

NATURAL CONSEQUENCES



ELLIOTT KAY

Natural Consequences

By Elliott Kay

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WARNING:

Natural Consequences contains explicit sex, explicit violence, explicit expletives, violent misuse of office equipment, nudity, perfidy, disruption of public transit services, polyamory, theft, arson, open relationships, trespassing, heterosexual foreplay, lesbian sex, depictions of beings of a divine and demonic nature bearing little resemblance to established religious or mythological canon, cell phone hacking, contempt of court, flagrant violations of civil rights, dangerous use of alcoholic drinks, infidelity, public sex, bras, panties, murder, attempted murder, blasphemy, atheist rationalizations, cannibalism, prostitution, decapitations, gossiping, defenestration, exsanguinations, tax evasion, oral sex, multiple threesomes, sexual harassment, ancient Babylonian marriage customs, horse-poisoning, stalking, selfies, bribery, assault under color of authority, fantasy depictions of sorcery and witchcraft, highly sexualized Halloween costumes, assault and battery, stabbings, excessive handcuff play, mayhem, explosions, existential discussions, controversial topics of sci-fi fandom, living room sex, home invasions, mind control, conspiracy, cohabitation outside of marriage, multiple references to British science fiction literature and television, bad study habits, government surveillance, donuts, discharge of firearms on Federal property, spousal abuse, interrogations, even more explicit sex, guys from Eugene, sexual harassment in the workplace, classroom misconduct, sexual misconduct, divine misconduct general misconduct, voyeurism, reckless driving, murder of Federal agents, poor firearms safety habits, misuse of a swimming pool for gladiatorial combat, insanity, immolations, public endangerment, sexual promiscuity, consistent contempt of vampires (screw 'em, they suck), disorderly conduct, kidnapping of police officers, kidnapping of Federal agents, underage drinking, dismemberment, abuse of authority, still more explicit sex, electrocutions, destruction of private property, escape from Federal custody, barbering without a cosmetology license, World War I, betrayals, slavery, mild dom/sub play, cosplaying, a high school flashback, infidelity, reliable predictions of eternal damnation, destruction of a nice Zoot suit, nutshots, party fouls, littering, domestic violence, lengthy foreplay, abbreviated foreplay, disrespect for authority, falsification of records, prostitution, public indecency, impersonation of police officers, obstruction of justice, biting, clawing, hair-pulling, trash-talking and a general and willful disregard for traditional Western family values.

All characters are over the age of 18.

*For Val,
who gave Rachel her voice.*

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Prologue

"This is the case of the United States of America versus Raven Sebastian Winterhome, AKA Sir Julian Storm, AKA Lord Marcus Etienne Ravenscar... birth name Marvin Kowalski," the judge added with a cynical frown. His eyes glanced up from the papers in front of him. "Are you Marvin Kowalski? Or any of these other aliases?"

The chamber bore greater resemblance to a bunker than a courtroom. The furnishings and layout were all present—tables for prosecution and defense, a judge's bench and witness stand, even an American flag in one corner—but the concrete walls had been left unpainted. Heavy steel doors fit for a naval ship lay closed and locked at either end of the room. The digital clock embedded in the wall noted an hour far too late for any ordinary court proceeding.

The judge sat in black robes at his bench. The prosecutor and defense attorney both wore suits, as did the man and woman in the gallery. Three uniformed bailiffs stood at the ready. All attention fell on the deathly pale, young-looking man with black hair, frosty blue eyes and the bright orange jumpsuit of a prison inmate behind the defense table. Thick chains connected his manacles to a similarly thick bullnose ring imbedded in the floor. He could stand and sit, but not much else.

"Fuck you, chum," the pale man said. His Cockney accent and defiant tone contrasted sharply with the calm, business-as-usual demeanor of the judge. "This ain't no real cour'room. Why'nt you tell me wot the fuck you lot 're doin' an' knock off the fucking charades, eh?"

"Mr. Kowalski," murmured the suited attorney to his right, "speaking to the judge like that won't do you any favors."

"Piss off."

The judge was unmoved. "I am Judge Eduardo Castillo. Mr. Kowalski, you've been charged in an indictment with the murders of Caroline Morris, Raymond Wong, and Douglas Kramer. You are also charged with three counts of kidnapping, twenty-three counts of aggravated assault, assault on federal agents, resisting arrest, misprision of felonies and tax evasion." He lifted his eyes toward the defendant. "Do you have a copy of the indictment?"

"Fuck yourself wi' your indictment. Stick it up your crusty arse!" The defendant tugged at his chains, struggling as if he had every reason to believe they might break. "Let me the fuck ou' of 'ere! You sacks dunno wot you're dealin' with!"

"It's here, your honor," said the attorney beside the prisoner.

"Very well. Mr. Kowalski, let me inform you of your constitutional rights. You have the right to remain silent. You don't have to say anything to anyone. Anything you say can and likely will be used against you. Do you understand your right to remain silent?"

"Fuck you. That's what I understand."

The defense attorney leaned in and hissed, "Mr. Kowalski, do you understand that this is quite probably a capital case?"

"Oh, piss off, mate! These fuck'ead Feds jus' jumped me in the parking lot of a

fucking 'otel three hours ago! Even if this is a real court, all o' this is bollocks an' they know it! So either quit the fucking farce an' tell me wot's goin' on, or give me my phone call so I can get a real fucking lawyer!"

"Mr. Kowalski, *they know what you are.*"

Taken aback by the warning, the defendant asked, "Wot?"

"Your fangs are showing," advised the attorney.

Kowalski's eyes widened in fear. "There's no law against that!"

"You're not on trial for that. Read the indictment."

Judge Castillo continued. "You also have the right to representation by a lawyer with appropriate security clearances. Counselor Lopez, who holds proper clearance, currently assists you. Do you have a different lawyer with top secret clearance you would like to use?"

"Wait, clearance?" the defendant blinked. "Wot the fuck you talkin' abou'?"

"Mr. Kowalski, this court operates under top secret Federal orders pursuant to national security. You will make no phone calls. You do not get to pick any old attorney off the Internet. So again, do you currently have on retainer an attorney with top secret clearance? If not, I will appoint Counselor Lopez to continue to represent you. The court will cover all expenses in such a case."

"What the—wait, this is ridiculous!" the defendant spat. "I want a real fucking court with a real fucking lawyer and a real fucking judge! Don't give me this 'top secret' bullshit!"

"Very well," Castillo conceded. "I will remand you to the Federal District Court of Los Angeles. Your arraignment will proceed at 10 am on Tuesday, October the 22nd."

Marvin's bluster ground to a halt. So did his phony accent. "Wait, what?"

"10 am, Tuesday, Los Angeles," Castillo repeated.

Marvin blinked nervously. "Ten in the morning?" He swallowed, looking to Lopez on his left. "They can do that to me?"

Lopez gave a bit of a nod. "The regular courts run on regular schedules. This is the only court in the nation that accommodates supernatural conditions."

"None of the other courts fucking *know* about supernatural conditions!"

Again, Lopez nodded. "It's a problem," he sniffed.

Marvin looked from the judge to the lawyer and back again. "Uh, Judge... I think... I think I'll take this court. And, uh, this lawyer."

"Understood. I hereby appoint Michael Lopez to represent you. Is defense counsel prepared to proceed with the arraignment?"

"Yes, your honor," Lopez answered.

"Are you correctly named in the indictment? Would you like me to formally read the indictment into the record?" He took his cues from Lopez's short, quick replies. "How do you plead?"

Lopez glanced at Marvin, who looked back at a complete loss for words. "Your honor, my client pleads not guilty," Lopez announced.

Castillo's attention turned to the prosecution's table. "What is the government's position on detention?"

"Your honor, the defendant struggled violently against arrest, assaulting several Federal agents," the prosecutor explained. "His health conditions require the ingestion

of warm blood, and he has shown every willingness to commit assault to attain it. He has also demonstrated extraordinary strength, speed and stealth, and is largely unharmed by most weapons carried by police or the general public. It is the government's position that he is a severe flight risk.”

“Very well, Counselor Oswald,” Castillo nodded, “Mr. Kowalski will remain in Federal custody until trial.”

“What?!” Marvin burst. “That’s it? That’s my bail hearing?”

“Yeah, they always screw my clients on that one.” Lopez glanced at his watch. “Look, you’ll get two liters of fresh chicken blood every night.”

“Chicken blood?!”

Behind him, the suited man rose and turned for the door. He was a trim man in his early thirties, tall and clean-shaven. He held the door for the younger woman who followed him out while Kowalski unleashed a torrent of worried questions on his attorney.

“That one’s gonna be a slam dunk,” said Agent Paul Keeley.

Agent Amber Maddox was not so comfortable with all this. It showed on her young, pretty face. Her pantsuit did little to show off her athletic figure, but that was how she preferred it in these environments. It was hard enough to be taken seriously when she looked even younger than she really was. Waiters and bartenders routinely double-checked her driver’s license. Dressing in anything but the most conservative styles at work typically drew the same reactions. Tonight, at least, she could accessorize with the small gauze pad taped over her temple. Kowalski’s arrest had not gone as smoothly as anyone had hoped, but in the end the Bureau got its man.

Kowalski had been her first supernatural encounter. Up until now, she had focused purely on learning the ropes within the task force, building an airtight case and making the arrest. Thoughts of what would come after that had to be put on hold, but now those concerns were front and center. “What makes you say that?” she asked. “I mean, Kowalski is obviously not all that bright—“

“Dumb as a box of rocks,” interrupted Keeley with a wry grin, “if you want to be charitable.”

“—and his defense attorney might not be the most energetic I’ve seen—“

“Lopez knows how to pick his battles,” Keeley shrugged. “He’s good at his job. Knows a shit case when he sees one. Not all those charges will stick.”

Amber paused, wondering if she should say something about being allowed to say her peace. To his credit, Keeley caught onto her understandable frustration immediately. “Sorry,” he grunted, “it’s late. Go on.”

“Like you said, not all the charges will stick,” Amber said. “I mean, he gets a full jury trial, right? You said this is done by the book, secrecy notwithstanding?”

“Well,” Keeley shrugged, “they’re *entitled* to a jury trial. Doesn’t mean it actually happens. Remember what we told you about the loyalty oaths? Swearing fealty when they’re given the big bite and such? Secrecy is the most important aspect. Every vampire is brought in promising to keep their existence secret, even at the cost of their lives. They enforce that on one another brutally.

“The second a vampire realizes he’s been made, he starts sweating bullets. Having to go through a trial like this is some scary shit for them, because even if they get out, their vampire buddies would be all over them to know if they slipped up even

just a bit... and they wouldn't be here if they hadn't already slipped, right?

"A jury is twelve more people who know the truth. That's twelve more screw-ups on the vampire's part. So usually they waive their right and opt for a bench trial. Lopez argues that the trial isn't legit, because it violates the defendant's Sixth Amendment right to a public trial; Oswalt says the defendant just waived that right by opting for this court over a regular public courthouse, and Castillo agrees, so that settles that. And then we move to the bench trial."

Not for the first time this month, a small part of her kicked herself for waiting until now to ask all this. It wasn't as if Keeley or the other agents on the Kowalski case had held anything back. "And if they want a jury?"

"Then we give it to 'em," answered Keeley. "Twelve U.S. citizens, fluent and literate in English, with no previous connections to the case, who all hold top secret security clearance. And yes," he added, "Lopez objects to that wrinkle, too, and points out that this creates a jury that is naturally predisposed toward the government. Castillo overrules and life goes on."

Amber walked beside him, unsure which question to ask next. That had more or less been the story of her life for these last few weeks. "So is this how it always goes?"

"For the vampires, yeah, pretty much," said Keeley. "We've had a couple curveballs, of course. In the beginning, everything seemed so crazy that there'd never be a normal. But you start to see patterns. The werewolves have their own goofy habits. And then there're the other weirdoes," he grunted, "but we haven't caught enough of those other kinds to establish any baselines."

Amber's next question had been on her mind for some time. Amid all the cloak and dagger procedures and the grim confidence of the task force, it had seemed almost naïve, but now she had to ask. "What are you gonna do when one of these cases ends in an acquittal?"

Keeley came to another door. He paused before he opened it to look over his shoulder at the young agent. "I don't know," he smiled. "I'll tell you when it happens. 'til then, we keep moving on to the next case. And this one's a bit of a problem."

Amber followed him into a conference room dominated by a long table and a white projection screen opposite the door. The room's four occupants had all gone for loosened ties and rolled-up shirtsleeves. She saw Chinese take-out boxes, bottles of soda and a good number of manila file folders. One wall of the room was covered with suspect sketches.

"You ready for us, Joe?" Keeley asked as they entered. "Arraignment's all pretty much finished anyway."

Standing taller than the rest was a blond man with football hero shoulders, a square jaw and something just shy of a flat-top. The sight of Keeley and the other man together immediately made Amber think, "Good cop, tackle cop."

She met Agent Hauser briefly when she was first recruited onto the task force. He hadn't said much at that meeting. Now, he acknowledged her with much the same grunt as then, but this time he spoke. "Agent Maddox," he nodded, "it's good to have you here. Congratulations on your first arrest with the task force."

"Thank you, sir," Amber mumbled.

"Everyone," Hauser said to the others present, "this is Agent Amber Maddox. Received her high school diploma *and* her Associate's degree at age 17 through

Washington's Running Start program. Graduated University of Washington with double honors degrees in chemistry and physics, age 20. Worked for three years in the Bureau's Applied Sciences lab, then went to the Academy in Quantico and served in C.I.D. for a year before she signed on with the task force three weeks ago."

Amber glanced around at the others: one woman, two men, plus Hauser and Keeley, all staring at her. "That's a bit more of an introduction than I usually get," she said. Five minutes from now, she'd come up with something much wittier.

"Everyone here has at least ten years on you, Amber," Hauser explained. "I don't want anyone wondering why you're here, least of all you. You've kicked a lot of ass to be here." He paused. "Plus I needed to see if you'd blush."

"Did I?"

"No. Have a seat, everyone."

Amber felt many eyes still upon her as she took up an empty chair. "I only did the honors program in chemistry," she confessed. "Physics is hard."

"Amber, these are Agents Doug Bridger, Matt Lanier and Colleen Nguyen," Hauser began as the lights went down and the projector mounted in the ceiling flickered to life. "They've all been on the task force for several years. You'll be working with us for the foreseeable future in your hometown of Seattle."

Amber blinked. She knew relocation was a potential factor in this transfer, but thought that train had left the station. "I'm not staying with the LA office?"

"No," Hauser said. "No, that was just your audition. We had to make sure you wouldn't freak out at the first encounter with a supernatural. Some people don't take too well to seeing those kinds of abilities." He paused, offering up a wry smirk. "Most people don't respond by tackling the perp to the ground."

She felt grateful the lights had gone down. It was a pretty sure bet she'd be blushing by now. She paid attention to the map of the west coast on the screen and its red, blue and green circles here and there.

"The west coast is something of a hotbed of organized supernatural activity. We've got large vampire societies in LA and San Fran and a couple of distinct werewolf packs spread out across the southwest. The vampires organize themselves in a somewhat feudal structure. There's no discernible consistency of who claims what titles, but there are chains of allegiance. Many of those chains lead to this woman, Lady Anastacia Illyana Kanatova of Seattle."

The slide changed, offering up a detailed sketch of a thin woman of regal beauty. She was blonde, with Eastern European features and a haughty, elegant look. "We have no idea of her original name or how old she might be, but she clearly dates back centuries. As far as we can tell, she's the best-connected vampire on the west coast, with allies across the country. She's in charge of a group of at least sixty other vampires in the Seattle area, which is one of the largest populations we've identified.

"They all vanished last month. We haven't picked up a trace of them since."

Amber blinked. Hauser shifted to the next slide, which showed multiple views of what must have been a large house—perhaps a mansion, judging by its footprint—that had burned down to the foundation. She had to wonder how long it had been burning before the firefighters in the pictures arrived. Even much of the grass had burned within an acre of the house, maybe more.

"We know that in mid-September, Kanatova held some sort of major party at this

house in one of Seattle's northern suburbs. We don't know what the hell happened at that party. The fire burned so hot we can't really piece together any physical evidence. Property records are suspiciously sketchy. We've matched several abandoned vehicles nearby to known vampires in the Seattle metro area. We're sure at least some of the vampires survived, but they've gone to ground.

"Local authorities found one still-unidentified woman in the tree line with her head twisted almost in a full turn, and ashes from two vampires, along with their dresses," Hauser said, clicking the slideshow along, "but that's pretty much it. No human remains. No shell casings. Nothing.

"We've got wire-taps on vampires from here to New York and Miami, and everything indicates they haven't a clue what happened, but they're extremely concerned. They suspect it was a hit by another supernatural faction, but hits this size don't happen.

"About a week before this incident, a similar fire destroyed a cemetery chapel in Seattle," Hauser continued, shifting to a new spread of pictures. "Again, cause undetermined. Someone inside called 911, but left the phone off the hook without giving any info. No human remains were found. Nothing but ash."

Hauser leaned forward on the table. His voice held steady, but his frustration couldn't be missed. "Years of investigations. Thousands of hours of surveillance. Research. Solid cases, just waiting for a safe moment to nab the suspects. All gone up in smoke, without an explanation. And now we have vampires all across the country and probably beyond on a hair-trigger to retaliate."

Amber glanced around the table. The expressions worn by her fellow agents confirmed that they all knew the whole story already. This briefing was specifically for her. "So we don't have any leads at all?"

"One," Hauser grunted. He clicked to the next picture.

She saw a typical cell phone self-portrait: bathroom mirror, sink in the foreground, towels on a rack on the wall behind the subject. The guy in the picture might barely be old enough to drink. He was skinny, with short, wet brown hair, a pale, mostly hairless chest and a towel wrapped around his waist. His thug-life posture looked so comical that he couldn't possibly have taken himself seriously. In one hand, he held his cell phone. In the other, he held what appeared to be a wooden stake and a necklace of fangs.

An inset photo beside the youth's face provided a blow-up of the fangs, with markings to denote their likely legitimacy.

"His name is Jason Cohen."

Chapter One: And It's Only Tuesday

"This picture's all over the place," Alex teased. He held his phone in one hand, both his elbows on the restaurant table. "I mean, you've got fangs in your hand, posing like you're about to bust out some terrible nerdcare rap, but all this lens flare makes it look like you've just joined Starfleet... I don't know if I'm supposed to think you got these fangs from vampire Klingons or vampire Tupac, y'know?"

"Oh, like you're the guy to critique anyone's photography," retorted Jason. Baskets of half-finished gyros and Greek fries sat between the pair. "Didn't you burn down a church the last time you busted out your camera?"

Alex cringed. "I've taken pictures since then," he said, his voice dropping. He wore a blue dress shirt and black slacks, having come over for lunch from work. "And it was just a funeral chapel. Anyway, you know we didn't take out all the bad guys that night. Why would you want to ask for more trouble?"

"Dude, nobody's listening to us. It ain't like any of 'em are gonna eavesdrop on us at this hour," Jason said, jerking his thumb toward the window. Though Seattle's skies were as overcast and its streets as wet as any other October, it wasn't exactly dark. "Lorelei said those guys are like supernatural bottom feeders, right? So what's the big deal?"

"They aren't a big deal to her or to Rachel," Alex corrected, "or to Molly and Onyx. But I—"

"Yeah, have you called them lately?" interrupted Jason.

Alex winced. "No."

"Why not? They seem awesome."

"They are, I'm just... can we stay on topic? Look, there are more of those guys out there. They knew my name and how to find me, so they must know how to use computers. I deleted all my social media shit, but we both know all that stuff stays out there anyway. How hard do you think it'd be for them to figure out who my friends are?"

Jason gave a bit of a scowl. "You're that freaked out about it?"

"We are, yeah," Alex nodded. "Jason, I'd be dead right now if it wasn't for you. Twice, at least. And I don't want to think about what would've happened to Lorelei. She almost pulled out of her thing with the conservatory board today to come talk to you about this. I don't think you know how much you mean to her, man."

Sighing, Jason pulled out his phone. His fingers tapped through his password and called up the web page out of muscle memory. Jason barely had to look. "I was just fucking around anyway," he muttered. "Not like I thought anyone other than you two and the guys would get what's in that picture."

"Yeah, that's what I figured at first. Lorelei convinced me otherwise. She's dealt with these assholes before. She says they're hard-core about their secrecy stuff and so it stands to reason that they pay people to cruise the Internet and check for anything that might be about them. Even dorky bathroom cell phone pics."

Jason rolled his eyes. "It's gone, okay? Already off my profile pic. I'm deleting it from my pictures, see?" He tilted his phone to show the webpage. "Wasn't even up all

that long.”

“Thank you,” Alex said. “Although that brings up the other question—where in the hell did you get those, anyway? Those were real fangs?”

“Yeah, they’re real,” Jason said. “I picked ‘em up just after the fight. They were just sitting there in the piles of ashes. I guess not all of them crumble up all the way. We wanted to pick up all the incriminating evidence, right?”

“So you could post it on your profile page?” asked Alex.

“Hey, it’s gone, alright? It’s gone.”

“Thank you,” Alex sighed. “And you won’t show those to anyone, right?”

Jason sighed back, more dramatically than before. “No,” he grumbled. “Nobody’d know what they really were, anyway.”

“Hopefully.”

“Unless Lorelei knows any demon girls who are single,” he added. “If that sort of stuff impresses them.”

“I kinda doubt it. What about Britney and Brittany? How’s that going?”

“Uh. Well, that wasn’t ever gonna work out anyway,” Jason said, scratching the back of his neck. “I mean, I don’t think I’m ready to settle down yet, y’know?”

“Fucked it up?” Alex asked.

“You might be right about me blabbing too much online,” Jason confessed. “Less said about all that, the better. Anyway, I’m back on the market.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just give it some time. You’ll find someone new, or she’ll find you.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve had women hanging all over you ever since all the crazy started.”

“That’s not all a good thing,” frowned Alex.

“Oh, whatever. It’s only not a good thing for you because you’re...” Words failed him. He waved his hand at Alex. “You’re *you*.”

“Jason, the one thing that I learned from all the crazy was that I wasn’t getting anywhere with girls because I wore all my angst and loneliness like a neon t-shirt. Nobody wants to get with that. Fact is, you’re a good catch, and you know why. Just relax and don’t worry about it.”

“Is that how you work it?” Jason said, trying not to sound sullen.

His friend grunted, wanting to avoid that topic entirely. “Hey, I gotta head back to work,” Alex said.

“Yeah, I’ve got another class soon myself. Should probably get going.”

“I’ve got the bill,” said Alex, leaving cash on the table. He stood as Jason stepped out of his seat. “Everybody still on for pool tomorrow night? I’m gonna be late, but I’ll be there.”

“Sure,” Jason said. “See you then.” With that, he headed out the door.

Before he left, Alex pulled out his phone and sent out a text message: “Mission accomplished. Everything’s cool.” He didn’t expect a response from Lorelei anytime soon. Fundraising for the arts required a lot of schmoozing and charm, neither of which would be helped by poor cell phone etiquette.

He looked up from his phone to find one of the restaurant’s servers standing in front of him at his table. “You know you don’t have to hurry out of here, right?” she asked, smiling up at him with dark eyes and darker hair. She gestured to the mostly

empty tables beyond his. “You kinda came in after the lunch rush was over, anyway. If you want to hang out, it’s not like we need the table...?”

Alex smiled back reflexively, and then saw from her stance that she read it as an encouraging sign. He realized then that perhaps he shouldn’t have let his eyes drift over to her so many times while he and Jason ate, and that he’d gone out of his way to be polite and friendly... perhaps too far out.

“Sorry,” he said, “I’ve gotta get back to work. Going to lunch this late was an exception as it is.”

The waitress just shrugged. “Come back anytime.”

He felt her eyes on him as he passed. His strongest urges made it difficult to walk out the door, but his willpower won out in the end. Tempting as it was to stay and flirt, Alex preferred instead to keep his job—which presented plenty of its own similar challenges.

* * *

Some days were easier than others.

This afternoon would be tough. He could feel it in the elevator. He had only three hours to go after his late lunch, and knew he’d tremble through probably half of them.

Half of him hoped he would find Kat filling in at reception in her tight sweater, or perhaps Stephanie and her white, form-hugging dress shirt with the top buttons ever so innocently popped open when Alex came around. The other half of him told him to keep it in his pants, to avoid Stephanie entirely this afternoon, to stop thinking about sex and to focus on his work. He had a lot of filing ahead of him. Three hours of decent, reliable, utterly chaste filing.

Alex couldn’t claim his hair-trigger arousal didn’t feel good. Allowing himself even harmless fantasies made real opportunities hard to resist, though—and living under the “curse” of a succubus seemed to ensure those opportunities would come his way. Moreover, his natural charm and confidence seemed to grow in leaps and bounds under Lorelei’s influence. Once shy and wary of coming off as a creep, Alex now had to make an effort *not* to flirt.

At least he had no issues working beside Kat, despite her perfume and her eye-catching figure. The work dynamic between Alex and Kat was rife with innuendo, but there was never any chance she’d cheat on her boyfriend, or that Alex would tempt her toward that. No matter how much they teased, Kat served as a reality check on his magnetism. Not every woman was interested. Kat was safe. She was great eye-candy and great company, but no one’s self-control seemed ready to crumble there.

Stephanie was another matter entirely. Alex’s attraction to the party-girl copy room clerk had originally been one-sided, but as his confidence and experience grew, so did her interest. He didn’t know if he could deny another overt advance from her today.

He stepped off the elevator to find Shirley back from her lunch break and at the front desk once more. He smiled and waved at the grey-haired receptionist. No temptation to be faced there. Just a warm greeting and a wave on through into the law offices of Keating & Rose.

Alex took the long way around to the file room so he wouldn’t have to pass by

the copy room. He turned the corner, and found two of the company's sharpest attorneys in an office doorway. Whatever conversation Susan had been having with Trinh stopped immediately. His stride faltered. Both women glowered at him, then stepped inside Susan's office and shut the door.

Oh no, he thought. The last time he'd been in that office, Susan threw him up against a wall, kissed him hard... and wasn't happy at all to hear that he was seeing someone.

Alex scratched his head and wondered how he could mend that fence as he wandered to the file room. Kat wasn't back from lunch yet. He sat at his desk and rolled the mouse to bring his monitor out of screen saver mode. He entered his login and password, found it rejected and tried again. No luck. He wondered what he was doing wrong. Was the caps lock on?

"Alex?" asked a cool, confident female voice. He looked up to see Olivia—pretty, older, dark-haired office manager Olivia—standing in the doorway. "Could I talk to you in my office, please?"

"Uh, sure, Olivia," Alex shrugged. He rose from his seat to follow and found he couldn't help but look at the sway in her hips as she walked. That skirt wasn't too short to be professional, but wasn't long enough to be conservative, either. He liked the stockings, too. And the woman wearing them.

Stop it, he reminded himself. *Stop thinking about that. Try something else. Think about math. Motorcycle maintenance. No, baseball! Baseball isn't sexy! Except for all the innuendos about getting to bases. Dammit!*

Olivia shut and locked the door behind him. Her hand came to his chest, gently pushing him backward. The smoldering look in her eyes made her intentions plain.

Aw hell. Not again. Not today. I can't handle this today.

"Olivia, what—wait, what's going on?" he asked. The couch snuck up on him, taking his legs out from under him at the knees. He fell back into a seat.

"I think you know," she murmured. Olivia sat sideways in his lap, bringing her legs across his, not waiting for anything resembling permission. She kissed him hotly, slipping one hand behind his neck and up to grab a little of his short black hair. "I'm all about grabbing opportunities while they last."

He was stronger some days than others.

When she kissed him again, he didn't resist. He couldn't. Justifications filled his mind: She was an adult. She knew what she was doing. This was completely within the bounds of his relationship rules. Somewhere out there, a demon who loved him silently urged Alex to tear Olivia's clothes off. At least one angel probably had similar wishes with more vulgar expressions for them.

Olivia looked great with her hair down like this. Felt good up against him. Alex's hands roamed up her sides, leaving him curious about the lacy bra he felt underneath her top.

He didn't initiate this. He never did. Alex hadn't even ever flirted with his boss like he had with Stephanie, or Susan...

Wait. No. Susan. Stop. "Stop," Alex managed to say in the middle of their kiss, then repeated, "Wait, Olivia. Stop for a second."

Olivia's hand in his hair took a firmer grip, tilting his head back so she could lick his neck. "Can't it wait?"

“Did Susan say anything to you today?”

She pulled back. His shirt was already half unbuttoned. Her blazer was off. “You really want to do this now?” Frustration and annoyance replaced the tone of lust in her voice.

“Do what now? What happened?”

“What happened? Oh, nothing, except that Susan found out that you’ve been fooling around with Stephanie.”

“What?” Alex blinked.

“Stephanie left her cell phone out on a countertop in the copy room with a message to you showing. Susan decided that wasn’t okay with her.”

“But I didn’t fool around with Stephanie. Nothing actually happened.”

“Hm. Well, I told Susan that what she saw didn’t sound like conclusive evidence to me, but in the end it doesn’t matter. What does matter is what Susan believes and what I’m left to deal with.”

“Susan filed a complaint?”

“She talked to me as a first step, yes. Next step if I don’t resolve it is to take it to the partners. Can’t have that, can we?”

He didn’t even know what to say. “Then this—what is this? This here? You and me and... what the hell, Olivia?”

“*This* is nothing anyone will ever be able to prove, because I’m not careless enough to leave evidence lying around,” shrugged the office manager. “Now, I know you’ve got a girlfriend. I don’t expect what happens here to leave this office. The real question is whether or not you’d like me to fix this for you.”

“For me?” he blinked. “Is Stephanie in trouble, too?”

“She’s gone. Talked to her just before you went out to lunch. She’s already packed up and out of here.”

Suddenly he felt awful. “Olivia, why did you do that?” he demanded.

“Because Susan has a lot of loyal clients, Alex. Business contacts. Wealthy people. If she leaves the firm, she’ll take them with her.” She got off him and retrieved her blazer from the floor, putting it on as she sat behind her desk and straightened her hair. She seemed shockingly calm about all this. “And I think I can see where this is going. I’m sorry, Alex, but the firm can’t tolerate this sort of behavior.”

“What?” he burst.

“You’ve been a good worker and everyone likes you, Alex. But this sort of sexual harassment is unacceptable.”

His jaw hadn’t closed yet, so it had no farther to drop. He stood from the couch. “You’re *firing* me?”

Olivia looked him over and gestured absently at the impressive tent formed by the crotch of his slacks. “Unless you can give me some reason I shouldn’t?”

His response didn’t come out right away, jammed up as it was by a dozen other shocked and disgusted replies all trying to escape his mouth. “Go to hell!”

The office manager sighed. “I was afraid you’d get self-righteous about this.”

“Self-righteous?” Alex sputtered as she reached for the phone. “You—“

“I’m calling building security now,” Olivia said flatly. “They’ll have someone up to watch you collect your belongings and escort you to the parking garage.”

There was nothing more to say. Nothing to debate. No defense he could muster.

Alex stormed out of Olivia's office without another word. He headed back into the file room, buttoning his shirt back up as if it mattered.

"Wow," said an amused female voice, "that shit did *not* go the way I expected." Alex found her lying atop the long counter that made up his and Kat's desk, lounging with her head propped up on one arm. The radiance of Rachel's halo seemed a bit toned down, perhaps for his benefit. The slender, youthful beauty's broad white wings mostly faded into the wall behind her.

Usually, Rachel's mere appearance gave him an immediate thrill. He saw her almost daily, but never at predictable moments. Given her responsibilities, the angel could not spend as much time with her lovers as any of them might wish.

Alex had responsibilities, too. Fewer of them now. It didn't feel good.

"Were you watching?" he asked, keeping his voice low. He could still count the number of people who'd ever seen her on his fingers. Fired or not, Alex didn't want anyone walking in to see him talking to the wall. Somewhere out there was a security guard on the way.

"Yeah, most of it. I felt her coming onto you. Figured as long as I was gonna get vicariously boned, I'd come get the visuals to match." she grinned.

"Sorry about that," he muttered. "I feel like such an asshole."

"Why? Your boss is the asshole here," Rachel shrugged. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Between you and me, Olivia's guardian angel says she's always been like this. You're not the first guy she's hit with the fuck-me-or-you're-fired bit."

"So you don't think this I brought this on myself?" he fumed.

"Oh, sure, 'cause you come to work dressed like a slut, right?" the angel deadpanned. "Doesn't matter how hot you are or if you flirted with her or not. If the genders were reversed, you wouldn't even question who was in the wrong."

"Still. Women never even hit on me before Lorelei came along."

"Hah! You mean you didn't notice. Alex, your *eau de succubus* just advertises what a great lay you are," she said with a melodramatic gesture. "It doesn't turn anyone into a slobbering drone. There are four other chicks in this office who've fantasized about fucking you into the dirt, but they handle attraction like rational adults. You don't see them tying you up and stuffing their panties in your mouth."

Alex blinked. "Freudian slip much?"

"Maybe," Rachel replied with her sweet, naturally innocent grin. "But still. As much as Stephanie wanted to jump you, she kept it under control, didn't she?"

"Ugh. Yes, and I feel awful for her. I don't even have her phone number or her email. Can't even apologize."

"It's not on you to apologize. I'm telling you, this is about Olivia being a crazy bitch. Shit happens. You can't make it all about you."

"Doesn't mean I don't feel bad."

"Fair. Hey, I'll talk with Stephanie's guardian. Maybe we'll bend a couple rules about interventions to make it up to her."

Alex nodded and slumped down into his chair. He knew he should set to clearing out his desk, but fuck it. He was entitled to a few minutes for this to sink in.

"Anyway, screw this job," Rachel said. "You don't actually need it. You can't tell me filing all day long was a thrill a minute."

"I liked having this job," he scowled.

Rachel made a face. She looked at the file racks and the pile of papers in his in box. “For fuck’s sake, why?”

“Because after the way all my other opportunities coming out of high school fell apart, it felt good to at least have an adult job. This might not be exciting, but it beats working a register or standing behind a deep fryer. That’s all most people my age can find.” He paused and added, “It felt good to have a job to go to after all the other craziness in my life, too. Helped keep me grounded. Made it feel like I wasn’t just sponging off Lorelei.”

“You don’t *need* to stay grounded, love. What you need is a long, sustained stretch of party time. No, seriously,” she said as she saw the objection rise to his mouth. “You’ve had life after life of hard knocks and sacrifice. I know you don’t remember any details anymore, but it weighs on your soul. I see it.”

“Other lives. They weren’t *me*.”

“Yes, they were, dork-ass,” Rachel sighed, reaching out to nudge at his heart. “It’s all the same soul. It’s *who you are*.” The thought gave her a bit of a frown. “Nobody should have that kind of consistency, but there it is. You made all those choices. You carried all those burdens. It’s time to dump ‘em. Relax. Have some fun with this life.”

His eyebrow rose. “You don’t think I have enough fun with you and Lorelei?” he asked, his lips hinting at a grin despite his stress.

She mimicked his expression. “You could have more,” she suggested. “I’m kind of surprised life isn’t all strippers and sex clubs for you and Lorelei yet. You’re under a succubus curse. If you try to deny it, you’ll go nuts. You’ve gotta manage it, and that means letting your freak flag fly sometimes.”

“That’s what I’m saying, though,” he said as his grin faded. “You and Lorelei are incredible. Shouldn’t that be good enough? More than enough?”

“It’s not a question of ‘good enough,’ lover,” Rachel answered patiently. “For either of you. It’s a curse. It’s not supposed to be fair.”

“No, but *I* should be.”

Rachel let his statement hang in the air before she spoke again. “Y’know, this isn’t the only open relationship in the world. We didn’t invent the term. The others don’t come from demonic curses, either. The *healthy* ones just get there through a whole lot of honesty.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Yeah, I’ve been working on that.”

“I know,” she said. Rachel sat up on the counter, gracefully sliding over to put both her feet on the arms of Alex’s desk chair. “I should probably get back on the job. Still got things to deal with in the bay. All kinds of nasty tentacled shits trying to move in down there. Ugh. So fucking gross. I’ll come back to you when I’m free again. You gonna turn into a mopey emo bastard on me?”

“This happened like two minutes ago. Give it a chance to sink in, okay?”

“It’s just a job,” she reminded him evenly.

“It is,” Alex sighed. “I’ll get over it.”

“Go home. Talk it out with Lorelei,” the angel nodded. “She loves you. So do I.” She leaned in to kiss him softly. Then she was gone.

Alex opened his eyes to find a scowling security guard looming over him. His nametag read “Lambert.” The man pushed an empty trash bag in his hands. “Two minutes, creep,” said Lambert. “Get your shit and get out of my building.”