lock so he'd hear it, then pulled down the blind. Sobs pushed upward from deep within her and she sank to the floor, covering her mouth to keep the sound from reaching Sam, whose presence she still felt on the other side of the wood. Finally, his boots crunched on the gravel, growing fainter with each step. When the familiar hum of his Camaro faded, she allowed herself to break down.

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Quinn slept late the next morning. Her night had been full of erotic dreams, interrupted by abrupt waking to check the clock and try to call Nick, to no avail. Hoping some combination of rest, nutrition, and physical exertion would purge her system of the moon lust, she followed a workout with oatmeal and a shower. She was relieved, when she was done, to find herself less

hungry. It wasn't gone, but she could distract herself with work and by this time next week, maybe she'd be back to normal.

She took a deep breath before heading down the rickety staircase hugging the side of the building. Sam's schedule had him there by ten or eleven most mornings, but she wasn't sure what to expect after last night. Maybe he'd call in sick, or have cleaned out his things and left a letter of resignation on her desk. Maybe, in trying to preserve the most valuable thing in her life, she'd destroyed it.

Bracing one hand on the rough wood planks of the outer wall, Quinn yanked on the warped back door, taking a moment to prop it wide and let in the sunlight and crisp October breeze. Not stalling.

Just...setting up.

She paused on the threshold to let her eyes adjust to the dim office. Her desk was how she'd left it the night before, with piles of invoices and orders to approve, checks to sign, and client files to

review. Dust floated in the beam of sunlight that hit the floor in front of her feet. Quinn forced herself to look deeper into the room to Sam's desk, usually as full as hers, if more neatly organized. She held her breath as her vision sharpened, and movement turned into Sam's

hand making sharp notations on a printed spreadsheet. He flipped open a file and tapped a few keys on his keyboard without looking up at her.

"How long did you sleep?" he asked.

Breathing was suddenly easier than anything she'd done so far today. Sam asked her that every damned morning. "Eight hours, thirty-three minutes." Her perfect internal clock had amused and

delighted him at first, then became nagging when he used it to manage her, whether over how long she'd slept, gone without eating, or focused on a client. But that was what he was paid for, after all, and she welcomed the symbol of normalcy. He nodded his approval and kept working. Quinn went to her desk and booted up her computer.

Sam said, "You hear from Nick?"

"No." The ongoing lack of contact after the urgency of his call scared her. "Sam, I—" He shoved to his feet and headed out front. "We're low on vodka. I'll pull some up."

Quinn sighed and slumped. So much for normalcy.

It didn't get better. Sam worked out front while she stayed in the office. When she went into the bar, he retreated to the back. She stopped trying to talk to him, hoping the space would be a buffer both for their personal and professional relationships, and for her fading moon lust.

There was still no word from Nick.

Finally, Quinn settled herself in a corner of the bar with her laptop to handle stuff that had piled up over the week, hoping her full e-mail in-box and the routine work, the easy decisions, would keep her eyes off the clock. Requests for appointments and vendor info she forwarded to Sam. Most of the rest was related to the Society. Quinn served as the board's secretary, and many of her personal e-mails were about the annual Society meeting next week. Those she moved into a folder to address later. The official Society list e-mail was full of political posts, with elections coming up in November, but she skimmed and deleted most of them.

She'd gotten into such a rhythm that when Nick's name appeared, it was a moment before her reaction caught up. The words were innocuous at first, so she didn't understand the fear filling her until it merged with her ongoing low-level anxiety over last night's phone call.

I plan to ask Quinn to put this on the agenda for the meeting, but I thought you should all know ahead of time, so you can be careful.

Nick Jarrett's gone rogue.

Quinn pulled her cell phone out of her pocket to try to reach Nick yet again. This had to be why he was coming here—but what the hell did it mean and what did it have to do with her?

A crash on the other side of the room redirected her alarm. She was on her feet before she'd even spotted the source of the disruption.

"I'll goddamn keep drinking if I wanna keep drinking!" An old man, greasy gray hair hanging below a dingy trucker cap, wobbled in front of his overturned chair, arms flailing. Despite his obvious intoxication, his aim was good enough to hit Katie's tray and send glasses flying. Quinn stormed across the room, glaring at anyone who looked like they might want to join the fight. None of her regulars moved. Most had seen her in action, and they didn't want to get involved. A few strangers half rose but subsided when they saw her striding to the rescue. Not that Katie needed rescuing. Nearly as tall as Quinn's five feet ten, the young woman had

honed her manner and strength in New York City. By the time Quinn reached them, Katie was quietly telling

the drunk how he was expected to behave in Under the Moon.

Quinn's heart rate and footsteps slowed, ready to back up her waitress but also willing to let her handle it. Then the drunk fumbled a switchblade out of his pocket and flicked it open.

Shit. She lurched forward, but she was still too far away to do anything, and Katie hadn't noticed the knife. Reacting on instinct rather than thought, Quinn snapped her fingers and opened her hand as the knife soared to it. Relief flooded her. Concentrate. This isn't over yet. She squeezed the handle of the knife so no one could see her shaking.

The drunk waved his hand, then frowned when he realized it was empty. "What the—" He looked up and blinked at Quinn. "How'd you do that?"

Quinn signaled a white-faced Katie to step away. She glanced around to be sure everyone was out of reach and then faced the drunk.

"You want to leave my establishment," she told him with forced calm.

He scowled. "T'hell I do. I ordered a beer! And I'm not leavin' till I get it!"

"Yes you are." She jerked back as the man lunged at her, flicking her fingers at him. He slammed into an invisible wall but only grew angrier. Quinn swallowed hard. She didn't have the power for more than this, and she couldn't risk her staff getting hurt. Summoning the knife and stopping the drunk's movement required only a little access to the waning moon. But because it had already passed the zenith of its arc, even this drained her.

She had enough for one more act. Please let it be enough. She thought heat and pointed at the sleeve of the man's denim jacket. A second later it caught fire. He yelled and slapped at it, extinguishing the flame almost immediately, but it had done its job.

His eyes wide, he tried to back away. The overturned chair tripped him up and he stopped. "What are you?" His voice quavered.

Electric awareness alerted Quinn to the presence of the man two feet behind her before she heard his voice, a slight Texas drawl mellowing the deep rumble that always made her think of his

perfectly tuned muscle car. "She's a goddess."

"Goddess," the drunk scoffed. "Them's just a myth."

Nick Jarrett stepped past Quinn, standing between her and the drunk without making it look like he was getting in her way. The hunger that had been easing all day flared, but because she'd never recharged with Nick, she was able to stamp it down more easily than she had last night.

"You don't believe your own eyes?" Nick said to the drunk.

The drunk scowled at them, then at the tiny wisp of smoke rising from his sleeve. He blinked blearily and stumbled toward the door, grumbling under his breath.

"That's what I thought." Nick swung around to look at her, a hint of a smile on his full lips and welcome in his green eyes. "Nice parlor tricks."

Quinn snorted, covering how happy and relieved she was to see him, and turned to her busboy. "Catch that guy and call Charlie to pick him up in his cab, will you?"

"Sure." He pulled out his cell phone and hit speed dial on his way out. Everyone else dispersed, leaving Quinn relatively alone with Nick. Adrenaline drained out of her, and she would have sat, if showing weakness in front of him wasn't so unappealing.

"So what's going on?" She tucked her fingertips into her jeans pockets. The anxiety buzzing in her all day disappeared, allowing the alarm triggered by the e-mail to resurge. "You're never early."

"We've got a problem."

Quinn watched him scan the room, cataloging her customers and staff, lingering on her computer in the far corner and the closed door to her office. His face tightened, and he moved a step closer.

"I know we do," she said.

He whipped his head around, his eyes sharp. "You do?"

"I just found out. Come here." She led him to the table where her computer slept, its screen dark. "I read this e-mail not five minutes ago." They sat down, and she tapped a key to wake the computer while Nick signaled for a beer.

They waited for the wireless connection to reestablish. "You getting a lot of trouble like that guy?" he asked.

"No more than usual." She glanced at him. "Why? Is someone else?"

"Nah." He stood to pull off his battered, hip-length brown leather coat and hang it over the back of the chair, then rolled the sleeves of his flannel shirt up strong forearms. A waitress

sashayed over to set an amber bottle on their table. She looked at Quinn, who shook her head, but Nick made a face and dropped the money on her tray.

“Don’t listen to her.”

Quinn didn’t bother to argue. They had the same argument every time he came. Sometimes she won, sometimes he did. It balanced in the end.

Nick sat back down and took a pull of the beer, his strong throat working with the swallow. Light from a nearby candle picked up glints of gold in his short-cropped, dark blond hair. “Where’s Sam?”

Quinn cleared her throat. “In the office.” She diverted her eyes to the computer screen but heard his small snort of derision. “I had it under control, Nick.”

“The moon’s waning, Quinn. I don’t care how powerful you are at peak, you’re tapped out by this time—”

“Not completely. And protecting me isn’t Sam’s job.” She winced, realizing too late it might sound like criticism of Nick, and she hadn’t meant it to be.

He froze, the bottle halfway to his mouth, then set it down. “I told you to stick close. He should be out here. Or you shouldn’t. And I’m not listening to you argue with me. What have you got?” He turned the computer toward him, ignoring her exasperation.

She twisted to read the e-mail with him, now more confused by the words on the screen than anything else. “Well?”

Seconds passed while his eyes tracked over the words. “Fuck me,” he said softly. “That’s not the problem I was talking about at all.”