



CHAPTER 2

9:15 P.M., the same night, Vallejo Street,
San Francisco

Iskander put up his feet and kicked back in his recliner for an evening of movies and junk food. First up, *Shaun of the Dead*. He was totally on for an hour or two of zombie killing with everything he needed at arm's reach. Root beer? Check. Pizza, just delivered? Check. Remote? Check.

Press PLAY and go.

Check.

And click.

He was in his house. By himself. He wasn't freaked out or thinking he needed to go get laid so he wouldn't be alone. He was just a normal guy hanging out at his own house, enjoying a night by himself. Chilling like nothing had ever been wrong with him or his life.

The movie hardly got past the FBI warning when every

goddamned alarm he had set on the property shrieked into his head like a subsonic bomb.

What the hell?

Iskander got out of his chair and headed for the back of the house. His skin prickled up and down his body while he did a perimeter check. Everything was in place along the fences. His garage, a separate building on the back of his lot, was secure. His house was secure. He looked up to the darkened windows of the rental unit over his garage and got hit by a wave of sick magic.

He walked into his backyard and stood at the bottom of the stairs that led to the apartment over his garage. This was not normal. The magic felt like some kind of low-level infection, and there just wasn't any mistaking the stink. Goddamned mages. He was more than a little miffed that one of the magekind had the nerve to come anywhere near his house to do magic like that.

Hell, no.

At the top of the stairs to the unit's front door, he stripped down to his bare skin. If he was going to shift into his other form, better if he was naked when he changed. The minute he dropped his shirt, the last of the magical wards he'd set around the rental unit gave way. He hadn't done anything major in terms of proofing his garage from the kind of creatures that might come looking for him. Maybe he should have. He was going to feel guilty as shit if it turned out he should have protected his tenant better.

In the meantime, he knew someone was inside there who probably didn't think someone like Iskander should continue enjoying his current freedom and good health. What the hell this person wanted with his pure-vanilla, not-a-drop-of-magic-in-her tenant was a mystery.

The faces in the medallions he'd placed on either side of the apartment door morphed from smiling woodland creatures to two silent horrors that blackened to ash before his eyes. Whatever was going on in there was heating things up magicwise, and now the occupants were paying for it. He hoped the power releasing from those medallions was putting a serious hurt on the fucker responsible.

The need for his proofing was twofold. First, it warned him about the presence of a magic user who wasn't known and welcome at his house. Second, if the intruder didn't take the hint and leave, the proofing set off a psychic scream capable of killing. The proofing he'd put around his rental unit was already well into the second use.

Obviously, some stupid fuck of a mage had gotten inside the apartment. About now, the mage or witch or whatever was in there wasn't feeling so hot. The demon warlord Nikodemus had his territory pretty well controlled. Everyone knew Nikodemus came down hard on anyone who broke his rules, and he had rules about messing with humans. There were transgressions from time to time, and since Iskander worked for Nikodemus, he was sometimes tasked with carrying out the consequences of breaking the warlord's rules.

His hand closed on the doorknob when it occurred to him that since the apartment was rented out, his tenant might be home. With a mage. She was a nice girl. Totally vanilla—no magic whatsoever, which was the reason he'd rented to her in the first place. A couple of other people who'd come by to see the apartment after he decided to rent it out hadn't exactly been normal humans. He'd made a good choice, picking her. She paid her rent on time, let him know if something needed to be fixed, and, up to now,

lived quietly. He liked that she didn't bother him and never did much more than wave at him or say hello if they happened to see each other, which didn't happen all that often. Friendly, but not friends.

If his tenant, who so far hadn't done anything but mind her own business the entire time she'd been living over his garage, was getting assaulted or murdered because of what he really was, well, that just didn't seem right. Nikodemus would agree with him on that one. He didn't think he'd get in too much trouble if he kept his tenant from getting killed, even if it meant harming one of the magekind. He stared at the door and gave the doorknob an experimental turn. It was locked. It was possible she'd invited a mage over to her place. Maybe she was dabbling the way some humans did.

Or not.

What to do?

Coulda, woulda shoulda.

He could count on zero fingers and no thumbs the number of times she'd brought someone home with her. What were the odds that his tenant would have her first wild fling with one of the magekind?

On the other hand, if he went inside, he risked finding her getting it on with someone. Explaining why he was interrupting her booty time wouldn't be much fun. Particularly since he'd been informed that as a landlord, he did not, in fact, have the right to enter his tenant's unit without permission. Unless it was an emergency.

Was this an emergency? The lights were off in the apartment. He didn't hear a sound. Not a one. Any normal person would think his tenant was either not home or in blissful slumber. Or having really great sex. On the

surface at least, all was well. No human walking by would think anything was wrong.

He wasn't human, though, and every nerve in his body was on fire.

Whatever was in there wasn't kin. The kin were a species of demon also known as a *fiend*, which was what he was. What he was getting from the apartment was pure magekind. Rotten and perverted.

The front door looked undisturbed. No sign of forced entry. Which wasn't unexpected since there were plenty of creatures around who had no problem with human security. Like, for example, him. A locked door was no problem for him. Or the magekind.

His intention was to go in shielded from physical notice by a layer of magic, because if she was doing it with a mage, that was her private business. Just like it would be his private business to find a way to evict her for hanging with a mage whose magic felt like this.

Iskander sent a pulse into the door locks. If he hadn't dampened the magic, he would have heard the mechanical click of the tumblers moving. And so would the occupants. Paisley Nichols—if she was in there—wouldn't hear, but a mage? He'd hear something like that. And he'd know Iskander was here, too. If he didn't already.

He went in. The apartment was dark, but he'd shifted to his nonhuman form. He saw perfectly well in the interior gloom. All the hairs on the back of his neck rippled. The source of the magic was definitely here.

At first he didn't hear anything. No moans of sexual pleasure. No whispers or laughter. No squeaky mattress. Nothing. His tenant kept unusual hours; no nine-to-five job for her. It wouldn't be strange at all for her not to be

home yet. Maybe she wasn't home, which meant he might have walked into considerable danger.

Someone dry-heaved in the bathroom.

One of the magekind broke into his tenant's place to throw up?

He pulled magic through him until he was confident he could smoke just about any mage or witch who happened to be here. Still hidden from sight in case Paisley was here, he moved through the apartment toward the bathroom, which was in the back. The whole unit was something like five hundred square feet, and most of that was the living room. The bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom were tiny.

The light in the bathroom was off, but he saw someone bending over the toilet. A woman who felt like god-damned magekind. She didn't react to his presence, so he let go of the magic that hid him from human eyes. Nothing changed. She didn't move, and the magic swirling around her didn't react. His tenant was about her size, but his tenant was normal. Not a witch.

She moved. The light reflected off her red hair.

His heart took a dive.

What if it was Fen? What if she'd managed to get herself out of her entanglement with Rasmus Kessler and was in there? The proportions of the woman's body weren't Fen's, but it was dark, he was changed right now, and he hadn't seen Fen without one of them being fucked up or fucked over in nearly two years. He took a step forward. Part of him was thinking she'd come back, and that hope and longing obliterated the rest of his emotions.

His feet refused to move.

How pathetically fucked up was that? He and Fen had been blood-twins. His kind—the kin—existed in two

realms: the psychic and the physical. Their magic manifested in both planes and required both. Most of the time, the boundary between the psychic and the physical was seamless. His blood bond with Fen meant their physical bodies shared the same consciousness yet they possessed twice the magic of most of their kind.

Their blood bond had been severed, and everything they'd shared had gone to hell.

He thought about the years he'd had with Fen, the one and only woman he'd ever loved, and the signs that something had been going wrong for her and how he'd ignored the problems at first. Maybe he wouldn't have failed to help her if he'd done something sooner. If he hadn't waited until it was too late and there was nothing he could do because she'd already betrayed him to Rasmus Kessler. To save himself, he'd had to block himself off from his bond with her. His desperate act had slowly cost him his sanity. If it hadn't been for Nikodemus and his witch Carson, he'd be completely insane now.

His heart shattered all over again. He couldn't forget what they'd been like when they'd both been whole. What if that was Fen there in the bathroom? What if she was trying to come back to him? If he could go back to the days when everything was fine between them, he would. He still loved her. He loved what they'd had and what he'd been when they were strong and healthy and she had been the only lover he'd ever had or needed.

None of that was going to happen. He and Fen were over. Done. He hated that a part of him wished he could have it all back. The woman in the bathroom kept her arms around the toilet, but she turned her head, and he shifted back to human just in time.

Not Fen.

Not Fen.

And then his tenant, Paisley Nichols, sank to the floor, her rib cage heaving. His mental trip into the past ended with a jolt. His tenant wasn't anything like Fen, and he'd been stupid to be fooled for even a minute.

Shit, she was in a bad way. There wasn't any mage. All that sick magic was coming from her even though Paisley Nichols was not magekind. He wouldn't have rented to her if she weren't as unmagical as a human could get. Something had happened to change that. Something very, very bad.

"Ms. Nichols? Are you okay?"

She groaned.

"Hey," he said. He went in and knelt beside her even though she stank like bad magic. A layer of sweat covered her, and her skin burned to touch. Not normal for a human. "What the hell happened to you?"

She didn't move. He pressed two fingers to the side of her neck. Her pulse was erratic.

This wasn't right, not even in his world. His tenant was plain vanilla and here she was radiating magic. Sick magic. Enough that it had set off his proofing and made him think there was a mage in the apartment.

His proofing, the wards he set out to keep his property safe from intrusion, wasn't supposed to harm humans like his tenant. The protections were, however, designed to do maximum damage to mages and their magehelds. A mageheld was a demon unlucky enough to have ended up enslaved to a mage or a witch.

Paisley Nichols was now suffering under a double punishment: whatever the mage had done to her in the first place

and the effect of Iskander's proofing going off after whatever was wrong with her built to critical levels. Coming home just might have killed her.

Some mage had broken Nikodemus's rules, and his tenant was dying because of it. He'd seen this kind of thing once before, and it was pure ugly what happened when one of the magekind wanted to enslave a human. Ugly. Very ugly. These days, of course, the magekind denied that any such thing had ever happened. They saw themselves as the protectors of humankind. Fucking hypocrites.

From what he could tell, Paisley had been resisting the magic still working on her for a lot longer than most humans could have managed. If she were any less of a fighter, she'd already belong to whatever mage had done this to her. That wasn't supposed to happen. They were all supposed to be more civilized now. No fucking over humans like this. Not anymore.

He did a quick check of her physically to see if he could find a point of contact. He got lucky and found it right away. He figured a mage was a more likely culprit than a witch, and considering that Paisley Nichols was a total fox, the mage wasn't going to mark her where it would spoil her body. Iskander found the entry spot on her right wrist, a round, angry blister, broken open and oozing sera and blood. She whimpered when he touched her wrist.

She lifted her head like it weighed a ton. "Don't want to die," she said.

She didn't deserve this. No one did, but especially not his sweet-as-sugar tenant who wasn't doing anything but living the life she wanted.

To keep her alive, he'd have to break one or two of

Nikodemus's rules. Like the one about not going into a human's head without permission and not using magic on humans without permission. If he didn't, she was going to die, and wasn't that worse?

She'd said she didn't want to die. To him, that counted as permission. He tried to make a psychic connection with her, and, damn, it was like trying to dig through concrete with a spoon.

"Hey," he said, still crouched down by her. He pressed two fingers to her forehead. "I need in."

She didn't get it. Or didn't know what to do.

"Relax, cupcake." He tried again to get into her head.

She blinked a couple of times, and he kept his fingers on her forehead. No go. The second time, though, he made contact, but he had to sweat for it. Jesus H. Christ. Her agony about blistered the inside of his head.

He took as much of the pain away from her as he could stand. At the same time, he reached up and turned on the water in the sink so he could keep one hand under the running water while he siphoned off the magic boiling through her and let it drain away into the water. He kept his other hand on her damaged wrist. He growled and shifted forms again, because it was like running ground glass through his body and it was going to be a lot easier to take if he wasn't limited by being in his human form.

Before long, the room filled with steam from the water that was vaporizing almost as quickly as it hit his hand. But slowly, her breathing eased and the pain he was pulling through her and into him lessened enough that he could think about moving back to his human form.

Which, come to think of it, he'd better do because her eyes were fluttering open. He wasn't sure how much she

was going to remember about tonight, though in his limited experience with humans, psychic and magical trauma at this level tended to get thoroughly suppressed.

After a bit longer, she lifted her torso off the floor and groaned. He backed off on the psychic link and *bam*. He was shut out. Locked out good. Paisley Nichols was one of those rare humans with a natural resistance to magic.

"I've got you," he said softly. He gathered her into his arms, and she leaned into him without protest, just a sigh of what sounded like profound relief. He didn't do the comfort thing well. The one time he'd been around a sick human, he hadn't been the one in charge, but he tried to take care of Paisley now. If this turned out badly and she ended up dead or damaged, he didn't want to spend the rest of his very long life knowing he'd let her suffer alone and in pain when he could have done something to help.

"Good grief," she whispered.

Iskander stroked her hair, running his fingers through the dark reddish brown of her ponytail. Not the fiery red of Fen's hair, but a darker red made up of what looked to his still-acute vision to be at least a dozen different shades of red and even gold. "How you doing?"

"Poorly," came the answer.

He kept his arms around her and leaned his back against the tub. He wondered if he was wrong about her not knowing anything about creatures like him. When a vanilla human got caught up in his world, it was most often because someone had been careless or the human had stumbled across something she shouldn't have. Sometimes, though, one of the magekind, or even one of his kind, did the deed and deliberately brought them into contact. "Who did this to you? Do you know?"

Paisley rested her head against his chest while he waited for the answer. She was doing better. Not much, but enough to hope she would pull through. "It must have been something I ate. Lord help me if I poisoned anybody at the bakery." She shivered. "Floor's cold," she said. "But you're not."

"Come on." He adjusted her in his arms. "Let's get you into bed."

"Okay." Her uninjured arm tightened around his waist, and she tried to get her legs under her. She couldn't. "I don't think I can stand up."

"I'll do the heavy lifting." Which he did. After he ran a wet washcloth over her face, he helped her brush her teeth. She had one of those electric brushes. He got her a drink of water, too. She was going to need a lot more liquid in her, he realized. The magic wasn't out of her system yet. It might not ever be. Paisley Nichols might not ever be the same again.

Understandably, she was too weak to do much but sprawl on the bed once he got her there. He almost didn't think about what he realized was a spectacular body while he helped her get her clothes off and then get under the covers. Normally he was all over naked women. Not this time. He wasn't quite that depraved, though she looked good enough to eat.

When he came back from filling a big pitcher with water, she was shaking, a teeth-rattling, bone-shivering convulsion. She was sinking fast. Everything he'd done so far had only delayed the inevitable. It pissed him off that someone had done this to her.

He got into bed with her after setting the water on the bed table. He made a cut in his forearm, pulled a little magic, and whispered what she needed to do to have a

shot at making it through the night. She fit her mouth over the cut. And damn, the reaction rocketed through him. Unexpected, but then, unless he counted Carson, who was magekind and something else, too, he'd never taken blood from a human woman before. The experience was as new for him as it was for Paisley.

His magic boiled up, and oh, fuck, he was in her head and they had a link going, and he could feel the psychic draw of her—resistant or not, she wasn't vanilla. Maybe not ever and sure as hell not now. With her having some of his blood in her, he didn't have to work so hard to keep their psychic link going. After a bit, he slid off the bed and pulled the sheet over her. Her eyes fluttered closed. A little later, he gave her some water, and when she fell asleep and started dreaming, he dropped out of that level of her consciousness entirely. Shut out again. Huh. She was resistant even in her sleep.

It was after nine in the morning before he was sure she was past the worst of it and he could leave her to wake up with only a few memories of what she'd been through. If she remembered fragments, that would be okay and a lot better than her waking up with nothing but a hole where the memories ought to be. She was already going to feel like shit.

She wasn't the only one with aftereffects to deal with, though. He left her apartment, resetting his proofing on the way out and making sure he adapted the magic to the changes in her. Then he went back to his house where he had all day to think about the consequences of all that magic running through her. If she was a latent—a human whose magic was dormant—there was a strong possibility she wasn't latent anymore.

That's when the lightning bolt hit him. Her apartment had felt so strongly of magekind that he'd missed an obvious cause of her symptoms. The mark on her wrist had misdirected his attention, made him overlook the things that fit another cause of her condition.

An attempted indwell. A human would call it *demonic possession*, which was accurate enough from the human point of view. There were some humans, like Paisley, who were resistant to a demon trying to take them over. Resistant or not, there was always a psychic cost when one of the kin attempted to indwell, and Paisley was paying that price in a major way. There was no way to be sure exactly what had happened, but he could guess. The most likely scenario was that some mage had tried to take her over—that would explain the blistered point of entry on her wrist. The mage's attempt hadn't worked on account of Paisley being resistant. After that, the mage must have sent one of his magehelds, a demon slave, to do the indwell and get control of her. Resisting that had damn near killed her. Iskander must have arrived right after the mageheld gave up and left Paisley to die.

He was going to have to tell Nikodemus about this.