



LOVE'S PROPHECY

Book 1, The Prophecy Series

True Love Takes Courage and Sacrifice...

Award Winning Author

Brenda
Dyer

LOVE'S PROPHECY
Book One Of The Prophecy Series
By
BRENDA DYER

Paranormal Romance

OceanofPDF.com

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Dedication:

I dedicate this novel to my wonderful husband who allowed me the opportunity to concentrate on writing. I can never thank you enough.

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Prologue

Sacred Dimension

The Creator leaned back against His throne. “Summon Vampier to me.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The messenger’s travel-worn blue robes fluttered as he bowed and backed toward the doorway.

Once alone, The Creator stared across His private chamber at the pristine white walls and floors. *It was time.*

He spread an ancient parchment over His thighs and read the words He’d written eons past. With a forefinger, He traced the outline of the sword symbol adorning the bottom of the sheepskin. This prophecy He’d formulated back when Lucifer had first declared war to destroy humans and take the earth for himself. A betrayal that still ached like a festering wound.

After rolling up the prophecy, The Creator rose and stood next to the arched window cut from the stone wall. Thick white clouds below obscured the view of the deep valleys, rushing rivers, and tall mountains of the Sacred Dimension. A warm breeze blew through the archway carrying the scent of rain dampened soil and green foliage. With His thoughts, He could part the billowing vapors, but decided against it. The gloom reflected His mood.

His gaze shifted to the east. It pierced through the veil that hid the Sacred Dimension from Earth, a blue jewel spinning in a sea of velvety blackness since the beginning of its formation. An immense ball He’d placed the precise distance from the sun’s burning heat to support life.

Water, land, and trees, all made with love for His greatest creation.

With a heavy sigh, The Creator watched His offspring go about their lives. Some remembered Him, but most did not. They were turning away at an alarming rate, listening to lies told by Lucifer’s demon children. With the demons’ help, Lucifer had turned the earth into a hard, cruel place—far from what had been intended.

He remembered the words He’d spoken to His angels millenniums past. *As it is in heaven, so shall it be on earth.*

The rhythmic slapping of sandaled feet on the marble stairs outside His room brought The Creator's thoughts back.

Vampier, one of His angels, sprinted through the arched doorway and then stopped. His white robes ballooned around his body as he dropped to his knees, resting his forehead against the floor. "I came as fast as I could, my Lord."

"Rise, my son."

Vampier stood. His knuckles showed white as he wrung his hands. "Any reply from Lucifer?"

The Creator gazed once more at the earth, then turned away. Sadness, raw and debilitating gripped Him. "Lucifer denied my request for council. Yet, my messenger brought back his words. A thief and a liar he named me. He demands nothing less than the destruction of my children and yours so he can then reclaim what he wrongfully feels I stole from him."

Fear filled Vampier's dark eyes.

"The worry I see in your eyes matches what is in my heart. Sadly, this war will continue. Lucifer's heart knows nothing but darkness. Pride and hate have consumed him. He will neither listen to reason nor will he turn from his chosen path."

Vampier made little noise as he walked across the white marbled floor. He stared out the window facing east. "Is there naught that we can do, my Lord?"

The Creator laid a gentle hand on Vampier's shoulder. "The earth belongs to our children. It is theirs to either win or lose. And as you know, freewill is a gift I bestowed upon them. We cannot interfere too much."

"Shall we leave them to suffer alone?" Vampier said, his voice a sharp crack that resounded off the walls of the circular room.

"Nay, not alone." The Creator placed the prophecy in his hands.

Understanding replaced the fear and sadness in Vampier's eyes. His black brows rose. "The prophecy . . . has it been found once more on Earth?"

The Creator nodded.

"So it has begun?"

"Yes. I've set the plan in motion. Your sons who govern your children will rediscover the prophecy."

With the parchment clutched against his chest, Vampier looked toward the earth. "This is most wondrous news, my Lord. Lucifer shall answer for

his sins upon you and our children.” He pounded his fist against the stone wall. “His wickedness will be brought to an end!”

Doubt took hold of The Creator’s heart. “I know not the final outcome. All hope rests on our children and whether they can forget old prejudices.”

Seating Himself back on the throne, The Creator allowed His mind to wander back to when He had Lucifer’s love and devotion. Now his thoughts and heart were forever closed. And what treacherous tactics he had in store were unknown. “I hope Lucifer does not discover our plan.”

Vampier knelt before the throne. “The prophecy has been kept secret for all these years, my Lord. A secret Lucifer knows nothing of. It will be as you prophesized. *The two shall make one!* Your daughters who carry the mark of the prophecy and my warrior sons will come together and put an end to his reign of terror.” Vampier rose and turned toward the windows. A white dove landed on the ledge. Its gentle cooing cut through the silence.

“Their coming together will not be easy. Lucifer has done his job well, separating our children,” The Creator said.

Vampier faced Him once more; his expression one of hope and sadness. “Nay, it will not. Still, they will triumph.”

Regret stabbed His soul. As much as He desired a different outcome, Lucifer, His once glorious angel, must fall.

Vampire Prophecy

In the depth of time
when all sorrow shall climb
The gods shall send
the ones to help bring about the end
From these shall spring
The saviors to whom all shall cling
From light and dark
look for the mark.

The time will come
when the two shall make one.
Small warriors of light
dark warriors of might
From light and dark
look for the mark.

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Chapter 1

Friday, June 13, 2:15a.m

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

From a dark corner table, Mel studied the crowd of humans while they drank and partied. Their shouts and laughter mingled with AC/DC's *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, pulsating throughout the dim interior of The Green Tree, a seedy nightclub set in the heart of downtown Surrey. Sweat and strong perfumes mixed together to form a nauseating bouquet.

Humans were clueless. Completely unaware vampires lived amongst them. Unaware one was amidst them at this moment, watching their every move. If they knew, they'd trample each other as they stormed to the nearest exit. A dark part of him wanted to jump up, bare his fangs and shout, "*I want to suck your blood.*" He smiled, picturing the scene. Yeah, too bad he left his Dracula cape at home.

Taking a sip of whiskey, Mel leaned back in his seat and continued his scrutiny of the inebriated crowd. Hard to imagine there'd been a time when both species had stood together against the evils in the world. That ended centuries ago, after humans turned their backs on vampires and listened to the lies spouted by the demons. Yet vampires had kept their end of the bargain. They continued to fight, keeping humans from being wiped off the planet.

Mel fingered the remnants of a scar hidden along his hairline, a trophy received the night before from a demon's blade. A battle he and his fellow slayer, Kal, almost lost. Four against two was a tough fight, but they emerged the victors.

A shapely waitress caught his attention as she retrieved her drink orders at the bar. She held a loaded tray above her head with one hand. The movement forced her full breasts higher. He was positive they'd spill out of her low cut top any second. Round hips swayed as she wove through the crowded tables, delivering drinks to the rowdy patrons. His groin hardened and pushed against his pants. And buried underneath his sexual need, a

deeper, more primitive hunger swam to the surface—a thirst no amount of alcohol could quench.

His fangs descended. He glanced away from her lush figure and willed them back.

Shit. Blood lust mixed with sexual desire was a hard combo to ignore. Too bad his mind wasn't as eager as his body. His canines tried to slip past his lips again and he sighed. Ah hell, couldn't fight vampire biology. And judging from the erection that bulged in his jeans, he couldn't fight male biology either.

Against his better judgment, Mel's eyes darted back to the waitress. He groaned when he caught another eyeful of her ample cleavage. His fangs dropped further. He swore, forcing them to retract. Two against one. Looked like his baser urges were winning this war.

Mel curled his fingers around the glass and downed the last of his whiskey, ice and all. Maybe he should just split. He glanced at his wristwatch. 2:20 a.m. Dawn wasn't far off. He scanned the crowd looking for Kal. What the hell was taking him so long? One more drink and he'd have to hunt him down.

As Mel crunched the ice, he checked on the waitress's progress. Three tables away, she moved with the grace of a dancer, all the while avoiding groping hands. She drew closer and peeked at him from under her thick false lashes. An unmistakable invitation shone in her blue eyes. Her scent, a tangy citrus aroma, cranked up his desire. She smiled, revealing even white teeth. Mel returned the gesture, careful not to flash his own.

Maybe he would line-up a little pleasure. And as always, when it was over, he'd wipe himself from her memory. Same drill, different night.

Yet he couldn't muster any enthusiasm. He was sick of the anonymity of it. He wanted more. Wanted to wake up next to someone, wanted someone to share his life with. Hell, at the very least he wanted someone to remember him.

Years ago, he had known the contentment of joining his life with another. He and his wife had shared a strong emotional tie—one that can only be achieved through love. But his father had made damn sure their love and happiness ended in tragedy.

Sweat beaded his forehead. Memories of his ol' man bubbled up out of the dark pit in his soul, where he desperately tried to keep them buried.

Something brushed against his hand. Mel jerked back, muscles tensed as fear sped up his heart. He felt like a jackass when he realized it was only his cell phone vibrating.

The phone bounced again and skittered across the polished tabletop. With a shaky hand, he snatched it before it fell. It buzzed against his palm and he pushed the side button to check caller ID.

Roarik.

He flipped it open and shoved a finger in one ear in an attempt to block the throbbing music. "What's up?"

A faint muffle was all he heard. Mel pressed his finger in tighter. "What was that?" This time he made out Roarik's deep voice but no distinct words. "I can't hear ya. Hold on a sec, I'm going to find some place quieter." He stood and moved through the tight press of bodies toward the restrooms. A quick check made sure it was empty. Satisfied, he brought the phone back to his ear. "Okay, what's up?"

"Is Kal with you?" Roarik asked in his gruff voice.

"He was hunting demons with me earlier, but he's not with me now."

Roarik's barked curse blasted in his ear. "Where is he?"

"I think he's in his truck out back of the club, feeding and screwing. Why?"

"Typical. Find him and get your asses back to the base. I'm calling an emergency meeting."

Mel's heart slowed to a crawl as unease filtered through his brain. "All right, but can you at least tell me what's going on?"

Silence filled the line, and then a heavy sigh. "The prophecy has been found."

The prophecy? Then it hit him with the intensity of a lightning bolt. The Vampire Prophecy. Mel cleared his suddenly dry throat. "How? When?"

"I'll fill you in when you get here."

The door banged open. Startled, Mel spun around.

Kal sauntered in with a big cocky grin. "Hey, I was lookin' everywhere for ya. Thought maybe you were finally gettin' some action. Guess not."

"Kal's here now. We're on our way." Mel flipped his phone closed. "Let's go." In three strides, he was across the room.

"Yo, where's the fire, dude?" Kal asked.

Mel wrenched the door open and the steady beat of the music rushed in. He turned and stared at Kal. "The prophecy's been discovered."

All pretense of teasing vanished from Kal's face. His dark brows dropped low over blue eyes, which were the same color as the highlights streaked throughout his black hair. "Are you shittin' me? When did this happen?"

"Don't know. Let's go." Mel shot through the door with Kal right behind him.

As they drove through the city, it seemed to Mel they hit every damn red light, plus the heavy Friday night traffic slowed them up. When they finally reached the highway, traffic thinned and Kal stomped on the accelerator.

With the lights of the city well behind, they turned onto a quiet country road. After a few miles surrounded by nothing but trees, the pavement came to a sudden end and the road forked. The headlights illuminated two large signs. One read *Water Shed* with an arrow pointing left to a washed-out logging road, the other marked *private property* pointed to a narrow gravel lane dwarfed on either side by dense fir and cedar trees. Kal turned right.

Fifteen minutes later, Kal parked in front of a three-story white house with a wide veranda running the length of the lower level. They hopped out, sprinted up the stairs, through the wooden double doors, and up a winding staircase to the top floor.

"Sorry we're late," Mel said as he stepped into Roarik's office. He glanced at the other warriors seated throughout the room. All were present. Soren, Black, Sin, even Ace.

The rectangular room was spacious, but with all seven warriors present, it felt like the red walls shrunk.

Roarik rose from behind his oak desk. Topping out at six-foot-seven, he was the tallest and broadest of the demon slayers in this squad. His regal carriage demanded respect. Not only was he a direct descendant of the first king of the first vampire clan sent to Earth thousands of years ago, he was the captain of this unit of slayers.

Before Mel and Kal sat, Roarik thrust a sheet of paper in each of their hands. Mel studied it. Written across the top were the words *vampire prophecy* followed by fourteen short sentences in English. Decorating the bottom was a small symbol shaped like a crooked dagger. He glanced up. "This makes no sense. It reads like a goddamn riddle."

Roarik nodded. He headed back to the black swivel chair behind his desk. Once seated, he picked a pen from a jar on his desk and twirled it between his fingers. "Behold the prophecy, boys."

Silence filled the room.

Dropping his pen, Roarik sat forward and leaned his thick forearms along the desktop. “Those lazy pricks in the Sacred Order are riding me and every squad leader’s ass around the globe—hard—demanding answers to this riddle. Their orders are for one warrior from each squadron to research it.” A short pause followed. “I choose you, Mel.”

Mel’s eyes jerked from the page to Roarik’s grim face. “Why me?”

“Because, out of the seven of us here, you’re the only one who’s studied our species’ history extensively.”

“Studied sure, but a scholar I’m not. Sorry, can’t help you. You’ll have to get someone else.”

“Well, I suggest you get on your computer and search the great world-wide web and get reacquainted with history text books.” Roarik’s eyes narrowed. “That’s an order.”

Annoyance rolled up from Mel’s gut. *Well, I suggest you shove it.* He clamped his teeth to trap the words. He had no desire to spend one second of his time researching a bogus prophecy made up by the gods. As far as he was concerned, the gods could go straight to hell with their buddy, Lucifer. They were all useless bastards who cared nothing for the miseries vampires suffered. Miseries he’d suffered. They proved that when they’d ignored his prayers and allowed his father to destroy everyone he loved.

“I want you on it this weekend,” Roarik stated. “I expect a report on Monday.”

Mel swore under his breath and shoved the prophecy into a pocket of his black leather jacket. “I’ll do what I can.”

Beside him, Kal laughed and nudged his arm. “That’s what ya get for being a book-worm. That’s why I stick to the simple things in life: women, video games, and loud music. This way no one expects anything.”

Mel tried to hide his smile. Leave it to Kal to find humor in an otherwise serious situation.

Chuckles from the other warrior’s filled the room, but Roarik’s thunderous expression stopped the laughter. “Now is not the time for your bullshit comedy, Kal.”

Kal’s face turned red and his gaze shifted to the carpeted floor. “Sorry.”

Roarik stood and strolled over to the enormous stone fireplace, which covered most of one wall. “I’ll fill you in on what little the Sacred Order knows about the prophecy. They believe it refers to some mystical warriors who will help bring an end to this war.”

Soren pulled a pack of smokes from his jacket pocket. His dark blond brows lowered over cunning green eyes. “What do the historians have to say about it?”

“Where do you think the Order is getting their information?” Roarik shoved his hands through his blond hair. “Oh, and another thing, the symbol on the bottom of the page is believed to be how we will identify these warriors. So they want every slayer on the lookout for this mark.”

“Yeah? And what do they suggest we do? Go around stripping every warrior we meet?” Ace laughed and shook his head. “What a bunch of no-mind ass clowns.”

“I agree,” Roarik said with a smirk on his face.

Black leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “How was the prophecy found?”

“Rats.”

“Rats found the prophecy?” Kal laughed.

“In a manner of speaking.” Roarik crossed his arms and widened his stance. “Recently the Council house was hit with a rat infestation. A member of the Sacred Order went down to the unused section of the underground tunnels armed with rat poison. He shone a light into a crumbled segment of wall when he noticed a rat jump out, and hidden inside was a metal box. Imagine their surprise when they opened it to find the prophecy. God knows how long it had been sealed up in the wall.”

“Holy shit,” Black murmured. “The prophecy had been under the Sacred Order’s noses all this time.”

Roarik nodded. “I know you all have tons of questions, but I don’t have answers, so save them. Now, on to other business. Celeene and I are leaving tonight for Kelowna to meet their new squad leader. We’ll be back Sunday night. While I’m away, Soren will be in charge. This concludes our meeting. If anything unforeseen happens, call my cell. As usual, boys, be careful.”

Ten minutes later, Mel entered the small two-bedroom suite he and Kal shared beneath the main house. There were seven suites in all, including theirs. He paused in the entrance to their living room and glared at his computer. Instant anger over his new position as researcher gripped his gut in a tight fist. Shaking his head, he walked down the short hallway to his room. “I’m hitting the sack. Catch ya later.”

“Yo, Mel? Do you think there’s any truth to the prophecy?”

Mel halted outside his bedroom, but didn't turn around. He hated the glimmer of hope in Kal's voice. "No. I don't believe the gods will finally get off their lazy asses and send help."

"But you don't know that for sure, man."

Mel heaved a weary sigh. "The gods don't give a shit what happens to us. Hell, they don't even care what happens to their precious humans. Look around, Kal. Look at all the misery. All of us—humans and vampires—are just puppets dangling from strings for the god's amusement, and we vampires are their disposable soldiers. Tools to be used and tossed aside when we're no longer needed." He opened the door and stepped inside.

She rested with her back against the red cushioned swing chair in a garden of blooming flowers. Moonlight illuminated everything it touched while flowers danced in the light breeze, swaying to a song only they could hear. The swing rocked back and forth, powered by her small bare foot. In her arms lay a smiling baby. Long dark hair shielded her face from view. Mel tried to call to her, but to no gain; his tongue wouldn't take direction from his brain. He wanted, no, needed to see her.

Abruptly, as if someone flicked a light switch, the woman and baby disappeared and the sound of thunder filled the blackness.

Blood curdling screams poured into his ears as he ran, clawing his way up a steep hill, stumbling and sliding in his panic. When he finally reached the top, he stood unmoving on the edge of the cliff and stared with horror at the scene. The houses and barns in the little valley were all ablaze. Flames lit the night while smoke filled the sky, trying to choke out the stars.

Men on horseback raced through the village, cutting down screaming females and young on the run for their lives. He tried to move, but his feet had grown roots and were stuck fast, deep in the earth.

He glimpsed his wife Bethany, as she ran out from behind a burning barn. Her long red braid bounced and swayed as she raced toward the dark forest. He tried to scream a warning, but no sound escaped. He was paralyzed and mute. Helpless. A large masked human male riding an immense black horse, galloped up behind her, closing the distance with lightening speed. As she headed for the cover of the trees, the rider, with a mighty swing of a sword, cut her down as he bolted past. Her body crumpled to the dirt. The male jerked his snorting steed to a sliding stop,

and wheeling around, he charged back. With a triumphant yell, the masked warrior pulled his helm from his head, and shook out his long black hair.

The scene changed again. No longer merely an observer, Mel was thrust into the action. He leaped off the prancing stallion and turned over his dead wife for inspection. Instead of his wife's lovely face, his father's evil black eyes stared back. He tried to jump away, but his father's hand snaked out and curled around his ankle.

“Oh, son,” he sneered, laughing maniacally up at him. “You will never be free of me. I am inside you, just waiting for the perfect opportunity to come out.”

The scenario abruptly transformed once more. Mel now lay bleeding on the cold, hard ground. He looked up at his father as he leered down. Pure hatred swirled in his sire's eyes, freezing his soul. With a foot planted on Mel's chest, his father plunged the tip of a sword straight for his heart.

Mel violently shook his head, mouthing the word no, over and over.

Then just before the blade hit its mark, a beautiful white light shone into his eyes, momentarily blinding him. Mel swung his terrified gaze from his father's enraged expression and stared at a hooded and cloaked figure. He sensed she was a woman, but he didn't know for sure, he couldn't see her face. She reached down to him with one small glowing hand. Without hesitation, he grasped it like a lifeline and she pulled him out of the nightmare.

Mel bolted awake. His arms flailed as he fought the blankets tangled around his body.

Sucking in a lungful of air, his heart slammed against his ribs. With a vicious curse, he shoved his sweat-dampened hair out of his eyes. Frantic, he searched the room, afraid his father's ghost still lingered in the shadows.

He hung his head from tense shoulders and willed his pounding heart and erratic breathing to settle.

A few moments later, he laid back and recalled the dream of the woman and baby. A dream that haunted him on and off for the past fifty years. Nothing ever changed, not even the simplest detail. After all these years he had no clue who she was. He hadn't even seen her face. But oddly enough, she didn't seem like a stranger. This dream always filled him with love, contentment, and overwhelming happiness.

He frowned as his thoughts changed to the nightmare that followed. A nightmare which plagued him since his wife's murder. But the cloaked

woman in the end was new.

Closing his eyes, Mel hoped for sleep with no dreams, only forgetfulness.

Friday, June 13, 9:10p.m

Dr. Breeana Spencer pulled her gray Ford truck into a parking space behind The Green Tree. She shut it off and glanced out her rear window at the two-story concrete building.

Great, another dump. If Carol saw this hole-in-the-wall, she'd laugh her ass off.

A small door beside the back stairs opened and out walked John, the bass guitarist in their band; a thirty-five year old accountant by day, slash rocker on the weekends. He smiled and waved when he saw her.

Breeana waved back. "Hey, John."

"I was going to call you. Thought maybe you got lost." He stopped beside her truck and leaned in through the open window and kissed her cheek.

She shoved an old gas receipt with his scrawled directions written on the back, under his nose. "How could I possibly get lost following your awesome directions?"

He chuckled, folded his long arms along the truck's window ledge and eyed her up and down, his pale green eyes sparkled with male appreciation behind his glasses. "Hey, like the get-up. Very Lee Aaronish."

She glanced down at her black jeans, high heeled boots, and long leather coat. "Thanks."

John straightened, drumming his hands against the truck. "Well, I'm heading in. The guys and I are having a beer before we go on. Come join us."

"Yeah, I will."

He turned and walked toward the door. When he was half way, she leaned out the window. "John?"

He stopped and faced her. "Yeah?"

She glanced at the building, arching an eyebrow. "The Green Tree?"

John spread his arms wide. "Hey, it was either this dump or a strip club in Seattle. Thought you'd like this place better."

Breeana chuckled. “Is there at least some place where I can put on my face?”

“Yep. Through this door and down the hall is a dressing room.”

“A dressing room?”

“Okay.” A wide grin stretched his lips. “More like a small closet with a chair and a mirror.”

“That’s more like it. I wouldn’t want to get used to any luxuries.”

Using his thumbs and index fingers, John flashed her the double gun signal before he disappeared inside.

As she opened the truck door, the hinges squealed in protest. She leaned over the passenger seat, clasped the handle of her guitar case and the strap of her purse, then lugged them out. As she walked across the parking lot, her cell-phone rang. She reached into the pocket of her leather coat. No need to check caller ID. Only one person would be calling.

“Hey, Carol. What’s going on?”

“Not much. Just making sure you made it,” Carol said with a teasing lilt to her voice.

“Of course. Did you think otherwise?” Breeana laughed to herself, knowing she did.

“I know your shitty sense of direction. Plus I was worried because I kept you up all night and half the day.”

“I’m fine. Honest. I’m used to functioning on no sleep, fueled by caffeine.” And she was. Being a veterinarian, she was accustomed to hard days and late nights attending to some animal related emergency.

“Well, I feel bad,” Carol said.

“Will you stop that? You’ve been around horses your whole life. You know they give birth whenever they feel like it. Star decided last night was her time.”

Carol sighed. “So anyway, what’s this place you’re singing at tonight called? Thugs-R-Us? ”

“Har, har. Actually it’s a dive called The Green Tree.”

“Sounds...nice. But aren’t you tired of playing in dives? Why don’t you quit? You’re so busy with your job and you don’t need the money.”

Breeana trapped her cell phone between her shoulder and ear. She walked over to the door, set her guitar down, and leaned against the building. “I like singing. It feeds the wild-child in me.”

“If you say so,” Carol said, her tone heavy with mockery. “Did you book a hotel room yet?”

“I did before I left.”

“Good.”

A pause followed which prickled Breeana’s instincts.

“So,” Carol said. “Have you given anymore thought about dinner tomorrow evening with Dave and me?”

Breeana barked out a laugh. “Why? So you can set me up with another one of your husband’s friends? Don’t think so.”

“Come on. James is great. You’ll really like him. I promise.”

Not this again. She hated that out of all her friends she was the only single one left, and for some reason, they all felt compelled to fix her up with their husband’s friends. She could find her own dates, thank you very much, and she resented the hell out them for thinking otherwise. “Forget it, Carol. I’m not interested.”

“Look, I’m just trying to help. I know you’re lonely and . . .”

“Then I’ll buy a vibrator. Besides, I’m too busy for a relationship.” Breeana kicked at a small pebble with the toe of her boot and glanced out at the darkening lot. “Listen, Carol. I have to get ready. We’re due on stage at ten.”

“All right. What time will you be home tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll call you in the morning after I wake up. But maybe if I meet someone I won’t come home for days.”

“I hope you do,” Carol replied seriously. “Though knowing you, you’ll find some lame reason for why he’s not right for you. Look Breeana, Tom was a dick. Not all guys are like him.”

At the mention of her ex-boyfriend, her stomach dropped. “No argument there, but I really don’t want to—”

“Talk about him, yeah, yeah, I know. There are good men out there, but you won’t find one hidden in the pages of a romance novel. News flash, girl. They’re fictional characters.”

Okay, time to get off the phone. “Carol, I’m not having this conversation with you again.”

“Yeah, because you know I’m right. You’re so scared of being hurt again that you’re playing it safe, looking for someone who doesn’t exist, and one of these days you’re going to realize I’m right.”

Gritting her teeth, she swore under her breath. "I'm not scared; I just don't have time to invest in a relationship."

"Want to hear some of the excuses you've used?"

"Not really, but I'm sure you'll tell me anyway." Breeana sighed and silently counted to five, trying to control her temper.

"Too arrogant, allergic to animals, swears too much, and oh yes, stinky feet. Need I go on?"

Breeana burst out laughing, remembering Steve from college. "Steve's feet did stink when he took off his shoes."

Carol laughed back, the tension instantly evaporating. "Yeah, they did."

"Listen, I gotta go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay, sweetie. I'll talk to you later. I love you."

"Love you too. Bye."

Breeana closed her phone and dropped it into her purse before hurrying through the door. The music, which had only been a muffled throb outside, became louder as she jogged down the narrow hallway. She opened a door at the end and stepped into a dimly lit cramped room, bare except for a small chair sitting in front of a mirror. She leaned her guitar against the wall, then rummaged through her purse. As she extracted her make-up bag, something fell, hitting the floor with a thud. The latest romance novel she was reading. She picked it up, looking at the cover. A large muscular man leaned over a beautiful woman, kissing her neck. The woman was tipped back in a pose that defied the laws of physics. Her breasts almost overflowed from the top of her dress while her hip-length blonde hair swirled around them.

She traced the hero's face with a finger. She loved reading romance novels, especially paranormals. Vampires made her heart race. Carol thought she was nuts, believing it was one of the reasons she didn't have a boyfriend. Which was bullshit. Imaginary men couldn't hurt her. Not like real men.

She flinched as painful memories of her last serious relationship flooded her. Clear as if it happened only yesterday, she recalled Tom's startled face when she walked in on him and his ex-girlfriend. Hard as that was, his explanation was what stung the most. "You don't have what it takes to keep me satisfied. Your job always comes first. I need a woman who's willing to put me first."

Breeana dropped the book in her purse and busied herself applying make-up. Everything always worked out in books—not like real life. She ached for love—companionship—but all she ended up with was heartache and pain. She was happy sticking with her fictional vampires, werewolves, and shape shifters. They were safe. Perfect.

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Chapter 2

Friday, June 13, 10:40pm

Downtown streets of Surrey

“Ladies, will you excuse us, please?” Mel grabbed Kal by the shoulder and hauled him away from the two attractive women he was chatting up.

Kal shrugged out of his grip. “Hey, man. What gives? I was trying to score us some action.”

“First, I can *score* my own *action*, asshole. Second, take a look.” Mel pointed across the busy intersection at two male demons leaving *The Devil's Own* nightclub. The local hot-spot catered to a rough assemblage of humans and evidently demons.

Kal rubbed his palms together. “Alriiight, fighting action.”

Mel sighed. “Yeah, fighting action.” His eyes followed the two making their way up the sidewalk, heading in the opposite direction. “Let's go.”

With his mind, Mel changed the glowing orange hand on the crosswalk signal to the go symbol. A black Camero skidded to a sudden stop as a surge of pedestrians filed across the street. Techno music thumped from the car's speakers and vibrated up Mel's legs.

Once across, Mel and Kal stalked the demons from a safe distance. Taking their time, they hung back and ducked behind buildings whenever they got too close. The demons seemed unaware they were followed; both too busy ogling pretty human females as they made their way to the various nightclubs lining the downtown streets of Surrey.

Mel weaved through the crowds, keeping tabs on them with no problem. Even blindfolded, he would be able to follow. Although demons used human bodies to hide their true appearance, the malice and evil of their spirits couldn't be masked. Being enemies, vampires sensed when in their presence. The physical sensations were similar to a static charge: hair raised on arms and neck, low buzzing in the muscles, accompanied with the unmistakable stench of rotting flesh. Even humans perceived demons on a

small level, though they didn't know what they were reacting to. It came across more as dislike or fear.

Mel closed his eyes and allowed his body's natural instincts to take over. The moment he opened his mind, the cold evil from the devil's spawn called to him like a light beacon signaling to a lost ship. Mel peeked at Kal and knew he too felt the strong internal pull.

Mel stopped. The cretins were swallowed by the bustling crowd.

“What's the plan, Stan?” Kal asked.

“Shut your mouth for a second and maybe I'll figure it out.”

Shit. How were they going to pull this off with so many witnesses around? The street was crowded with humans who didn't need to see what was about to go down. Every alley or dark corner was likely occupied with drug dealers or hookers plying their trade.

Nice world we live in.

He searched his mind and remembered The Seacrest, an abandoned hotel, slated to be torn down, was only three blocks up. Old and destined for demolition, yes. But abandoned? That remained to be seen.

He gripped Kal's arm and pulled him into a dark alley littered with garbage overflowing from three large waste bins.

Two men—one with a needle stuck in his thin arm—jerked to attention. “Hey. This space is occupido, understand?”

“Yeah, gotcha. Just pretend we're not here.” Mel's gaze locked with the speaker's and his mind drilled into his fuzzy brain. He shoved through the drugged haze and planted his own thoughts.

The man's blood-shot eyes glazed over. He nodded. “Ah. . . sure. You're not here.”

Mel's hypnotic stare fell on the other until he too nodded and murmured, “You're not here.”

“That's right.” Mel released their gazes and turned to Kal. “Remember the old Seacrest hotel?” Kal nodded. “Go ahead and make sure it's empty. Wait for me. I'll lure the demons.”

“Good plan, Stan.” Kal took a step away, ready to dematerialize.

Mel gripped Kal's black leather covered bicep. “Call me Stan once more and I'll use your head as a football. Those two buildings at the end of the block will be the goal posts. Ya hear me?”

Kal looked down and scratched his forehead, a gesture Mel knew all too well; he was trying to hide a smile. “I hear ya, man. I won't say it again.”

Mel glared back, unconvinced.

“What?” Kal asked, his voice heavy with laughter.

“Whatever. Hurry up. I want to get this over with.” They stepped behind the dumpsters and Kal dematerialized first. Mel could have sworn he faintly heard the word, *Stan* float past his ears. “Asshole,” he muttered with a smile before he concentrated all his energy on a small, hopefully empty alley fifty feet up the block ahead of the demons. His vision distorted as his body faded. He glanced down at himself; he resembled a ghost—transparent. With closed eyes, he concentrated harder and then disappeared, leaving the drug addicts and the rank odor of decaying garbage behind.

Mel took form in the small alley and exhaled a sigh of relief. Just a wino passed out under a threadbare blanket. He straightened his jacket and stepped out onto the busy sidewalk, heading toward the hotel. He knew the moment Lucifer's servants spotted him. Their eyes bored holes in his back like hot poker.

Now that he had their attention, he ambled up the street acting as if he were hunting for a meal, not a fight.

Ten minutes later, he stopped in front of the rundown building and bent to tie the already tied laces of his hiking boots. As he feigned ignorance at their silent approach, the muscles along his jaw clenched in anticipation.

“So, slayer. Fancy meeting you here.”

Mel glanced up. A large male demon with scraggly brown hair stopped five feet away. He crossed thick arms over a broad chest. Mel scanned the area for the other, sensing him hiding behind a dumpster on the far side of the building.

Mel straightened. “I could say the same to you.”

“What? All alone tonight?” The demon’s lips curled as he snarled. “You maggots usually hunt in pairs, so I figure you must be out feeding, spreading rabies like the filthy vermin you are.” He laughed and withdrew a dagger from underneath his long black trench coat. The bright silver of the deadly blade gleamed in the dim light.

“That's so clever,” Mel taunted. “Did you come up with that on your own, or is that one of your master's jokes?” When the demon didn't reply, he added, “Must be, for we all know your kind can't think for yourselves.” He withdrew his own blade, sheathed at his waist, and held it out in front.

“Fuck you,” the demon bellowed.

Mel chuckled as anger replaced the evil interloper's cocky smile.

He knew demons envied human and vampires' free will. They were slaves to Lucifer's every whim. On earth, the relative freedom they had was a luxury, they would do anything to stay. This made them a formidable foe.

When a demon was slain, it went back to its master—back to the pain and despair of its miserable existence. Back to its deformed shape; no more lithe human body, no more freedom, no more light, only agony and servitude.

“Eager to be reunited with your master? If you're homesick, why didn't you say so? I'll help you get back, no worries.” Mel aimed his dagger at the demon's chest. “I have your one-way ticket right here.”

The second demon stepped out from behind the dumpster and sauntered over to its partner. “You think you can take us both on, fucker? Let's see what you've got!”

This demon, though smaller than his sidekick, had an air of confidence. With a sinister laugh he crouched low, tossing a dagger from hand to hand, waiting for Mel to make a move.

Kal stepped out from the hotel's entrance. He leaned nonchalantly against the door jam, cleaning his nails with his blade. “Need any help, buddy? Or can you handle these two pieces of shit?”

“I could handle them myself, but I'm in a sharing kind of mood tonight. Why don't you pick one so we can hurry this along.”

“Well, isn't that generous of you.” Kal pushed off with his shoulder and strolled over to stand beside Mel. “Let's get this started.”

Mel pointed his dagger at the brown-haired demon. “Eenie, meenie, minee... mo.” His blade stopped on the smaller male. “I guess you're mine.”

Adrenaline surged through his body like an old friend. This was what he was born to do; his purpose in life. To destroy monsters. Send them back to hell where they belonged. He bent his knees, his muscles clenched and his mind cleared. Power flowed through his veins. He glared at the demon. “Why don't you show me what you've got?”

The male roared as he launched at Mel, coming for him straight on. Just before they collided, the demon jerked to the side. In a fluid motion, the fiend twirled and slashed his weapon sideways, narrowly missing Mel's abdomen.

Mel jumped back and twisted out of the blade's reach. With a skillful flick of his wrist, he thrust his own blade up. His aim was true. The sharp knife sank deep, just above the bastard's kidney. Warm blood oozed onto his hand.

The demon jerked and stumbled. He spun toward Mel, squatted low, ready to spring.

Without hesitating, Mel slammed his fist into the demon's face. With a satisfying crunch of cartilage and breaking bones, the nose flattened under the force of the blow.

Howling with pain, the demon used its body like a battering ram. He lunged, grabbing Mel around the waist. The force and momentum took them both to the ground.

As they skidded across the pavement, Mel wrapped his hands in the male's stringy hair and then slammed his forehead into the ruined nose. The tight grip around his waist loosened. He tugged hard and forced the creature's body under him.

Dazed, the demon tried to bring his blade up to slash Mel across the throat.

“No you don't,” he snarled as he grabbed the bastard's wrist and snapped it back. The bones surrendered to the pressure. With a sickening crack, they shattered.

The knife fell from the limp wrist and clattered to the pavement.

Time to end this. Mel plunged his dagger into the demon's chest, and twisting his wrist, he worked the blade into the flesh. It resisted as it penetrated bone, but once through it drove straight toward the black heart within. Before the sharp blade hit its mark, he pulled back on the hilt. “Looks like you're heading home.”

The demon froze, his eyes wide with hatred. “I'll rip your lungs out—”

“Have a nice trip.” Mel leaned into the blade, piercing what was once a human heart.

The body writhed; black blood gushed from its gaping mouth and poured down the chin. The beast coughed, spewing more blood. With an ear-shattering scream, the spirit separated from its borrowed house. A black mass—cold and shapeless—freezing Mel's sweat—rose from the prone body. In a blinding flash it burst into a thousand shards of light, then winked out.

Mel fell forward as the body under him turned to ash. It coated the front of him with a fine gray dust.

He stood, brushed off his jacket, and watched Kal pound his fists into the other demon's face. Mel winced at the dull thud of fists kissing shattered

bone. Blood sprayed from the creature's mouth and nose, splattering Kal's face with each powerful strike.

Huh, not bad, he thought, admiring his technique, which was definitely improving.

With a forceful undercut, Kal plunged his blade home. As if he were dancing, the demon jerked under the knife for a few seconds before a black mass seeped out and burst into a colorful light display. The empty body disintegrated into a soft gray powder that floated to the ground.

"Two down, only two million or so to go, eh," Kal said between labored breaths.

Mel wiped off his dagger before sheathing it under his jacket. He brushed his hands along the tops of his thighs. The weight behind those spoken words was like an unbearable burden.

"Yeah, that's about right." He walked over to Kal and clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's grab a drink. These goddamn ashes make my mouth feel like the Sahara Desert."

"You know it. A drink or three sounds great right about now."

They vanished out of the parking lot, and reappeared beside Kal's black Ford truck. Mel relaxed in the passenger seat as Kal started the truck and headed to The Green Tree to wash away the taste of ash.

Fifteen minutes later, Kal parked across the street from the nightclub. He killed the engine.

The sound of Disturbed's, *Down With The Sickness*, was abruptly cut off.

Mel stared out into the clear night at the line of humans waiting to gain entry to the club. The giant neon-green palm tree attached to the flat roof shone down on them, turning their faces a sickly green.

A young male grabbed another by the scruff of his shirt and slammed his fist into the other's nose. They fell to the ground, beating each other while the rest of the crowd cheered. Two bouncers stood alongside the double doors like dogs guarding a house, but didn't bother to break it up.

"Two less to toss out later I guess," Kal said with a shrug.

"No doubt."

What a nest of depravity. The men all shared the same expression, like they would think nothing of shoving a gun in your face, stripping you of your belongings, and calling it a night. And the women all looked like professionals who would show you a good time for a line of coke, crack, or a tab of E.

The Green Tree catered to a tough crowd. Criminals and addicts looking to score something you couldn't find at your local Wal-mart. The perfect place to blend in.

Four young men walked past the truck on their way to the club. They all possessed the glassy eyed stare of people high on something other than life.

A cop car cruised up the street, mildly checking out the line-up for the club. Mel and Kal stepped from the truck but hung back, waiting for the cruiser to disappear. The last thing they needed was to have the cops stop them and conduct a search. They'd have their asses hauled in for sure with all the weapons they carried under their coats.

When the patrol car rounded the corner, both dashed across the street. Flashing their member's cards, they bypassed the line-up.

As they entered, the music became deafening—a raging force that moved through the body. The air was thick with the stale smell of alcohol and sweat.

Mel followed Kal as they squeezed through the packed entranceway and made their way down a small flight of stairs.

Pushing through the throng of humans, a sour mixture of booze and sweat hit Mel full in the face. The stench made him gag.

A hand grabbed his ass and squeezed hard. He jerked to the side, then turned.

A petite blond woman purred as she sidled up to him. “Aren't you the tall, dark, and handsome type? Just what I'm looking for tonight.”

Mel disentangled himself from her groping hands. His eyes traveled down to her scarcely covered breasts and his fangs exploded into his mouth. Bloodlust rose to the forefront. He needed to feed and she looked like a willing candidate.

He smiled, careful not to flash his teeth.

She stepped closer, pressed her large breasts against his chest, sealing the deal. “Well, what do ya say, handsome? Would you care to take this,” she cupped her hand between his legs, “into the back room?”

Leaning close to the woman's ear, he whispered, “Ye—”

The sound of a woman singing caused an electrical current to course down his spine.

His head snapped up. He glanced toward the stage, but it was blocked by a large black pillar. He closed his eyes and listened to her voice. When she hit a high note, another shiver danced along his spine.

Without another word to the clinging female, he shoved his way through the humans gyrating on the dance floor. He stopped half way, then stared up at four humans: three males and one female, skillfully working their instruments on the stage.

The woman held him rapt as she strolled to the front of the platform, her head bent, playing her guitar. Her long, dark hair covered her face as she concentrated on her fingers flying over the strings.

Something familiar nagged at the back of his mind, but he couldn't quite place it.

She lifted her head, grabbed the microphone, and belted out the next line in the song.

Mel didn't hear a word. Abruptly, he was hurled back to his dream of the dark-haired woman and her baby. But instead of its usual ending, this time she lifted her head and gazed directly at him.

He stood immobile even though humans jostled him from all sides as they thrashed and screamed along with the music. He was barely aware of his surroundings, only the woman and the silent vision unfolding in his mind. In his mental picture, she stared back at him with such love and happiness it stopped his heart.

A sudden shove from a young male snapped him back. He gazed up at the woman on stage, not believing his eyes.

That's her! The woman from my dreams.

Christ, no mistaking it, they were one and the same. Same long, dark hair, smooth pale skin, and full lips. She wore more make-up than in the dream, but regardless, it was her.

He drank in her appearance like a desert flower soaking up the waters of the first rain after a ten-year drought. Dressed all in black, she wore jeans with high-heeled boots. A lacy shirt peeked from under the wide V-neck of her ankle length, black leather coat, which was form fitted across her breasts and flat stomach.

Desire slammed into him with the force of a semi-truck, almost taking him to his knees. All his blood left his brain and took a vacation south. His body was wired—tuned into the woman's. She was like a magnet that commanded every particle of his being to feel the strong urgent pull.

“Hey, man,” Kal shouted, nudging his arm. “Let's go sit down. I need a drink.”

Mel stood rooted to the floor. His shock and confusion still held sway over him.

“Yo, Mel!” Kal waved his hand in front of his face. “Let's go.”

He dragged his eyes away from the woman and glanced at Kal. “Yeah...sure. Go get us a table. I'll be there in a sec.” His eyes shot back to the woman on the stage.

“Hey, ya see something you like?” Kal asked with a laugh. “She's cute, eh? Why don't you ask her if she'd like to be your dinner?”

The spell he was under vanished at Kal's words.

Seething with anger, he pinned Kal with a hard stare. His fangs descended and his hands curled into tight fists, ready to punch the guy. It took all his strength and willpower to hold himself back.

All his primal instincts screamed for him to leap up on the stage, grab her, and disappear into the night. She was his and he'd kill any other male who tried to get near her.

His body throbbed with hostility. “Go to hell, Kal.” Mel shoved his way through the crowd to the back of the club.

Jesus Christ. After all these years, he'd finally found her. But...who the hell was she? And why the fuck had he been dreaming of her for fifty years? He mulled over these thoughts as he paced back and forth along the rear wall.

Kal strolled over. “What'd I say? You looked ready to rip my head off.”

He glanced up. Hurt and confusion was etched across his friend's face.

“What's goin' on with you, man? You look as if you've seen a ghost.”

No way was he discussing this with Kal. The biggest problem he'd ever faced was which video game he should play.

After a lengthy pause, Mel finally replied in a stiff voice, “I'm not in the mood tonight.”

He grabbed a chair and slumped down, raising two fingers up to the waitress as she came over. Kal placed his order, and sat down, drumming his fingers on the table.

When their drinks arrived, they sat in silence, listening to the band. Mel tried to catch a glimpse of the woman but the stage was out of his line of sight, so he closed his eyes and let the sound of her voice wash through him.

Chapter 3

“Can I buy you a beer?”

Breeana jerked her head up. *Oh crap.* A young man leaned against the polished bar, eying her up and down. Dim lights illuminated his shaved head and reflected off the thick metal hoop pierced through the flesh between his nostrils. She half expected him to snort and stamp a foot like a bull.

Not a chance, Bullwinkle. She raised her glass of beer. “Got one, thanks.” She took a step back, hoping he would get the hint and scam.

He moved closer. “How 'bout I buy you another?”

She swallowed. “No, but thanks anyway.”

“You did good up there.” He nodded his head toward the stage and took another step in her direction.

Did good? “Thanks.” She glanced around the crowded bar. “I really have to find my . . . husband. He gets angry when he doesn't know where I am.”

Bullwinkle glanced at her left hand. “Where's your ring?”

Her jaw clenched. “Ah . . . I don't wear my ring when I'm playing guitar. It might get caught in the strings.” She hoped he believed her.

A smile parted his lips, revealing a gap where his two front teeth were missing. *Okay, time to leave.* Breeana moved toward the bar. His sour body odor assaulted her nose as she brushed past. She grasped the handle of her guitar case.

“Well, I better be going. Nice talking to you.” Without another look, she walked up five stairs and headed to the back of the nightclub.

She found a table and set her guitar at her feet before collapsing into a chair. Instant relief rushed through her. While she stretched out her legs, she wiggled her toes, trying to force blood into the cramped appendages. High heels were killers.

The night's performance replayed in her mind as she sipped her beer and relaxed. The thrill, the energy—it had been such an exhilarating experience. Although the rush had worn off, leaving her exhausted. Starting today, she had two weeks off. Lots of time to catch up on sleep.

As she luxuriated in the idea of a well deserved vacation, a young couple walked up the stairs. The girl's black skirt was so short it stopped just below the round curve of her ass. If she bent over, her twin cheeks would be on full display. They headed to the small alcove where the washrooms were located. In front of the door marked *women*, the young man pulled her against his chest before smoothing his hands up her thighs. The movement caused the woman's skirt to ride high, exposing her naked backside for all to see.

Breeana's eyes widened when the man's hands cupped her round globes, pulling her closer. *Holy hell!* They acted as if they were going to get down and dirty right there.

She tore her gaze off the amorous couple and stared at her beer, watching the bubbles rise to the surface.

This was definitely not her type of crowd—way too young. Only thirty-two and she felt like the oldest person there. Well, maybe not the oldest, she thought, spying a scruffy, bearded man hunched over at the bar.

She remembered her comment to Carol about the possibility of meeting someone here and nearly laughed out loud. Judging by the few men she'd seen, that possibility was no longer an option.

Breeana rested her chin in her hands and thought back to the last date she'd been on. The date had been a complete disaster, starting with his incessant need to wink after everything he said. By the end, she'd wanted to poke his winking eye out with a stick. And to top it off, he had the nerve to get pissy when she declined his offer of sex. Needless to say, she'd never allowed Carol to fix her up again.

Carol's intentions were good, but Breeana would find her own man. Yeah, sure. By that time, she'd be too old to have children. She'd wind up a seventy-year old woman, sitting alone, and the only phone calls she'd receive would be wrong numbers or solicitors.

She heaved a heavy sigh and studied the sticky table. Depression skulked on the outskirts of her mind like a circling vulture, waiting for its struggling victim's last breath.

“Hey, you guys were awesome. I totally enjoyed it.”

Ah crap. Not again. She wasn't up for talking.

She turned. “Thanks. Thanks a—”

Holy... Mary... Mother... of God! Where the hell did these two guys come from?

Seated against the back wall were two of the handsomest men she had ever seen.

“Lot,” she finished. She knew she was staring. Heck, she wouldn't have been surprised to find herself drooling.

Breeana's heart ricocheted off her ribs and she quickly turned her gaze back to her table. *Am I dreaming?* She had to make sure, so she chanced another peek.

“Have you been playing long?” The one who asked the question was absolutely gorgeous. His blue eyes, framed by thick black lashes, were the color of a robin's egg, and his black hair, streaked with blue highlights, fell just under his jaw line in long messy layers. His face was the most stunning she'd ever seen on a man.

He leaned forward in his seat. His immense arms folded along the table and his broad shoulders hunched.

Her eyes moved to his friend, and her heart stopped. This guy, though not as stunning, caused her knees to go weak. Thank God, she was sitting or she'd have fallen flat on her ass.

His black hair, parted down the middle, fell below his huge shoulders in long wavy layers. It surrounded a truly handsome face. His strong jaw, shadowed by black stubble, gave him a sinister appearance. Light flashed off two gold hoops hanging from his earlobes with each breath he took. Her gaze dropped to his lips. Lord, every man should have lips like his. They were made for kissing.

Lust rushed through her, hot as a flame, consuming her in one brilliant burst. Intense silver-gray eyes surrounded by long black lashes, bore through her flesh, straight to her soul.

She couldn't look away. A connection flowed between them, traveling along an invisible thread. She had the distinct impression he wanted to... eat her. And God help her, she would let him.

He leaned in his seat, back against the wall with muscular arms folded across his broad chest. Long legs in a pair of faded jeans, stretched out in front of him.

Raw masculinity oozed off him, calling out to the woman in her. Never had she felt so aware of or attracted to a man before. This instant irresistible force scared and overwhelmed her in its intensity.

Her mouth went dry. She focused on her beer and then took a couple of much needed sips.

What did Mr. Blue hair ask? Shit, think, think. Oh yeah, right. She cleared her throat. "We've been playing together for a couple of years."

Was that her voice? It sounded high and squeaky.

"Like I said, you guys were great," the one with blue highlights said with a perfect smile. "By the way, I'm Kal and this is Mel."

She gave a slight nod. "Breeana."

A waitress approached her table and asked if she'd care for another beer. Before she answered, the one named Mel said, "I've got it, and I'll have another, thanks."

The low rumbling of his voice sent shivers racing up her spine. If sex had a voice, that's what it would sound like.

"Why don't you join us?" Kal waved a large hand, indicating the vacant chair at their table.

Join them? She so wanted to, and before the logical part of her spoke up, she said, "Ummm, sure, why not."

Breeana bent, grabbed her purse and guitar, and walked the few steps to the empty seat at their table.

As she approached, Mel stood. Her eyes slowly traveled up his large, powerfully built frame and her body turned to melted wax. He was huge, at least six-foot-five.

He extended a hand toward her guitar. Vivid images of his large hands roaming over her body filled her mind. Another strong jolt of desire crashed through her. Flustered, she placed her guitar strap over his waiting fingers.

"Thank you," she managed to whisper.

He propped her guitar against the wall beside him before sitting. As she sat, she wished the waitress would hurry up with their drinks so she could keep her hands occupied.

Like her hands were the only problem. What about her eyes? She couldn't sit here, staring like an awe-struck fool!

"So, do you play professionally? I mean, do you play for a living?" Kal asked with a bright smile.

"No. Actually, I'm a veterinarian."

Kal's eyes widened. "A vet?"

A nervous laugh escaped her. "Yes. A doctor for animals."

He chuckled. "I know what a vet is, but you don't look like one."

"Oh? And how is one supposed to look?"

A broad grin stretched his lips. “Covered in dirt for starters, and smelling like a barn.”

She realized he was only teasing. “You just described how I looked and smelled this morning.”

So far, so good. A little more at ease, she leaned back in her seat, trying to stay calm, cool, and collected.

Mel sat forward and stared directly into her eyes. “A veterinarian, huh? Requires an enormous amount of schooling doesn't it?”

Forget more at ease. The nervousness was back full force. She swallowed a dry lump in her throat, hoping to control her chaotic emotions. They were complete strangers, yet her heart and body cried out to his with a strange yearning.

“Yes it does,” she replied. “About the same as schooling for human doctors.”

He remained quiet, acting like he hadn't heard her though his eyes searched her face. She squirmed under his close scrutiny, feeling like a bug under a microscope.

“Do I have something on my face?”

His dark brows lowered. “No—why do you ask?”

“You're staring at me like...you're looking for something.”

Kal laughed. “Mel's just like that—” He stopped mid-sentence, glancing over at the bar. “Well hello there.” He stood. “Will you two excuse me for a moment? I left something...unattended.”

Breeana glanced behind her. A beautiful woman with long blonde hair eyed Kal with a seductive smile on her full red lips. She looked back at Kal and tried to hide a smile. “I'll say good-bye to you now since I'll probably be gone by the time you're back.”

Kal shook her hand, and flashed a cocky grin. “Hey, it was nice meeting you. Sorry I've gotta leave so soon, but you know how it is.” He shot a quick glance in Mel's direction. “Yo, dude, I'll be back shortly.”

“Take your time,” Mel said.

After Kal took off, Mel eased back and fingered his empty glass. “I'm sorry I was making you uncomfortable earlier. You look a little like someone I've...met before.”

“That's all right.”

He cleared his throat. “So, what's the story behind you becoming a vet?”

“No story really. I like animals so I guess you could say it was preordained. Sometimes I think I like the company of animals over most people.”

You idiot! She berated herself. *He's going to think you are some kind of freak.*

Chuckling, he said, “Yeah, I hear ya. People for the most part can be a real pain in the ass.”

“What about you? What do you do for a living?”

Before he replied, the waitress came back with their drinks. “Sorry it took so long.” Her smile of apology was directed at Mel.

“Don't worry about it. We can see how busy you are,” Breeana said.

The waitress murmured a quiet thank you. Glancing at Mel, she ran her gaze over his broad shoulders and handsome face. With a step closer, she leaned against his arm and set his drink down. Slowly she straightened, giving him an eyeful of breasts that were all but falling out of her low-cut, bright pink uniform. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Can I get you anything else?”

Breeana gritted her teeth. She wanted to scream at the hussy to back off. He was hers.

Ignoring the waitress, Mel cocked an eyebrow at Breeana. “Anything for you?” He nodded his head, indicating her beer.

“I'm fine,” she murmured.

“We're fine, thank-you.” The waitress smiled one last time at Mel and left.

“She a girlfriend of yours?” The words shot out of Breeana's mouth before she had time to think.

A slow grin spread across his lips. “No.”

Her face warmed. If only she could take back her last question. It made her sound like a jealous fool. She had no right to these feelings. Trying to redeem herself, she shrugged. “If you say so.”

“I do say so. Now where were we before we were interrupted?”

“I asked what you do for a living.”

Still grinning, he said, “A little of this and that.”

“This and that, huh? So, a Jack-of-all-trades?”

He rested one arm along the back of his seat. “You could say that.” His silver eyes glittered behind long lashes.

She wanted to leap across the table and tease his smile with her tongue. She curled her fingers around the armrests of her seat to stop herself. With tremendous effort, she turned her mind from his gorgeous body, back to their conversation. "I've got it. You're a plumber."

Mel laughed a deep, rich sound that heated her blood. "Ah... no."

"A wrestler perhaps?"

He laughed harder. "No. And by the way, that shit's all fake."

"What?" She teased, playing along. "No way, it's all real."

Mel didn't reply, merely shook his head and continued chuckling.

"I've got it! You're a candy striper!"

"Did you say candy striper?" When she nodded, he said, "I'd scare away all the patients, don't you think?"

She glanced at his immense shoulders. Oh yeah, he'd scare them all right. He looked more like a gunslinger than a caregiver.

"You've got a point." She tapped a forefinger against her chin. "Okay, my last guess is you're a secret agent."

"A what?"

"007, James Bond?"

He rolled his eyes and laughed. "I don't think so."

The rumble of his laughter sent tingles fluttering down her spine. The skin around his gray eyes crinkled as he smiled, transforming his already handsome face into something absolutely breathtaking.

Her heart did a series of flip-flops. She followed his hand as it wrapped around his glass, bringing it up to his mouth. He was a fantasy come true.

Breeana wet her dry lips with her beer and placed the glass down. "I lied. I have one more guess. Are you ready?"

"Shoot."

"I think you're a model for the cover of romance novels."

He almost choked on his drink. "Believe me, I'm no model, for—did you say romance novels?"

Breeana nodded as she tried to hold her laughter in.

"Like I said, I'm no model, be it for *romance novels* or anything else. Now Kal, he's more your model type."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. I think you'd be superb."

"Thanks... I think."

*

Mel tried not to stare, but he couldn't stop. After all these years of wondering who the woman in his dreams was, he had finally found her. And the moment he laid eyes on her, his body pulled rank on his brain. His heart raced. His palms were slick with sweat, and his gut churned.

Strangers they were, but he felt such a powerful connection to her it left him stupefied.

Was it because of the dreams?

Mel tossed that thought around his mind. It was undeniably part of it, but not all. Watching her lips move as she spoke hypnotized him. The husky sound of her voice filling his ears was sheer heaven. He inhaled deep, drawing in her exquisite flowery scent. His reaction was immediate. His cock hardened and his fangs tingled madly, dying to taste her.

No woman had ever affected him as she did. Lust he had felt many times, but never with such intensity. He knew his response wasn't solely from her appearance.

No question she was lovely. His gaze moved over her rich brown hair, following the ends that stopped below her small breasts. The dark strands surrounded her beautiful face, emphasizing her exotic hazel eyes. Her skin appeared so soft, he wanted to run his knuckles down her cheek to test for himself. He longed to scoop her up, wrap her long shapely legs around his waist, and bury his face against her neck.

Earlier, when the waitress all but sat in his lap, Mel was sure he had detected a hint of jealousy flare in her eyes. The prospect made his heart speed up.

An image of her naked under him flashed through his mind. The pressure in his pants increased. He shifted, hoping to relieve it.

He glanced away, trying to ignore the vivid vision.

“So,” Breeana said, bringing his attention back to her. “With all my guessing, did I come close to what you do for a living?”

A brilliant smile lit up her face and eyes. Mel smiled in return. She was absolutely incredible. She made him laugh and it felt good. To feel genuine amusement was such a pleasure. For God knows, there sure as shit wasn't much in his life to laugh about.

“What do we have here?” A smooth masculine voice drawled, interrupting them.

Mel's head jerked up. He cursed out loud when he saw Soren. He heard Breeana's small gasp as her gaze settled on the tall, blond vampire staring at

them with his hands shoved into the pockets of his dark blue windbreaker.

Mel ignored Breeana's inquisitive glance his way. He downed the rest of his beer. Slamming his glass down, he glared at his fellow clansmen. "Hey Soren. What do you want?"

"Just came in for a quick drink." Soren's eyes widened with interest as he studied Breeana. "So, who is this charming lady? Mel, don't be rude. Introduce us." His gaze stopped on her breasts. Mel wanted to smash his fist into the vampire's face when he caught lust brightening his green eyes.

He shot Soren a murderous look before he said through gritted teeth, "Breeana, this is Soren, one of my clans—roommates."

She offered her hand to him. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too." With a large booted foot, Soren hooked Kal's empty chair, dragging it closer. He sat, facing her, still staring openly at her breasts. "Am I interrupting anything?"

Mel continued to glare a silent warning for Soren to back the hell off.

Clearing her throat, Breeana glanced at her wristwatch and whispered, "No, you're not. It's getting late. I should be going."

Apprehension gripped Mel's gut. He didn't want to let her go just yet.

"Don't leave on my account. I only came in for a quickie," Soren said, winking at Mel.

Rage filled Mel's body. His hand clenched around his glass as he tried to get his violent emotions under control.

"I really should be going," Breeana said.

She stood, ready to leave—ready to walk out of his life forever. Before Mel could stop himself, he asked, "Do you have a ride?"

"Ummm, yes. My truck is parked out back."

"Let me walk you to your truck." He rose to his feet and grabbed her guitar.

"That's okay. Stay and visit with your roommate." She reached for her guitar, but he pulled it back, out of her range.

He forced a smile. "It's not safe in this neighborhood. I'll walk you out." Christ, she didn't know how true his words were. And the way she made him feel, she wasn't safe with him.

"All right then." She slipped her purse strap over her shoulder and stuck her hand out to Soren. "It was nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Next time, stay a little longer."

“If there is a next time, I'll be sure to stay longer.” With a wave, she walked toward the rear exit.

Mel glowered at Soren one last time before he followed behind her, weaving through the heavy, boisterous crowd.

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Chapter 4

Breeana pushed the bar on the metal door marked *EXIT*—shoved it open, and stepped out onto a metal grate landing that overlooked the back parking lot of The Green Tree. She didn't need to check behind her to see if Mel followed because his magnetic presence—his raw sexual energy—was hard to miss.

The door clanged shut behind him.

The fact they were alone didn't go unnoticed by Breeana. Her body instantly responded: knees quivering, nipples hardening, heart slamming.

You're pathetic. Needing to put space between them to catch her breath and get her emotions under control, she walked across the small landing and stopped in front of the metal hand railing.

Mel stood beside her, set her guitar down at his feet, and leaned his forearms on the railing. Although a few inches separated them, his heat and clean masculine scent flooded her senses, heightening her arousal.

What's the matter with me? I'm acting like a sex-crazed lunatic.

“Nice night,” he said.

The deep timbre of his voice sent chills rolling over her.

“Yeah, it is.” She glanced up at the clear night sky. The stars sparkled like millions of diamonds. Without turning her head, she lowered her lashes and peeked at his large hands dangling over the railing. Even his hands embodied sex—long fingers, rough, calloused palms. He was every woman's fantasy.

“Did you find what you're looking for?” he asked.

Breeana's head snapped toward him. “Excuse me?” *Did he read my mind?*

“Your truck?” He pointed to five vehicles parked along a concrete wall near the back of the lot.

Heat fanned out over her face. “Right.” She turned away. “It's the gray Ford beside the red Toyota.”

Breeana hitched her purse strap up onto her shoulder. She swept past him, down the nine stairs and across the parking lot. The deep thud of his heavy

footsteps sounded close behind her.

“Well, this is it,” she said with false joy. “Thanks for the beer and walking me to my vehicle.”

He ran a hand over his chin, the scrape of his stubble loud in the quiet. “No problem. It was my pleasure.”

His low voice and the word *pleasure* caused heat to settle between her thighs. “I guess I should get going. Let you get back to your roommate.”

“Yeah.”

An awkward pause stretched between them.

She didn't want to go; didn't want to say good-bye. But what did she hope would happen? That they share a wild, mutually satisfying one-night stand? She was not the one-night-stand-kinda girl, and a relationship with someone like him was not an option. She'd been hurt before and was in no hurry to feel that pain again. Besides, the fierce attraction she felt warned her he had the power to not only hurt her, but destroy her. He would make Tom's betrayal feel like a paper cut in comparison.

Yeah, all good arguments.

Just get in your truck and leave. It's the smart thing to do.

Resolved to do just that, Breeana rummaged through her purse, looking for her keys. After she found them, she glanced at him and froze. He stood so close she could see her face reflected in his silver eyes.

Her heart shot into high gear. His gaze locked with hers. If she didn't know any better, she'd think he was experiencing the same strange emotions as she was.

He leaned closer and reached around her to prop her guitar against the back bumper of the Ford. He straightened. “I guess I...better go.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Neither one made a move to leave.

“Okay...Bye.” She turned and extended a shaky hand toward her guitar handle when his voice stopped her.

“Breeana?”

“Yes?” She faced him. He glanced away as if nervous.

He raked his hair off his forehead and glanced around. Finally he spoke. “Would you like to go somewhere and...talk?”

Her heart sang with joy. “Yes,” she blurted out. “I would love to.”

His lips twitched before he smiled. The tip of his tongue flicked out, moistening his lower lip as if getting ready to kiss her. She swayed forward

slightly. Her body unconsciously tried to get closer to what it craved. At the same time, he leaned in. When only an inch separated them, she sensed him pull back.

Kiss me you fool, her mind screamed, but Mel took a step back. Indecision clouded his eyes.

Disappointment filled her, though logic told her it was for the best.

A few seconds ticked by before his gaze once more latched onto her lips. This time he was going to kiss her. In answer, her heart thrummed wildly and a pleasurable ache hummed between her thighs.

His head dipped and his long lashes swept lower. She should leave, but her feet wouldn't listen. Deep down she wanted to taste his lips, wanted his tongue in her mouth, her breasts pressed against his hard, broad chest. Right now, she couldn't think beyond that, nor did she care.

Afraid he would change his mind again, she rose up on her toes and placed a hand on his arm.

That was it. The next second his lips crushed hers with a strength that should have frightened her, but it had the opposite effect; it sent her desire soaring to heights she'd never felt before. The taste of beer, male, and raw desire played havoc with her senses.

He gripped the back of her head and his fingers tangled in her hair as his tongue ravaged her mouth.

She groaned and fisted the front of his jacket. Her body vibrated as arousal built to a fevered pitch.

His hands left her hair and smoothed over her shoulders, down to her backside. Cupping her ass, he pressed her closer.

The force of his kiss changed. He nibbled, licked and sucked her lower lip before drawing it into his wet mouth. Breeana wrapped her arms around his neck and molded her body against his, trying to get closer, but it wasn't enough. She wanted to unzip his skin and step inside.

His satiny tongue slipped past her lips and tangled with hers. Raging desire shot from her mouth to her core. In answer, a flood of moisture dampened her panties.

A low growl escaped him. He deepened the kiss, bruising her lips. Breeana felt a sharp sting of pain on her lower lip, but she didn't care. With a growl of her own, she kissed him back with the same passion, clutching at him with desperate hands.

*

Mel's fangs descended. The need to taste her blood and draw her essence into him, took over his passion. Panic mixed with bloodlust. Before his dark urges won, he pulled her arms from around his neck and held her away from his body. He stared at her up-turned face, his breath coming in short harried gasps. She looked at him, questions and confusion in her eyes. Slowly, she reached up and touched her lips. Mel gulped more air and took a step back.

What the hell was he doing? He was on the verge of losing control and biting her. If that wasn't bad enough, he was more than ready to tear the pants off her body and plunge his cock into her welcoming heat. He should turn around and run. But this attraction and strange connection was stronger than his will-power. He leaned closer. Her warm, intoxicating sent filled his nostrils. Her arousal perfumed the air and sent his desire skyrocketing. The thought, *she's mine and I'm hers*, tore through his mind, finishing with, *not just for tonight, but for all eternity.*

What the hell are you thinking? Go. It's for the best. Nothing can come of this. Your life is too dangerous. It isn't right to endanger her when she knows nothing of who and what you are.

"Aw son," his father's voice suddenly sneered inside his mind. "Take her. Fuck her. Drain her dry. You know you want to."

Cold fear gripped Mel's stomach with an iron fist. He stumbled as he took another step back.

"Do it, you sniveling worm," his father snarled. "She's just another human. Or does she mean more to you?" Insane laughter buzzed through Mel's mind. "She does." More laughter. "Well, my son, you know what happens to those you care about. They always wind up dead!"

"Mel?" Breeana asked.

The sound of her softly spoken question pulled his mind back, silencing his father's voice. He needed to get the hell away from her before he lost control. Mel willed his fangs to retract, then inhaled deep. The sweet scent of her need rushed up his nostrils almost knocking him on his ass.

"Mel? Are you okay?" She took a tentative step toward him.

His body trembled as he struggled with his warring thoughts and desires. Suddenly, anger ignited in him, burning away his common sense. One taste! He wanted one taste of heaven before he disappeared out of her life!

Restraint snapping, Mel lunged for her. The moment their lips touched, his soul opened up, drawing in her warmth and passion. It filled him with happiness and life. Every fiber screamed with the joy of it. Christ, the taste, the feel of her in his arms made him feel like he was coming unhinged.

He was drowning and in desperate need of a life preserver, and that life preserver was her lips. And like a man caught in the churning surf, fighting to stay afloat, he went for it. With a moan of desperation, he kissed her with all his pent up desires, frustrations, and fears. Her tongue caressed his as she pressed her supple body flush against his. He was lost.

They clung to one another in a frenzy of desire, neither one aware of their surroundings, only of their ferocious need.

“What do we have here? A slayer and his dinner? How disgusting.”

Mel released Breeana's lips with a quick jerk. His jaw dropped open as he stared with horror at a male and female demon standing five feet away from them. The female eyed him coldly. Hatred rolled off her in menacing black waves.

His blood turned to ice as fear for Breeana consumed him. He captured and held her gaze. “Run back inside, and don't look back!”

She blinked up at him. “What's going on?” She tried to turn her head, but he stopped her. “Who are they?”

“Come now, slayer. I'm not going to wait until you finish your dinner,” the female demon stated in a honey-sweet voice.

Mel grabbed Breeana by her shoulders. He shoved her behind him to shield her identity from the demons, praying he could get her safely to the back door without them seeing her face.

Still clutching her tightly behind him, he shuffled her closer to the stairs. He shoved her, demanding she run.

Breeana stumbled forward, but stopped. She turned to him, hurt and anger erupted from her eyes. Taking two hesitant steps toward him, she asked, “What the hell is going on? Who are these people?” Her eyes widened. “Is that... Is she your girlfriend? Just great! I'm outta here.”

As she elbowed her way past, Mel snagged her arms in a tight grip, and hauled her up until they were nose to nose. He knew he was hurting her, and he hated the look of fear that flashed in her eyes, but it was necessary.

With their gazes interlocked, he snarled, “Listen to me! Don't ask questions, just get your ass inside, now!”

“The only place I'm going is to my truck so I can get the hell out of here. I don't need this shit.” She struggled as she tried to pry his hands off.

“Do as I say.” He set her on her feet and shoved her toward the steps. He whirled around and faced the demons, hoping Breeana would heed his advice and leave before the fight began.

*

Tears flooded Breeana's eyes as she gripped the handrail. She wished the ground would open up and swallow her. Of course he had a girlfriend. Pain and anger cramped her gut as she ran up the stairs only to stop when his girlfriend's laughter and strange words filled her ears. “Trying to protect this idiotic human? How noble of you slayer.” The word *slayer* was spat out in disgust like she'd eaten something rotten.

That was the third time she'd used that word. Maybe she meant, *player*. That would make more sense, since Mel was definitely one.

Why do all the good-looking men have to be jerks? Except I was taken in by him, so what does that say about me?

A perverse part of her wanted a look at his girlfriend. She glanced over her shoulder. Her heart sank. She was absolutely stunning; the tallest woman she'd ever seen, almost as tall as Mel. Her glossy, black hair came down past her hips in a straight fall, and her body would have put a playmate centerfold to shame. She wore a skin-tight, full piece, red leather jumpsuit, with black, thigh high boots with impossible-to-walk-in high heels.

Breeana's gaze moved to the man standing beside her. He was handsome in a feminine sort of way, wiry with short dirty blond hair and multiple earrings in his ears. Light pink lipstick coated his thin lips and black eyeliner circled his eyes, giving him an intimidating appearance. But it was the woman who commanded all the attention.

Legs parted with a frigid smile curling her lips, the woman turned her black gaze on Breeana and laughed.

Oh shit. She looks pissed. Not that Breeana could blame her. She knew the feeling.

Cold menace swirled in the woman's eyes. Alarm paralyzed Breeana. Pinpricks of fear turned her legs to jelly as the woman pulled a cruel looking knife from a black belt around her waist and repeatedly slapped the flat side of the blade against her opposite hand.

Is his girlfriend that upset she'd try stabbing him? Maybe I'd better call the police before someone gets hurt. “Mel, I'm going to phone—” The words died on her lips when Mel reached inside his leather jacket, and pulled out his own knife. Okay, things are definitely getting out of hand. Maybe she should try and help him out—explain to his girlfriend nothing happened, even though he was nothing but a cheating dog.

Breeana glanced at her. “Listen, nothing happened. We just—”

“Get inside, before you get hurt!” Mel shouted, never taking his eyes off the two in front of him.

His words and cold tone scared her. She took a couple steps back.

“Does she mean something to you, vampire?” the woman asked.

Mel crouched. The muscles of his thighs bulged under his jeans. He reminded her of a lion ready to pounce on its victim. “Hardly. Nothing more than a vessel to satisfy my two hungers.”

Vampire? Her gaze flew from Mel back to his girlfriend. She must mean he sucked the life— love from her like a vampire sucks blood. Or maybe they belonged to some weird cult?

She *should* get the hell out of there, but she remained rooted to the spot. Something seemed off about the whole situation. Mel and the black-haired woman didn't act like they were a couple, more like strangers who despised each other.

The woman skewered Breeana with a cruel stare. She cocked her head. “I think she does. I think she means more to you than just dinner and a screw.” A slow cold smile spread across her face. “This is perfect. My revenge will be even sweeter.”

“Revenge?” Mel echoed through gritted teeth.

Her hate-filled eyes shot back to him. “Do you forget so soon, slayer? Don't you remember your kills tonight?” Mel didn't reply. Enraged, she screamed, “Well, I remember them. You ripped out my soul you, filthy bastard!”

“You don't have a soul so that's an impossibility.” Mel tossed his knife from hand to hand.

Breeana smothered a gasp. *Kills?* The bottom dropped out of her stomach as the woman's eyes flashed red—as if they filled with blood.

It's only my imagination. Breeana squeezed her lids shut, but they flew open when the woman screeched.

“You killed my lover! For that you will pay with your life, vampire.” Spittle flew from her mouth. “Do you have any idea what it feels like to lose the only thing you've ever cared about?” When no response came, she asked through gritted teeth. “Well, do you?”

Breeana's heart stopped as the woman's harsh words filtered through her clogged brain. *Oh God! This can't be happening. It's not true. He can't be a ... murderer?*

Her stare flicked over to Mel. His shoulders tensed before he spat viciously, “Your words mean nothing. And as for your lover, was it? Look around, its ashes might still be in the parking-lot.”

Snarling like a ferocious dog, the woman paced in front of Mel. She stopped and pointed her knife at Breeana. “I think I'll have a little fun with your girlfriend before I kill you.” She laughed. “What do you think about that, slayer?”

Mel turned to Breeana, a savage expression on his face. “I told you to get the fuck inside!”

She gaped back, dumbfounded. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

“Do it now!” he shouted, his voice echoing off the back wall.

His hoarse shout shocked her into moving, but she made it no further than the landing.

He's not a murderer.

She wasn't sure how she knew that, but her instincts warned her there was more to this. From her vantage point, she saw the thin man creeping closer to Mel, a knife clutched in his fist. Without thinking Breeana ran down the stairs. “Mel, look out!”

All hell broke loose. The woman sprang forward, her blade held high, shrieking, “Seize the human. The vampire is mine!” At the same time, Mel charged, yelling for Breeana to run.

Mel and the woman collided. Their weapons flashed in the dim light. Snarling like two wild animals, they slashed at each other, trying to rip the other to shreds. They drew apart, circling before they once again charged.

Don't just stand there! Go get help before someone gets killed!

Breeana held a hand over her mouth. She stumbled backwards, tripping and falling onto her backside.

This can't be real.

Dazed, she reached up. Her hand closed around the cold steel of the handrail, and she scrambled to her feet. “Mel, I'm going for help. I'll call the

police!”

She tore up the stairs. As she reached for the door, powerful arms grabbed her around the waist, and dragged her back down. She struggled, kicking and clawing. It was no use. The arms were like two steel bands.

“Want to die so soon, human?” The voice hissed close to her ear, and the sour smell of booze almost made her gag. “Your turn is next, so relax and observe as your diseased lover's life drains all over the pavement.” He laughed, filling her ear and soul with ice.

Raw terror gripped her as the man licked her ear and nuzzled her cheek. Her muscles went slack. She opened her mouth and screamed. “Mel, help me... please!”

Her attacker spun around, giving her a perfect view of Mel and the woman locked in an insane dance.

The sinister look of rage on Mel's face when he turned and looked her way stopped her attempts to escape. He growled, a primal sound, full of power and fury, then grabbed the woman by her throat, lifted her above his head, and squeezed his hand until his fingers dug into the soft flesh. The woman yelped. She snapped her teeth like a rabid wolf. Struggling, she kicked and jabbed, trying to stab him with her sharp heels. A roar exploded from Mel as he flung her down. He pivoted and rushed toward Breeana.

Relief replaced her fear at the magnificent sight of him coming for her. Hair flying out behind him, knife clutched tightly in his hands. Before he could reach her, the woman stood and launched herself at his back, knife raised high.

Relief changed to fear. “Mel look out! She's——Nooo——”

He tried to spin around, but it was too late. The blade plunged deep into his lower back. He howled, stumbling to his knees. The woman shrieked a triumphant laugh, and without hesitating, she drew her leg back and kicked him in the stomach. The powerful blow sent him flying backward. He skidded across the parking lot until he slammed into Breeana's truck. He rolled over, then attempted to scramble to his feet, but the woman kicked him again. She straddled his chest.

Breeana screamed, hoping someone passing by would hear and call for help. The man wrenched her head back by her hair.

“Quiet, bitch,” he said with a hiss. “Scream again and I'll break your fucking neck! We clear?” When she didn't answer, he twisted her head

further to the side until tears sprang to her eyes. “Nod if you understood me.”

Shallow pants were all she could manage. Her heart raced until there was no pause between beats and her limbs and head became light. If she didn't get herself under control, she'd pass out and be dead for sure. Finally, she nodded.

“Good.”

Through her tears, she looked over at Mel. He was flat on his back while the woman sat on his chest, her fingers wrapped around his throat. He swung a fist up, narrowly missing her head, and bucked his hips, but it didn't dislodge the bitch. Even to Breeana, his movements seemed sluggish. He was losing strength.

How can this woman be so strong? She had to do something.

She twisted, kicked, and pried at her capture's arms. The man jerked her head back, preventing another frantic stab to flee. Wracking her brain for some other solution, Breeana remembered her old self-defense training; classes she attended with Carol back in college.

She went limp and dropped her head as if in a faint. *Wait for it. Wait for it. There it is!* A slight easing of the man's hold and Breeana sprang into action. She flung her arms up, pulled her body down with a quick jerking motion, and fell to the pavement. She rolled over three times and jumped up as he crouched to grab her. Drawing her leg back, she kicked him square in the nose with all her strength. A sickening crunch greeted her boot as blood sprayed all over her heel. He crumpled, screaming as she jerked the sharp point out of his ruined nose.

Free, she ran over to Mel as the woman plunged her knife toward his heart. He twisted to the side. The knife missed, embedding into the soft tissue between his shoulder joint and pectoral muscle.

Mel groaned. He tried to grab the hilt to pull the blade out.

With a demented giggle, the woman said, “Here, let me help you.” She grasped the handle and yanked the blade free. “Time to die, you bloodsucking bastard!”

Breeana skidded to a stop. Her guitar case lay at her feet. She seized the handle and drew it back like a baseball bat and swung it as hard as she could. It struck the woman in the back of the head with a loud crack. The guitar flew out of her hands. The woman slumped to the side and rolled off his chest.

“What the fuck?”

Pounding feet accompanied the loud shout. Panting, Breeana looked up as Kal and Soren rushed into the parking lot.

The woman leapt up, ran over to the tall concrete wall, and jumped onto its narrow ledge. Her companion followed, his hand clamped to his face while blood leaked through his fingers.

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Chapter 5

“Breeana.” Mel tried to shout, but it came out as a croak. His throat burned like he’d eaten fire.

Agony from the stab wounds, intermixed with panic, flooded his body. He tried to rise. Grit from the pavement scraped his palms as he pushed upwards. He fell back, only to try again.

Silver from the demon's dagger polluted his blood stream; his frantic heartbeat sped up the process. It wouldn't be long before paralysis set in. His left arm and right leg were already becoming numb.

“This isn't over, slayer. Not by a long shot,” the female demon screamed from atop the concrete ledge. “I won't stop until you're dead. But first, I'll kill your girlfriend. A lover for a lover.”

Oh God, the demons have Breeana! He gritted his teeth against the pain and rolled to his side. He tried to force himself to his knees, but it was no use. The silver worked too fast.

“What the fuck? Mel!”

The sound of Kal's loud cry filtered through his anguish. He turned his head in time to see Kal and Soren charging through the parking lot. “Kal. Soren. Thank Christ. You have...too...”

Their faces came into focus as they dropped to their knees beside him. “Oh Jesus, no,” Kal murmured.

Mel attempted to stand again, but his paralyzed leg wouldn't support him. Instead, he grabbed Kal's arm in a weak grip. “Bree...Breeana. The demons have her—” He swallowed, trying to regain his voice.

“She's right here. She's safe,” Kal replied.

“Is he—is he going to be okay?” Breeana asked, in a hesitant tone.

Mel turned his head in the direction of her sweet voice. She stood not far from his supine body with her arms wrapped around her middle. Violent tremors shook her length and her teeth chattered so hard it was a wonder they didn't shatter.

He extended a hand toward her. “Are you okay?”

She stared at his outstretched arm with wide frightened eyes. Her head bobbed. "I...think so."

Mel's gaze traveled over her, making sure she was unhurt. He was in total awe of this woman. She saved his miserable life; this human, this tiny female who was no match for a demon saved him, but unfortunately for her, she was now in danger.

He tugged Kal's leather jacket and pulled his face down to within an inch of his. "Get the bastards. Don't... let them...get away."

"Fuck you, man. We have to get you home and call Doc Johanson."

Soren leaned down, bringing his face into view. "You're hurt bad. You need to get the silver out of your system before the damage is irreversible."

"Don't worry about me." Mel squeezed his eyes shut against the pain that ripped through his body. There was no way he'd allow the demon bitch to live, especially after her vow to kill Breeana.

Ignoring their demands, he said with more force, "Do it!"

"Screw you, man. We're taking you home." Kal pulled his truck keys from his pocket.

"Home?" Breeana asked. "He needs to go to the hospital. We need to phone an ambulance."

"Uh, yeah. That's what I meant. The hospital," Kal replied.

Mel snapped his jaw closed against another wave of pain as it sliced through him. He tried to focus on Kal's face. "Hurry up. You're wasting precious time."

Soren leaned closer until they were nose to nose. "Listen to me, Mel. You need to get back to the base."

"No, you listen to me." Mel tried to snarl back, but it came out as a pathetic whisper. "I want them dead."

"Be reasonable. We'll take you home and then Soren and I—"

Mel was frantic. With each second that ticked by, the demons got farther away. With as much power as he could muster, he said, "Just do as I ask. There's more at stake here. I don't have time to explain." He swallowed and stared into Kal's eyes, silently pleading. "I can't risk them getting away."

Kal let out a sigh and bowed his head. He glanced over at Soren who nodded. "All right. Just don't die or anything." He rose to his feet. "We'll be right back, man, so hang in there."

Mel recognized the struggle in their eyes as they both looked down at him one last time before they took off.

“Hey,” Breeana yelled. “Where are you guys going?” Both ignored her and jumped onto the wall, disappearing into the shadows. “He needs to go to the hospital! Kal? Soren? You can't leave him here. He'll bleed to death!”

“Breeana, are you all right?”

She jumped, her eyes jerking toward him. Her hands flew to her throat as she took a step back. “No... no. This can't be happening. Oh God, no. Kal? Soren? Don't you *dare* leave. He needs a doctor!”

Regret ripped at his insides with razor sharp teeth. He tried to sit up, but blackness threatened his vision. The parking lot spun. He sprawled back, clamping his lids shut.

A moment later, the brush of a cool hand on his forehead prompted his eyes to open. Breeana leaned over him, her tear-filled eyes bright with worry and shock. “Everything is going to be okay. I'll call an ambulance. And once you get to a hospital, the doctors will stitch you up. You'll be as good as new. I promise. I'll call the police, too. Those two maniacs need to be locked up.”

He grabbed her wrist when she tried to rise. If he didn't stop her, he'd wind up in a human hospital—dead for sure. What he needed was to get his ass home and call a doctor from his own species.

“Kal and Soren will phone an ambulance.”

She didn't answer, just tugged her hand free and crawled under the front of her truck to grab her purse. Pulling out her phone, she flipped it open only to curse. “I don't believe it! There's no signal.”

Mel tried to shift his weight off his injured back. As soon as he moved, pain exploded throughout his body, almost knocking him out.

She ran back to him, placing cool palms against his burning cheeks. “Don't try to move. Just stay calm. I'm going to get some help.”

Sorry, Breeana, I can't let you do that. Their gazes locked. He pushed his mind into hers; past her fear, her questions, and planted his thought. *An ambulance is on its way along with the cops.*

She blinked. “Yes. An ambulance is on its way.”

He slumped back. Shit, that took all his remaining strength. He wasn't sure how long the thought would last. The bigger job of erasing her memories of him and the demons would have to go to Kal or Soren.

Her soft gasp pulled him out of his daze. “You're bleeding.”

He glanced at his chest. A wet stain widened over the front of his black T-shirt. He cleared his throat. “I'll live.”

“I'm not a human doctor, but I know enough. We need to slow the bleeding.”

“I'll be all right.”

Her eyes grew hard. “You could die. What harm will it do if I have a look?”

He was too weak to argue, but he knew what silver did to a vampire's wounds, and it wasn't pretty.

“Look, I'm the best you've got until the ambulance arrives.”

Mel nodded and closed his eyes, telling himself she wouldn't remember any of this. She gently slid his jacket to the side and hooked her fingers through the hole in his shirt. “This is going to hurt a little.” Before she finished speaking, she tugged and ripped his T-shirt down to his waist.

The movement pulled on the chest gash. Searing agony devoured him like a fireball. He groaned, fighting to stay conscious.

“Mel, I'm so sorry.”

His fingers curled into tight fists. Swallowing hard, he fought against the urge to scream. Finally, the pain subsided enough for him to open his eyes. Tears streamed down her ashen face. With a trembling hand, he brushed the sparkling droplets off her chin. “I'm...okay.”

She wiped the sweat from his forehead before her eyes moved to his injury. She smothered a curse with her hands. “Oh...my...God,” she whispered through her fingers.

He lifted his head, getting a look for himself. The wound was four inches long with blackened edges. Dark lines under his skin radiated from the slice in all directions, looking like a picture of an ebony sun, drawn by a child. Blood oozed down his shoulder and side to pool under his back.

She raised grave eyes to his and swallowed several times. “Oh, Christ, you're hurt bad.”

“I'm tough. I can handle it.”

“Yeah, but can I?” Her voice throbbed with worry and her body trembled as she stared at the blackened slash marring his chest.

He knew the signs of shock. It wouldn't be long before she collapsed. “It looks worse than it is. Trust me.”

She dismissed his remark and clambered to her feet, looking wildly around. “I need something to hold to your chest. What can I use? What can I—”

Breeana grabbed her coat. With an emphatic tug, she peeled it off and tossed it to the ground. She yanked her shirt over her head and dropped it onto his stomach. He caught a glimpse of her breasts, covered by a black lace bra. Her smooth, white skin glowed in the dim lights. When she turned around and bent to pick up her coat, his gaze followed the line of her spine, down to her perfect...

What he saw made his heart freeze in his chest.

What the fuck? He blinked, trying to clear his eyes, wondering if what he saw was a trick of the light and shadows or his fevered mind.

On her lower back, just above the waistband of her jeans, was a three-inch long, brown birthmark. The mark was in the shape of a dagger. The words, *from light and dark, look for the mark*, flew through his brain.

The mark. It can't be.

Breeana jerked her coat back on, whirled around, and dropped to her knees. She balled up her shirt and pressed it to his chest. After a few moments of silence, she said, "Mel? What's the matter? Am I hurting you? I'm sorry, but I have to apply pressure."

Mel didn't reply—couldn't—he was numb with disbelief. All he could do was stare at her face with the words, *she carries the mark of the Prophecy*, repeating over and over in his mind.

Chapter 6

Mel's stare remained riveted on Breeana's face. Her lips moved, but he couldn't understand what she said. Shock and confusion swirled around his mind.

"Mel? Speak to me," she shouted. "Can you hear me?"

"How's he doing?" The sound of Kal's voice trickled through Mel's muddled brain.

Breeana's head snapped up. "Thank God you're back. I think he's going into shock."

Kal helped her to her feet, then squatted down. "Hey, my man. How ya doing?"

Mel didn't respond, but he took in Kal's stressed out appearance. Deep worry lines were carved beside his mouth, and his lips were set in a grim line.

Kal gripped Mel's shoulder and gave a light shake. "Yo, Mel? Ah, Jesus, no. I think we're too late." He slapped Mel's cheek.

"Fuck off," Mel said with a growl, turning his face away from the stinging pain.

"Oh, thank Christ. You scared the piss outta me," Kal murmured.

Soren lifted the blood soaked shirt. "We've gotta get him home. Now."

Mel glanced from one warrior to the other, hoping they had good news.

Kal's eyes dropped to the wound. He swore softly. "Yo, dude, that's just a scratch. Quit actin' like a baby."

With a weak grip, Mel grasped his arm. "Did you find them?"

The teasing smile on Kal's face vanished. "Sorry. We couldn't pick up their trail."

A cruel curse exploded from Mel. He closed his eyes. No way could he leave Breeana. Not with the demon bitch bent on revenge. But what the hell was he supposed to do? Bring her home? Roarik would kill him if he brought a human to the base. The only thing he hated more than humans was demons. But shit, what other option was left? She saved his life. And she bore the mark. It was the first clue they'd had.

He needed time to sort this all out, but time was the one thing he didn't have.

“Yo, dude, we'll get them. Don't worry. After you're healed, we'll get our revenge,” Kal said.

“When the hell is the ambulance going to get here?” Breeana snapped. Mel glanced over at her and their eyes met. “Maybe I should call, find out what's taking so long?”

“No!” Soren and Kal said in unison.

Her eyes narrowed. She balled her fists. “Why the hell not? And where are the cops?”

“Don't worry about it. We've got it covered.” Soren dropped his gaze back to Mel. “I'll take care of her memories for ya. You don't look like you even have enough energy to breathe.”

Mel stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Leave her memories. Knock her out, but don't erase her memories.”

“What?” Soren's brows shot up. “Leave them intact?”

Breeana cleared her throat, interrupting them. Mel turned his head toward her. She pegged them all with a hard glare. “Excuse me, but he needs to get to a hospital.”

Soren cursed. “This is none of your concern.”

“Look, I don't know who you guys are, whether you're criminals or not, and frankly, I don't give a shit. He *needs* medical attention.” A few seconds of silence ticked by before she shouted, “He could die.”

“We get it,” Kal said with an edge to his voice. “And we're going to take him to a hospital. We'll go in my truck.”

“I've had enough,” Soren said under his breath.

He stalked over to her. She backed away. “What are you doing?” Her back hit her truck and she stumbled. Soren grabbed her shoulders, pulling her face close to his. “Hey, let me go—” She sagged in his arms.

Soren propped her limp body against one of her truck tires. “That takes care of that. Let's get the fuck out of here.”

Mel struggled to sit up. The parking lot spun around him. He fell back.

Kal and Soren bent to help him up. They draped his arms over their shoulders and hoisted him to his feet.

Blackness lurked on the edge of Mel's vision. He swayed, trying to keep his balance. Nausea churned in his gut and saliva filled his mouth. He

swallowed several times, hoping the contents in his stomach would stay down.

“Can you hold him up while I get my truck?” Kal asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Could ya make it quick, this guy weighs a ton.”

Kal bolted out of the parking lot.

Mel squeezed his eyes shut against the dizziness. He needed to lie down. Even with Soren's help, he wouldn't be able to remain upright for long.

Soren shifted Mel's weight. “So, want to tell me why you want her memories left?”

“I'll explain when Kal gets back.”

The sound of screeching tires and a revving engine broke the silence. Mel opened his eyes and winced against the glare of the headlights that flooded the parking lot as Kal drove through the entrance. The truck jerked sideways, coming to a sliding halt. Kal jumped out, leaving the engine running.

With both warriors' help, Mel tried to limp over to the truck, but his feet dragged along the pavement. Although his body was useless, his thoughts raced as he tried to figure out what to do. He couldn't leave her, that much he knew.

Mel peered over his shoulder at Breeana slumped against her truck. There was no other option. He cleared his throat, hating himself for what he was about to do. “Bring her with us.”

“Are you insane?” Kal said with a whispered hiss. “No way, dude. Just forget it. Roarik will blow a frickin' fit. Remember what happened when I brought a female back to the base? He flipped and she was a vampire for Christ sakes.”

Mel turned his head slowly. “One of the demons vowed to extract revenge on me by using the human. I won't repay her for saving my life by leaving her to be tortured and killed for something she knows nothing about.”

“Come on.” Soren shot a glance over his shoulder, then back to Mel. “The demons won't bother with her. Unless there is something more you're not telling us?”

“It's a long story. One we don't have time to get into right now.”

“For fuck sakes, Mel. What the hell do you think is going to happen when she finds out what we are, huh?” Soren shoved a hand through his hair. “How long do you hope to hide it from her if she's living at the base?”

The best we can do is hunt them down before they find out where she lives. It'll take awhile for the demons to locate her, so we have time.”

“I won't take the chance.”

“Sorry. That's the best I can offer.”

Mel debated whether he should tell them about the mark. He knew it would get their attention, but that was a can of worms he wasn't prepared to open; not until he had more time to figure out why a human carried the mark of the prophecy.

“She comes with us, and that's final.” Mel hated the weakness in his voice.

Soren sighed. “See, that's where you're wrong. I hate to have to do this to you, but I'm pullin’ rank on ya. She stays in her world, and *that's* final.”

Mel was too drained to argue. It looked like he'd have to fill them in on her birthmark. He cleared his throat. “She carries the mark.”

Their jaws dropped and their eyes peeled wide. The expression on their faces would have been comical had the subject not been so dire.

Eyes narrowed, Soren demanded, “Are you sure? Where is it?”

“On her lower back. We have no choice but to bring her with us until we can figure out what to do.” Mel glanced at Kal to gage his reaction, but he was staring at Breeana with a strange expression on his face; like he was in the presence of someone holy.

Soren pinned Mel with a cold stare. “She comes, but when shit hits the fan, and you know it will, it's your ass on the line. We clear?”

“Crystal.”

“I'll get the human,” Soren said, shaking his head.

Soren lifted Breeana in his arms and carried her over to the passenger side of the truck, opened the door, and placed her inside.

Self-hatred filled Mel. He was a despicable bastard. Thanks to his selfishness, Breeana's life was in danger. Her world was about to be turned upside down.

Soren came around and helped Kal lift Mel into the truck. A few agonizing moments later, Mel leaned back against the seat and sighed with relief. He felt fuzzy, like he couldn't quite feel his body or the seat; almost like a floating sensation. And he knew what it meant; he was beginning to fade. He was afraid they wouldn't make it in time to reverse the damage the silver inflicted on his body.

Kal jumped in and slammed the truck into reverse, then gunned it forward, jerking Mel and Breeana in their seats.

Mel moaned as pain cut through him.

“Sorry,” Kal murmured. He swung the truck around and shot out into the late night traffic. “Soren's going to make sure Johanson gets his ass over to the house, pronto.”

“Good.”

Mel glanced at Breeana. She looked so innocent, it made him feel like a monster, a monster she'd run from when she found out what he was. That thought didn't sit well. Made him feel like a real shit for deceiving her. There was going to be hell to pay and a lot of explaining to do when she woke up.

Kal stopped at a red light. “You all right, buddy?”

No he wasn't. He was drained. “Yeah, I'm good.”

“You've lost a lot of blood. Maybe you should drink. You don't look so hot.”

Mel remained quiet. He didn't have the energy or the desire to speak.

“For shit-sakes, Mel, drink!” When he still didn't reply, Kal argued, “Come on. What are you waiting for? She's passed out, she'll never know.”

Mel looked at her hands lying limply in her lap. “I know.” He swallowed and glanced out the windshield at the heavy traffic.

The truck shot forward with the rest of the vehicles. Signaling, Kal turned onto the highway. “Just relax and drink. We'll be home shortly.”

He didn't answer until Kal nudged his shoulder. “Hey, did ya hear me?”

“Yeah, shit, I heard ya.” Kal was right. It was either drink her blood to buy himself some time or die. Mel gently picked up one of her hands and brought it closer to his face. He turned her arm over so her wrist was exposed. It was so tiny and delicate in his hand. Her pale skin glowed in the lights from the dashboard. Blue veins, just below the surface, pulsed with each beat of her heart.

He brought her wrist up to his nose and inhaled. The scent of her warm skin and her blood flooded his brain with their fresh flowery aroma. He swallowed hard as bloodlust hit, and his fangs protracted, making him feel like a freak.

What the hell was the matter with him? It never bothered him before. He liked taking humans' blood without them remembering. Besides, vampires only took a small amount, nothing humans couldn't afford to give.

Bloodlust pounded through his body, demanding attention. He opened his mouth yet hesitated. Breeana was different. She saved his life for one, and ah hell, he had feelings for her.

Quit being a sap and drink.

He sank his fangs into her wrist. Her blood flooded his mouth. He groaned with pleasure. The taste of her overwhelmed him; it was so damn good, like ripe blackberries. Never had he tasted anything so delicious in his life.

Mel swallowed his first mouthful. When the warm liquid hit his stomach, a powerful jolt almost dislodged his fangs from her vein. Power coursed through his body—the strongest he had ever felt. Electric tingles zipped through him, causing his fingers and toes to curl. With a muffled growl, he drank with deep greedy gulps.

Sexual desire rivaled bloodlust for attention. The urge to rip her pants off, spread her legs wide, and plunge his cock into her softness, over and over, muscled to the surface. He wanted to drink from her neck and take her at the same time.

A jolt of pain zapped him back to reality.

What the hell? He had actually tried to roll on top of her.

Swallowing his last mouthful, he released her wrist. He licked his lips and forced his fangs to retract. He stared at the two small puncture wounds and the thin trail of blood that slowly trickled down her arm. Gently, he licked off the blood and sealed up the twin holes. He pressed a light kiss to her wrist before he laid it back on her lap.

Her wrist would be tender when she woke, but she'd most likely think she'd bruised it in her struggles.

Mel leaned back and closed his eyes as the healing power of her blood went to work on his battered body. Her blood was potent. A small amount of strength returned, but it was only a temporary fix.

“Feel a little better?” Kal asked.

Mel sighed. “To quote Tony the Tiger, I feel grrreat.”

Laughing, Kal gripped his shoulder. “Yeah, you'll live. Sounds like you're getting your sense of humor back.”

Mel didn't reply. How the hell was he going to explain to Breeana that vampires were more than just a legend?

The next thing Mel remembered was waking to the distant echo of Kal's voice and someone nudging his arm. Feeling like weights were attached to

his eyelids, he pried them open, lifted his head, and peered out the windshield. He snapped his eyes closed against the glare of two bright lights. Pain jabbed through his skull. When the pain subsided, he slowly peeled one eye open and saw the blurred image of a three-story building.

Thank the gods, they were home. And not a moment too soon, he was fading faster and faster. What energy he had received from Breeana's blood was gone.

Thinking of her, he turned his head. The tendons in his neck protested, stiff as rusted hinges. Her beautiful face filled his vision. Self-hatred ripped a gaping hole in his soul and guilt ate him like worms. Not only for the predicament he'd gotten her into, but for invading her mind. He vowed no matter what occurred here on in, he wouldn't manipulate her again.

“Yo, dude,” Kal said. “We need to get you inside.”

Mel tried to speak, but his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth and his lips felt like someone wiped them off with sand paper. He shook his head, hoping the guy understood he was too weak to move. Kal leaned in, placed an arm around his shoulder, and tried to slide the other under his knees. He bumped the gash on his thigh. Mel hissed with pain.

“Shit, sorry, man.”

Sweat dripped from Mel's forehead, down the sides of his face. He tried to help by lifting an arm to drape over his roommate's shoulder, but he couldn't. His head flopped back against the seat.

From the front door of the house, two large figures charged out and ran over to the truck. Mel recognized Black and Soren's distorted shapes as they came closer.

“Do you need some help?” Black asked as he leaned in.

“Yeah,” Kal said. “Grab his arms. I'll get his legs. We'll try to be as careful as we can.”

“Guess I'll grab the human, again,” Soren replied with a sneer.

Black and Kal gripped Mel's arms. They pulled him across the seat. He locked his jaw together, trying to hold in his shout of pain, but it was too much. A scream welled up. He opened his mouth, croaking out a pathetic yelp.

After a few moments of pulling and tugging, he was free of the truck. He leaned heavily against the two warriors. With his arms flung over their shoulders, they dragged him across the gravel driveway and up the stairs to the wooden double doors of the main entrance. By the time he made it to

the porch, he was drained and limp; he couldn't even raise his head. His brain shorted in and out like corroded electrical wires.

Mel glanced at his useless legs. How the hell would he make it down all the stairs to the suites underground without passing out?

“Is Johanson waiting in Mel's room?” Kal asked, breathing heavily. The strain of his worry was unmistakable in his voice. “He needs the silver out before the damage is permanent.”

I think it's already too late, Mel thought, in too much pain to really worry. Silver was like fucking vampire kryptonite. It slowly paralyzed them until their organs gave out, one by one. He figured he was lucky the demon hadn't stabbed him in the heart. That would have been game over instantly, no passing go to collect two hundred dollars, no restart, just...dead.

“Soren made damn sure the doc would be here. Johanson wanted us to bring him to the clinic, but Soren told him to cram it, and get his ass over to the house. Not his words exactly, but I'd have to wash my mouth out with soap if I repeated everything he'd said,” Black replied, panting as he and Kal fought to get through the door.

Relief washed through Mel when they finally laid him on his bed.

“Where do you want me to put the human?” Soren asked.

Mel glanced up. Though his vision was blurry, he could make out Breeana's body cradled against Soren's chest. “At the foot of my bed.” He wanted to make sure he was the first person she saw when she woke up.

Soren laid her down and Kal covered her with a yellow blanket.

Doctor Johanson stepped out of the bathroom, drying his hands. He leaned close to Breeana and sniffed. “A human. You guys thought of everything. Mel will need her blood to speed up healing.” He set the towel down and covered his hands with something from his pocket. A pair of latex gloves, judging by the loud snap they made as he tugged them on.

With gentle hands, the Doc stripped off Mel's leather jacket.

Mel tried to concentrate on the doctor instead of the pain as Johanson leaned forward and inspected his chest wound. He was a middle-aged vampire who resembled a mad scientist. His white blond hair looked like it had never seen a brush. Black framed glasses with thick lenses covered pale blue eyes.

Doctor Johanson pulled a pair of scissors from his lab coat, carefully cutting away the rest of Mel's shirt. Gentle yet efficient fingers probed the gash on his lower back. “This is deep, but not serious. It passed through the

muscle, missing any organs.” He shoved his glasses up the bridge of his nose, then moved back to the chest wound. “The dagger doesn't appear to have punctured his lungs or severed an artery.” He glanced over at the males waiting quietly in the corner, and back to Mel, giving his arm a light pat.

Johanson walked over to his medical bag, perched on the bedside table and searched inside. He carried two syringes back to the bed, and then inserted a needle into the blue vein in the crease of Mel's elbow and slowly depressed the plunger.

Mel jerked and hissed, balling the comforter up tight in his fists.

God...damn!

Fire shot through him as the chelating agent flooded his veins, binding to the silver. His limbs seized. Sweat popped out across his forehead and upper lip. He gritted his teeth against the burning agony and tried desperately not to scream. In a fog, he felt the doctor insert the other needle into his lower back, releasing the second dose.

After what seemed an eternity, Mel finally relaxed against the mattress breathing heavily, drenched with sweat. He released his death grip on the comforter and sighed. Thank Christ that was over.

The doctor leaned in and placed his stethoscope on his chest. The chill of the disc felt good against Mel's overheated skin. Johanson then eased him onto his side to listen to his lungs.

“Good. Good. Heart and lungs sound strong.” Doctor Johanson moved back to his medical bag and pulled out two bottles of water. “Well gentlemen, he'll live to fight another day. I've given him the chelating agent, and not a moment too soon, I might add. I'll stitch him up. By tomorrow he should be almost as good as new. There is quite a lot of tissue damage inside due to the serrated blades the demons use, so that will require an additional day to heal properly. All in all, I believe he will be able to resume fighting in two days.”

He walked back to Mel, handed him the water bottles. “Drink both of these. It will help your body flush out the metal faster.

Nodding, Mel unscrewed the cap off of one and downed the contents. “Thanks, Doc.”

“No need to thank me. That's why I make the big bucks,” he said with a wink. “Now then. Would you prefer a sedative before I start stitching?”

Mel shook his head. He'd had sedatives before and the meds just screwed with his mind, making him groggy. He needed his wits about him so he could figure out what to do with Breeana.

“Okay. Let's get started.”

Thirty minutes later, Mel rested in bed, propped up against a mountain of pillows. Exhaustion pulled his eyelids low. His body screamed for sleep to begin the healing process. Like humans, a vampire's body healed during sleep; the only difference was the accelerated speed.

After Doctor Johanson left, Mel cleared his throat, ready to speak, but thought better of it. Soren, Black and Kal waited, wanting answers, but he didn't have any.

He glanced down at the end of the bed where Breeana lay sleeping, covered by a thin yellow blanket. What the hell was he going to do with her? What do you say to someone you basically kidnapped? And how was he going to inform her of the danger she was in...because of him. But before he got to that, he'd first have to explain to her what he was, and how does one explain to someone there's another species out there?

Most humans had heard of vampires, but the lore they believed was complete utter horseshit: wooden stakes, allergy to garlic, no reflection in a mirror, and oh yeah, one of his personal favorites, turning into bats. Also, since vampires weren't unholy monsters, neither holy water nor crosses, affected them. About the only things idiotic humans got correct was vampires drank human blood and they couldn't go out in daylight, unless they wanted to commit suicide.

He thought about the vampire movies he'd seen over the years, and almost laughed out loud. Halloween decorations and horror icons; that's what vampires had been reduced to.

What a joke.

Sensing their eyes boring into him, Mel stared at the three males. “I know you have a ton of questions, but unfortunately I have no answers.”

“Not to be a dick, but maybe you were mistaken. Maybe it wasn't the mark,” Black said.

Mel sighed. “I wish I had been mistaken, but it *is* identical to the dagger symbol from the prophecy.”

“Mind if we have a look for ourselves?” Soren asked, cocking a blond eyebrow.

Mel's first instinct was to tell him to shove it, but this concerned them all. "Go ahead. It's on her lower back."

Soren lifted the blanket, pushed up her long leather coat, exposing her back and the mark. Black and Kal leaned closer. "Shit," Soren muttered. He tugged her coat back into place, then moved to stand beside the dresser.

"Doesn't this bring us closer to finding the answers?" Kal asked.

Mel scrubbed his hand over his chin. "What more do we know? That a human carries the mark of the prophecy? If anything, it makes the whole thing more screwed up." He ran a hand through his hair and said more to himself, "This is something I never would have foreseen."

Black stepped closer to the bed, his eyes trained on Breeana's sleeping form. "Should we call Roarik? Ask him to come home?"

"No," Mel replied quickly. "He'll be home Sunday. And like I said, we're no closer to solving this riddle. So in the meantime, I'll do more digging and hopefully by the time Roarik returns, I'll have some answers." Shit, he hoped Black didn't end up phoning Roarik. He'd like to deal with that storm later, rather than sooner.

"If you guys would excuse me, I'm pretty wiped out." He closed his eyes, hoping they'd take the hint.

Kal cleared his throat. "Yo dude, make sure you talk to her. Explain who and what we are, and make sure she gets it before Roarik gets back. It'll be easier on her. If you need some help, just let me know. You're not the most sensitive guy around."

Mel's eyes flew open and he glared at Kal. Yeah, like he needed his help.

Kal laid a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, I'm not saying this to piss you off. Just speakin' the truth."

Mel backed down. He wasn't very good at being sensitive to other's feelings. When it came to compassion, he knew he didn't have much. Kal on the other hand was a real charmer. He could make the most unbelievable lie sound like the truth; not that the guy was a liar, he just had a way about him.

"I'll handle it," Mel snapped. "And by the way," he continued, staring at all three, "I don't want her to know about the prophecy unless we have no other choice. She'll have enough to deal with."

All three agreed. They stared at Breeana, watching the blanket rise and fall with each breath.

“This is insane,” Black whispered, shaking his head. “We usually do everything we can to *prevent* humans from finding out about us. Now...shit, you have to try and explain our existence to one.”

He walked over to the bedroom door, still shaking his head. With his hand on the knob, he turned and glanced back at Breeana. “I so don't envy you, man. She's going to freak.”

Mel leaned back against the pillows. “I need you two to go back to The Green Tree and bring Breeana’s truck here. The last thing we need is the human cops involved. Also, add a thought to a couple of the bartenders and waitresses. Tell them she left right after the gig and they have no idea where she was going. If there's time left, try and pick up on the demon’s trail. We need to find them before Roarik returns.”

“We'll take care of it,” Kal said. “Get some rest.”

Yeah, rest. He doubted that would be possible. But his heavy eyelids were already on the downward slide.

Chapter 7

Saturday, June 14th 8:00a.m

Breeana floated on the edge of sleep and consciousness. When she stretched her arms and legs, her muscles clenched. They were stiff like she'd been lifting weights.

She tugged the blanket, tucking it tighter under her chin and yawned. As sleep was about to reclaim her, a shiver tap-danced up her spine then spread. Something nagged from deep in her mind, but when she tried to figure out what it could be, nothing came to her. She couldn't even remember making it back to the hotel last night. Come to think of it, she couldn't remember much of anything. Most of the previous evening was a complete blur.

Breeana concentrated harder, but only succeeded in giving herself a headache.

How many beers did I have last night? Judging by her fuzzy, throbbing head and achy body, it must have been a fair amount. Which was odd. She normally didn't drink much when she had to drive.

Shame washed over her. Had she been foolish enough to drink and drive?

She opened one eye and glanced down at the bed she was laying on. She was stretched across the end, covered by a thin blanket. Shifting her arms, she heard the creak of leather from her jacket. Guessing by how numb and cramped her toes felt, her boots were still on. Cripes, she really must have been out of it.

She slid her left arm from under the blanket and glanced at her wristwatch. 8:04 a.m. Check-out time wasn't until eleven. She decided to catch a few more hours of sleep.

Too lazy to undress, she closed her eyes and tried to fall back asleep but her mind wouldn't stay quiet. Trying harder to focus, she started with the beginning of the evening. Performing, sitting down, and then—Mel's face flashed through her mind: his dark hair, silver-gray eyes, and his sexy lips. Her heart sped up.

Wow, he's hot. Just how I picture men in romance novels.

Breeana smiled, while their conversation replayed over in her mind. She recalled how the night—

Raw panic seized her throat, cutting off her air. Her body vibrated with adrenaline.

Where am I? Her eyes flew open and she looked down, surveying the bed again. *Definitely not at a hospital or a hotel.*

Heart thundering in her chest, she stiffened, terrified, as more of the evening's frightening events clogged her brain. She recalled thinking Mel and that woman were a couple at first, but she knew now it was much worse. The woman had accused Mel of murdering her lover. And she'd stabbed him.

Her heart rate slammed into over-drive, threatening to punch right out of her chest. The word murderer flashed through her mind like a blinking fluorescent sign.

Murderer. Murderer. Murderer.

Oh God!

You fool. You brainless idiot! Why didn't you run when you had the chance? Never mind that, how did you end up here?

In her defense, she couldn't remember leaving with them. All she could recollect was waiting for the ambulance, Kal and Soren returning...and after that... nothing. Blank. She should have run back into the club the moment the fight broke out and phoned the police, but no, she wanted to help Mel.

Well, you helped him all right. You helped him pick up another victim! And with a face like his, she was certain he lured tons of women; they'd flock to him like bees to honey. What perfect bait he was.

The soft rustling of skin sliding over sheets snapped her out of her frightening speculations. Every muscle in her froze as the soft inhale and exhale of breathing came from directly behind her. Breeana shoved a knuckle into her mouth, bit down, trying to stop a scream from bursting forth; alerting her captor she was awake. She remained motionless, but panic seized, making her light headed.

The urge to run was so strong, her legs twitched with the need, but she forced herself to stay as still as possible.

Okay, you need to relax and think. Just breathe. That's it. Slowly, in and out. In and out.

Determined she was as calm as she was going to get, she moved her head a fraction and looked around. In front of her, about eight feet away, was a door. Her eyes scanned to the left. A black entertainment unit with a TV, a DVD player, and shelves lined with books took up one wall. Shifting her head slowly upwards, she spotted a closet with bi-fold doors. One side was open, but the interior was too dark to see inside. Moving her head back down, her gaze passed the door. Beside it stood a blue upholstered chair with a black leather jacket thrown across it. Beside the chair was a dark brown dresser. Strewn across the top was a set of keys, what looked like a bottle of Jack Daniels, and—was that her purse?

It was.

Oh, thank God. Maybe her phone was still inside.

With hope blazing anew, Breeana pulled the thin blanket off, and eased both legs over the edge of the bed, allowing them to slide until they touched the floor. She rested on her knees at the end of the bed, facing the headboard.

She stopped breathing and squeezed her eyelids shut, waiting for invisible hands to grab her. When none did, she lifted her head and opened her eyes and gasped, but quickly stifled it with her hand.

Mel slept with his head facing the closet. His black hair fanned out across the pillow. His chest and broad shoulders were bare above a brown comforter. Bare except for a white bandage over the left side of his chest where he'd been stabbed. Her eyes followed one long, muscular arm down to his hands clasped loosely over his stomach, and then back again. On his left arm, circling his large bicep was a strange tattoo drawn in black ink. Even in sleep he exuded power, strength. How did that woman best him?

Her gaze returned to his face. A lamp on the bedside table let off just enough light for her to see his sleeping features. He looked peaceful. Long, dark lashes cast shadows on his cheeks, and a small snore escaped his parted lips. Dark hair sprinkled across his wide chest, traveled down over the hard ridges of his stomach, past his navel, only to stop when it disappeared under the line of covers, slung low over his hips.

He didn't look like a murderer, she thought with a sigh.

What the hell are you thinking? How do you know what a murderer looks like? It's not like psychos have it tattooed on their foreheads. Don't let his good looks fool you again. Now quit gawking and get moving!

Breeana scooted backwards across the carpeted floor until she hit the door. Springing up, she grabbed the knob and twisted it violently. But it was no use.

Shit! Shit! It's locked.

The keys!

She leapt over to the dresser, grabbed the keys and snatched the handle of her purse.

“I should thank you for saving me last night.”

Terror ripped through her like an electrical shock. Whirling around, the keys flew out of her grip and her purse fell to the floor, spilling some of the contents. Her breath left her in a loud rush. Chest heaving, she tried to suck air back into her lungs but all she could manage were short puffs. With her back pressed flat against the door, she stared wide-eyed at her captor.

He cleared his throat and ran his hands through his tangled hair, all the while never breaking eye contact with her. Finally, he sighed and dropped his hands back to the bed. “Breeana, you have nothing to fear. I'm not going to hurt you in any way.”

Yeah right. Like I'm going to believe that.

“No harm will come to you here. I promise.” He said this as if he were talking to a child.

She needed a weapon. Something. Anything. Her eyes glanced around the room, but found nothing that could be used against him.

“Please listen to me. I'm... not...going...to hurt you.” He flung the covers back and winced as he shifted his legs to the edge of the bed, ready to stand up.

“Stay where you are,” she shouted, holding her hands out in front of her. “Don't come any closer.”

He sighed and lay back against the pillows, then drew the covers over his hips. “Okay. I'm sorry I startled you.”

Fear clawed its way up her throat, threatening to choke her. She had to find a way out of here, and soon. Chances were pretty slim that she would make it out alive, but she had to try.

She needed a plan. Yeah, a plan would be good, but her mind was so bogged down with fear she couldn't think straight. Willing herself to try and get it together long enough to think, she kept her eyes glued to him, making sure he didn't try anything funny.

Oh, these psychos love it when women tremble in fear. Makes them feel powerful, manly—in charge. Well, she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. If she was going to die anyway, she was at least going to go with a little dignity.

Swallowing hard, she forced herself to look him square in the eye. “If... if you think I'm going to beg and plead... for my life, then...you're nuts. I know how it works with you sickos, getting off on women's fears, so if you're going to kill me just get it over with. I promise you, I'll fight all the way.”

“Excuse me?” Confusion filled his voice. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, don't give me that.” A small spark of anger ignited in her chest, giving her courage a much needed boost. “You know exactly what I'm talking about, so do us both a favor and quit with the games.”

“Breeana, relax.” He held his hands out, palms up. “I'm neither a murderer nor a rapist. Look, even if I wanted to—which I don't—I can barely get out of this bed.”

She wanted to believe him, but didn't want to cling to false hope, or be caught off guard. That could mean the difference between life and death.

Pegging him with a hard stare, she crossed her arms over her chest. “Okay. If that's the case, then why aren't we at a hospital, huh? If not a murderer, then you're a criminal of some sort, running from the law.” She narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to deny it. “Am I getting warm?”

He exhaled a loud breath and shoved both his hands through his hair. He glanced up at the ceiling before bringing his eyes back to her. “I'm not a criminal. And the reason for why I couldn't be taken to a human hospital will take some time to explain.”

“Human hospital? What are you, an alien?”

“No,” he murmured. “Not an alien.”

There was something in his voice that made the hair stand up on the back of her neck.

Oh shit. Don't ask. Just don't ask him what he means. You really don't want to know. But instead of taking her own advice, she looked directly into his eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

He was silent so long she thought he wasn't going to answer. Then he said three words she never expected to hear a person say outside of her dreams.

“I'm a vampire.”

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Chapter 8

“I'm a vampire.” Mel shifted on the bed. He didn't take his eyes off Breeana as she stood in front of the door—her face drained of all color.

Never having told a human vampires existed, he had no clue what her reaction would be. But he had a good idea. Laughter, disbelief, tears, and hysterics.

So when she laughed, he wasn't surprised.

“Breeana look, this isn't—”

She held up a hand, silencing him. Turning around, she walked over to his entertainment unit and rummaged through his books and DVDs. Still laughing, her focus moved to the closet where she pawed through his clothes hanging from the rod. She winked at him, moving closer to the bed before dropping to her knees. He leaned over the side, catching her looking underneath.

She straightened and glanced around the room. Her gaze stopped on the small lamp sitting on his nightstand. Another burst of laughter escaped her as she headed over and picked it up, inspecting it thoroughly.

Setting it down, she turned to him.

His eyes peeled wide when she leaned over him, and ran her hands over the headboard.

“Excuse me.” She pushed him forward.

He turned his head.

She lifted his pillow, swiped her hand over the sheet and then frowned. Dropping the pillow, she turned, placing her hands on her hips.

What the hell is she doing? Confused over her strange behavior, he continued to watch her.

“Okay, Carol,” Breeana said in a loud voice, looking around the room. “Enough is enough. Where's the camera? You got me good, I'll have to admit that. How you pulled this off is beyond me, but I finally figured it out. Although I must say, this was a little extreme, even for you!”

Who is she talking to? Realization struck. She believed this Carol had played a practical joke on her. Shit, not even Kal—as good as he was—

could pull something this extensive off.

He blew his breath out. "Breeana, I don't know who Carol is, but I assure you, this is no joke."

"Come on, Carol. Joke's over." She jerked a thumb toward him. "One thing I want to know is, where the hell did you find this guy to play the part? I hope he gets paid a fortune because he was fanfrickintastic!"

She clapped her hands, apparently applauding his performance.

Okay, this is going nowhere, and fast. Mel rubbed his forehead, trying to ease his tension. She thought he was an actor for Christ sakes. Just bloody wonderful. He leaned his head back against the headboard and closed his eyes, praying for patience.

"You were great, but you gave it away when you said you were a vampire." Laughter still clung to her voice.

He opened his eyes and gazed back at her, smiling. Time to get real and end this little game of make-believe. But before he showed her the reality of her misconception, he decided to have a little fun of his own. With his smile still in place, he asked, "Why did I give it away when I said I was a vampire?"

She slashed a hand through the air in a dismissive manner. "Carol must have told you about the vampire romance novels I love to read." She stared back at him with amusement shining in her eyes. "Carol believes that's why I don't have a boyfriend." She glanced around the room. "I get the hint, but just so you know, I'm still going to read them!"

"So, you'd like to meet a vampire would you? I think I can arrange that."

Breeana laughed, then sat on the chair beside the door. "Sure. Why not."

Mel stared directly into her eyes as he willed his fangs to descend.

The smile on her face disappeared as if wiped clean by a damp cloth. Her eyes widened as his two sharp canines slid past his lips.

Silence filled the room. Finally she whispered, "Now that's what I call good special effects." She swallowed, never taking her eyes off his teeth.

"Why don't you come over here? Give them a feel? See how real they are."

"Ummm, that's okay." She jumped up and backed closer to the door.

"Aw, come on." Mel grinned, running his tongue over one sharp point. "Just one touch and I guarantee you'll change your mind." He was goading her, but the sooner she understood what he was, the sooner they could get to

the more important issues. Demons, and the danger she now faced. “If they're not real, then what do you have to be afraid of?”

He could have sworn he saw curiosity hidden amongst the fear and doubt in her hazel eyes. “I won't bite.”

A hesitant smile lifted the corners of her lips. “Sure.” She walked closer to the bed, stopping just out of his reach, then hesitated a moment before continuing the last few steps. Her hand shook as she extended a finger and lightly touched his left fang.

A surge of desire ignited within him. He tried to sit still but her light touch, coupled with the sight of her barely clad breasts and her long neck, caused his cock to spring to attention. Without her shirt underneath, the deep V of her jacket left her neck and the swells of her breasts exposed to his gaze. God help him, he tried not to stare, but he was male. And when someone this beautiful was in front of him, well he just couldn't help it.

Mel envisioned slowly parting her jacket. In his mind, he unclasped her bra, baring her breasts. He drank in the sight, creamy swells, tipped with rosy, tight nipples. They rose and fell with each breath she took. He slid his tongue around one straining peak before drawing it into his mouth. After lavishing her other nipple, he lifted his head from her warm flesh, and glanced down at her hooded eyes—eyes full of passion. Pushed beyond his limits, he thrust her against the wall, ripped her jeans off and wrapped her long legs around his waist. With her spread wide, he shoved her panties to the side and buried himself to the hilt in her warm wet cleft.

She tilted her head back, moaning his name. His tongue glided up the graceful curve of her throat, flicking over her banging pulse. Fangs lengthening, heart slamming, he was out of control—wild. Not wanting to finish alone, his thumb found her moist, swollen flesh, rubbing gently. A shout of rapture escaped her parted lips as her body clenched around him. With a roar, he sank his teeth in deep, sucking her with the same rhythm as his pounding cock.

Breeana's soft gasp tore him from his erotic thoughts. With a shake of his head, he tried to clear his mind. She snatched her hand back, but remained beside his bed.

He heard her racing heart and blood rushing through her veins. Her fresh flowery scent surrounded him, causing his arousal to throb so hard, it was painful. Groaning inward, he closed his eyes.

He had no right to these thoughts since he single handedly messed up her life. Because of his stupidity, demons were after her. Until he found and destroyed them, she'd have to leave everything that was familiar to her and remain with him.

She was here for her protection, not his pleasure. These thoughts cooled him slightly. He shifted on the bed and drew one knee up under the covers to try and hide his body's reaction.

Mel opened his eyes and froze. The fear in hers cooled him off faster than a dip in the frigid waters of the Northern Atlantic.

Taking a step back, she shrugged. "Like I said. Good special effects. Obviously they're glued on or they're false teeth."

He lifted one side of his lips with a finger, exposing his gums.

Her expression hardened as she bent at the waist, examining his mouth.

When her gaze flew to his, round with disbelief, he whispered, "Yes. They're real."

Breeana shook her head. "No. No, this isn't real." Covering her face, she twisted away, murmuring through her fingers, "I know what's happening. I'm in the hospital, in a coma—something. I probably hit my head. Was knocked out."

Mel leaned forward. "I know this is strange and confusing, but it's true. I am a vampire."

Anger shot from her eyes as she turned, aiming a finger in his direction. "Will you quit saying that? There has to be another explanation, because vampires... do... not... exist!"

Cursing under his breath, he dragged his hands roughly through his hair, wanting to pull the shit out by the roots. His brain spun, trying to come up with something he could say to help her come to grips with this. No brilliant answers came to him. He was at a complete loss, which pissed him off.

Yet, what really fueled his anger was guilt. He suddenly wanted to jump up, grab her by the shoulders, and make damn sure she understood the enormity of her current situation. Hell, maybe he should bite her. Maybe then she'd believe him.

Yeah, shit. All that would accomplish would make her afraid of him. And he needed her trust.

Mel sucked in a big breath, his anger deflating like a balloon. But fury over the disaster he'd made of her life still flooded his system. He leaned against the headboard.

How could he make her understand?

Inside, his father's insane laughter filled his skull until he thought it would split open, allowing his useless brain to leak out. "Son, with you protecting her, she's as good as dead. Who do you think you're fooling? You can't protect her. Just like you couldn't protect your slut of a wife or that slut you called a mother. Why don't you off the human now, make her death quick and relatively painless? At the very least, save her from the torture she will suffer at the hands of that demon whore. You're a sorry excuse for a male—a warrior!"

Get the fuck out of my mind, you psychotic bastard!

Fear and rage shook Mel to the core. His heart knocked against his ribs as panic wrapped its gnarled fingers around his throat, squeezing so hard he couldn't breathe.

"I'm dreaming. That's what's going on. This isn't real," Breeana said, pulling him back from his turbulent thoughts.

Mel scrubbed a hand over his face, wishing he could scrub his father's memory from his mind. Wishing he could scrub away the scars his father left on his soul. His focus returned to her. She paced in front of his bed, wringing her hands, her fear and confusion evident in every line of her body.

Self-doubt tore at him once more. He would protect her, if it was the last fucking thing he did. And that meant it was imperative she believed him.

Desperation and panic turned his voice hard. "This is real. Vampires do exist. We've been around for thousands of years. Almost as long as humans."

She slowly backed up until her legs hit the chair and she slumped down. "No...no they don't. I'm losing my mind. That's what's happening. I'm officially going insane."

"You're not insane. Trust me."

"You're right. I'm not, but you are. Who goes around pretending they're a vampire? I'll tell you who. A nut case."

"Enough of this bullshit!" He sat forward and growled, "I'm sane. You're sane. You're not dreaming, in a coma, or in a hospital."

Breeana jumped at his sharp tone. As her eyes filled with tears, she whispered, "I don't understand why you're doing this to me? Why am I here?"

At the sight of her unshed tears, all his ire melted away. Yet inside, self-hatred filled him with ice. She looked so unbearably sad, confused, and scared. And to know he was the cause made him want to rip his own heart out.

He covered his eyes with his hand, trying to shield himself from the sorrow on her face, but the image burned into his mind. “God, Breeana. You don't know how much I wish things were different.” He dropped his hand and sighed heavily. “I never should have walked you to your truck. If I hadn't, none of this would be happening to you.” With another heavy sigh, he glanced at her; his heart shrank as she sobbed. “I was selfish. I was...taken with you, and I wanted—” What was he going to tell her? That he found her beyond sexy, and when he was around her all common sense flew straight out the window? That he wanted her naked and panting under him? That she was cursed with the mark of the goddamn vampire prophecy? *Yeah, good ones, asshole. She'll really appreciate those explanations.*

“You...wanted what exactly?” she whispered, swiping at her tears.

He stared at her, not sure what he should say. As their gazes locked, the same strange connection—the same magnetic pull he felt the previous evening flowed between them. He knew she felt it too by the frown creasing her brow and the inquisitive way she tilted her head. At that moment, he realized she deserved the truth. Minus the prophecy.

Clearing his throat to get rid of the gravel, he said softly, “I wanted to get to know you better. I wanted to see you again. I know it was wrong, but shit...I'm so sorry because now your life is in danger.”

“What do you mean?” Her frown deepened. “Who am I in danger from?”

“Those people.” He stopped, not sure how to continue. He knew she would scoff when he told her they were demons. Shit, she thought him insane now. Wait till he informed her not only were there vampires running around, but demons as well. She'd really think he was off his rocker.

“Those people last night weren't human,” Mel said, trying to gauge her reaction.

She raised her eyebrows and smirked. “Okay. Were they vampires like you?”

“No. They were...demons.”

Breeana chuckled. “Oh come on, Mel. Is that your real name?” When he nodded, she continued. “I'm not sure I even believe vampires exist, now

you're telling me there are *demons*?”

“Let me explain?” Impatience laced his voice. “That woman was a demon, along with the male. And not only is she after me, she's now after you.”

“Yeah, sure.” She laughed, rolling her eyes. “Nice try. I think you've been watching too much T.V. The show *Supernatural* for example. It's a good program, but fictional.”

Getting nowhere, Mel decided to try another tactic. “All right then. Did you see that woman kick me across the parking lot?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever known a woman to be that strong?”

“Well no, I haven't. But I'm sure there is...somewhere.”

He sighed, rubbing his thumb and forefinger across his brow. “Think back to last night. To the conversation. I know you overheard at least some of it. Didn't you think it strange the de—woman, kept referring to me as vampire?”

She glanced down. “At the time I didn't think too much of it, but yes, I heard her refer to you as a vampire, a slayer, and she referred to me as human.”

“Well?”

“Well what? What do you want me to say?”

“Don't you think it's strange?”

She resumed pacing between the bed and the door. “Yes, I did—I do. But that still doesn't mean they were demons.” She glanced over at him. “And it doesn't prove you're a vampire.”

“Breeana. Do I look like I'm bullshitting you? Be honest. Do I look like I'm lying? Or maybe a better question would be, why would I?”

She stared deep into his eyes, time passing with neither one speaking.

“Oh, God,” she finally whispered, hand held over her mouth. “You really are a...vampire!”

Mel closed his eyes briefly, silently thanking whatever God was listening. “Yes. I am a vampire. Like I said earlier, vampires have been around for thousands of years. In the beginning, humans and vampires co-existed peacefully.”

*

Breeana stared into his incredible silver-gray eyes, stunned.

A vampire? Did she dare believe this was true?

A big part of her didn't believe him—couldn't believe him—though she couldn't deny the small part of her that believed he was telling her the truth. Or maybe a really sick part of her *yearned* for it to be.

She wheeled around and tried to come up with any other explanation. Dreaming about vampires existing was one thing, but there was a huge difference between reality and fantasy.

But what about his teeth? They had looked so real, like canine teeth on a dog, but thinner. And upon closer inspection, she couldn't reject the fact they had seemed to be growing from his gums.

When she first saw them slide from behind his lips, her first instinct was to run. Yet mixed with her fear was curiosity.

Oh, and by the way, her inner cynic asked. Was that lust I detected mixed in with your fear and curiosity? Because I can't be sure, but I'm pretty confident it was. And if that's the case, I'd say you're more insane than the half-naked man lying in bed pretending to be Dracula.

It had been lust. Even though she thought him a raging lunatic, the possibility he was a vampire heated her blood. Also, the joy that flooded her when he'd said he had been *taken with her* was another indication she was losing it.

Not wanting to analyze her feelings for him further, her mind skipped to the next dilemma.

Demons. Just the thought demons could be real—going around stealing souls to bring back to the devil scared the crap out of her.

As asinine as it seemed, it was easier for her to believe in the existence of vampires. But if she entertained the notion that vampires *might* exist, then wouldn't she also have to entertain the notion that *maybe* demons did as well?

Don't forget it's because of a demon you're in danger, she reminded herself.

Fear spiked in her mind. That woman—demon, did say she was coming after her. If it was true—if she was a demon, who could she call? The police? The cops would think she was nuttier than a fruitcake.

Breeana glanced over her shoulder toward Mel. If those two from last night were demons, then he was her only hope.

She thought back—reliving every detail she could remember from the battle—recalling the words, vampire, slayer, demons. She remembered Mel

being attacked, stabbed, the woman overpowering him, Kal and Soren's refusal to call an ambulance. After she finished pouring over every particular, she was left with only one answer that fit. No matter how strange this situation was, how unbelievable it seemed, he was telling her the truth. Mel was a vampire.

He'd said vampires had been around for thousands of years. Almost as long as humans. Said they had co-existed peacefully.

Whoa. Wait a minute.

She turned and faced him. "You said peacefully, but don't...vampires drink human...blood?"

A faint smile lifted one side of his lips. "Yes, we do— but we only need a small amount. There are no ill effects. And no, we neither turn humans into vampires through our bite, nor do we kill them by draining them dry. Forget everything you've ever heard about us because it's all B.S."

Her heart racing, Breeana looked at him through new eyes, feeling the last thread of doubt disintegrated. For good or ill, she did believe he was a vampire.

"This is insane," she whispered.

Mel shifted his big body under the covers. After arranging himself against the pillows, he said, "I know you must have a million questions, so I was thinking I should give you a quick history lesson on vampires to help you process this all."

She opened her mouth, but all that came out was a strangled squeak.

"Breeana? Are you all right?"

No she wasn't. She tried again to speak with the same result.

Mel cleared his throat. "I know how strange this all must seem to you, but if you give me a chance to explain, then maybe you'll see that it's really not."

With a slight nod of her head, she slumped down in the chair by the door, clutching her hands together so hard the bones of her knuckles looked as if they would rip out of her skin.

"Good. Now granted, I'm going to tell you the abbreviated version of our history, but it will still take some time. Like humans, our history is long and involved. So, before we get started, I was going to call Kal—"

"Is... is Kal and Soren...are they vampires also?"

"Uh, yeah. Yes they are."

"Oh. I see."

“Anyway, I was going to wake-up Kal, ask him to bring us something to eat.”

Something to eat? “Do vamp...do you eat? I mean, does your kind eat food?”

“Yes we do. Actually, I'm starving—for food.” He smiled. “Humans and vampires aren't that different really. Both species basically need the same things to survive.”

“Except humans don't drink blood,” she stated with a weak grin.

“True. Could you please pass me my coat? My cell phone is in one of the pockets.” He pointed to the black leather jacket she was sitting on.

She stood, clasped the heavy leather and brought it over to him, staying as far away from the bed as possible. Even laid up, he exuded raw strength, coiled in his large muscular frame, ready to strike. Heat rushed through her veins—her senses spun out of control.

Mel slowly lifted a muscled arm and curled his long fingers around a dangling sleeve. With the jacket as link between them, his scorching silver gaze captured hers. She saw her pale face reflected in the twin pools of his eyes. It felt as if her world were off kilter.

“I won't bite you, Breeana. I would never hurt you... I promise.”

As she gazed down at him, something deep inside told her he spoke the truth—he wouldn't harm her. Last night he had begged her to run. She could have, but she'd chosen to stay.

Chapter 9

With a finger poised over the buttons of his cell phone, Mel stretched his legs under the comforter. He scratched absently at the bandage covering the wound on his back. The searing pain was gone, leaving just a dull ache. The bandages on his lower back and chest could most likely be removed.

He glanced across the room at Breeana. She paced by the door, chewing a thumbnail. She seemed lost in her thoughts. His eyes tracked her slow movements, the gentle sway of her hips and breasts. Once again, his mind filled with visions of thrusting into her soft, warm body while she freely offered him her throat.

Jesus, he had to stop this. Her life was in danger and all he could think about was sex and tasting her blood.

He peeked at his lap and cursed under his breath. The comforter jutted up like a tent with his erection acting as the pole.

Mel shut his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, but her scent—spring flowers and vanilla—rushed in, adding to his chaotic needs. His fangs pushed through his gums, poking his bottom lip on their way down.

Shit!

This is all I need, he thought as bloodlust and desire flooded him like water. *Yeah, well, get yourself under control.*

He clenched his fists on top of the comforter until his short nails bit into his palms, and then forced his fangs to withdraw. He needed her covered before he lost control.

Clearing his throat to get her attention, he said, “Would you like to freshen up before we get started? The bathroom is right through there.” He pointed to his right, toward a wooden door.

She stopped pacing and sagged onto the chair. She glanced at her hands clutched in her lap. Gasping, she gripped the front of her jacket, trying to force the gapping edges together as she surged to her feet and spun around.

“Why don't you change out of your coat into one of my shirts? There's sweatshirts folded on the shelf inside the closet.” He tried to keep his voice light, neutral, not wanting to add to her embarrassment.

“Umm, yes,” she whispered.

Without looking in his direction, she stormed over to the closet and flicked on the light. She reached in, pulled a red sweatshirt to her chest, then dashed into the bathroom, slamming the door.

Mel's heart withered as he stared at the closed door. Her embarrassment was just another reason to hate himself. He turned his attention to the phone clutched in his fist and peeled open his fingers; he was surprised he hadn't smashed it to pieces.

He dialed Kal's cell.

“What?” Kal's groggy voice filled Mel's ear.

“We need food.”

“Mel?”

“Who do ya think, Dipshit?”

“How's it going?”

Mel heard Kal shifting around in his bed. “How the hell do you think it's going?”

“Did you tell her?”

“Yeah. And as surprising as this may sound, it's not easy trying to convince a human that we exist.”

“Does she believe you?”

Anger almost choked him. The stress and strain from the past few hours had his patience on a very short leash. “I think so.”

“Do you need any help?”

“No. Look, I don't have much time. She's in the bathroom and she'll be out any minute, so could ya move your ass...please?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. What would you like?”

“Whatever,” Mel hissed. “Just hurry up.”

“Okay. Okay. Just keep your bib on.” Kal laughed before he hung up.

Mel closed his phone and set it on the bedside table. Exhaling loudly, his gaze skipped to the bathroom door.

As much as he hated to admit it, he was happy she was here. He knew it was wrong on so many levels, but he couldn't deny the connection they shared. In her presence, he felt alive and his existence had been barren and cold for so long these feelings brought an indescribable joy to his bleak soul.

He vividly remembered the passion that flared between them last night, wondering where it would have gone if they hadn't been interrupted.

As his mind wandered, he fantasized what it would be like to have her in his life, to come home to her every morning, to have her welcome him with a warm embrace and soft caresses. To have someone to love and someone to love him back. A chance at a semi-normal life.

A heavy weight descended upon his heart. He thought of all the reasons why they could never be together. The most obvious being they were two different species, which alone created a whole host of problems. For her safety, and the safety of all vampires, she'd have to leave her career, her friends, and family behind to be with him. And that he would never ask her to do.

Fuck! He was acting like a complete jackass. There was no room in his life for a woman, or love. His world was full of violence and death. And that was not a life he'd want for anyone, especially someone he could love.

As soon as he fixed this mess, she was going back to her world where she belonged.

*

Breeana sagged against the door and closed her eyes.

When she'd realized her breasts were all but uncovered, she'd wanted to curl up and die from embarrassment. Yet deep down, lust rose to the surface. A part of her had been tempted to peel off her jacket to see what he would have done.

With a groan, she glanced down at the red sweatshirt she gripped like a shield, feeling tears of frustration gathering behind her eyelids.

This just proves it. You've always thought so, but this definitely proves you're insane. You should fear for your life, not be fantasizing about doing your kidnapper—no matter how sexy he is. Besides, if he's telling the truth, then he's not even human.

Sighing, she glanced around the small bathroom. Directly in front of her was a small sink with a mirror above. A towel rack hung on the wall beside the sink with two black hand towels draped over it. A toilet and bathtub finished the decor.

Breeana gazed at her reflection. Yikes, she was a mess: hair a tangled rat's nest and her eyeliner had smeared, giving her raccoon eyes. With her fingers, she dried her tears and wiped away the dark smudges before trying to smooth out her hair.

That'll have to do, she thought, frowning at her appearance.

What the hell am I doing? I have more to worry about besides how I look. Like whether or not I'm going to make it out of here alive.

Disgusted with herself, she ripped her jacket off and dragged his shirt over her head. It settled down around her knees. She rolled the sleeves up five times to free her hands.

Her pale reflection stared back with wide eyes and she almost laughed. His shirt made her look like a shapeless sack with a head.

Mel's scent floated around her. She smoothed a hand over the soft fleece in a light caress. The idea it had touched his golden skin mesmerized her. She slowly brought her arm up to her nose and inhaled.

Oh, wow. He smelled delicious. Like spicy cologne and...male.

Her eyes fluttered closed as she dragged the sleeve back and forth under her nose. Her lids lifted and she caught her image in the mirror. Heat filled her face as lust threatened to overtake her.

Muttering a string of curses, Breeana washed her hands and then making a point of avoiding the mirror, she reached for the doorknob. Muffled voices filtered through the thin wood of the door. She leaned an ear against it, making out Kal's deep tone and Mel's grumbled reply.

Just great. Being in a room with one vampire was nerve wracking enough, let alone two. Plus, she was in all likelihood the biggest fool alive for trusting Mel; Kal she didn't. Breeana listened until she heard the outer door open and close, signaling Kal's departure. She waited a few seconds, making sure he was gone before she slowly twisted the knob.

As soon as she stepped through the door, her eyes flicked to Mel and all brain function ceased. His fierce stare captivated her. A jolt similar to an electrical shock, zinged along her nerves. An odd connection flowed between them: a joining of hearts, bodies and souls.

Their gazes remained interlocked for only a few seconds, but in that brief moment, Breeana swore she detected deep loneliness, longing, and sadness hidden in the silver depths. Words, all of a sudden, flooded her brain. *This is the man I've been searching for. The man I knew was out there waiting for me. My soul mate.*

Abruptly, the connection ended, leaving her cold.

Her brows furrowed. Had she imagined the whole thing? She searched for any trace of what had passed between them, but he glanced away.

Panic congested her throat. The truth was so obvious. He'd lied when he said he would never hurt her. Oh, he may not hurt her physically, but he had

the power to destroy her. Cripple her beyond repair.

Fear stabbed her gut—not for her life, but for her heart. She felt like screaming and begging to be let go before she couldn't leave without a part of her dying.

On shaky legs, she walked over to the chair by the door and sat before she fell.

Silence filled the air as Mel filled a plate with bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast from a tray on his nightstand. He set it down and filled another.

Twilight Zone, anyone? Christ, she was in a bizarro world. Or maybe she was really back at home in her bed, dreaming.

“Drag the chair over and come eat,” Mel said with a smile.

Breeana didn't move. His biceps flexed, bulking up with his movements, and the muscles of his chest bunched when he reached for a fork.

Damn him. Human or vampire, he was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen. The sight of his bare smooth skin and hard muscles, coupled with his rugged unshaven face, was too much of a temptation. One she didn't feel she could resist.

Her stomach growled its frustration, reminding her that the last thing she ate was a McDonald's cheeseburger last night. Shaking her head at the ridiculousness of her situation, Breeana dragged the chair closer to the bed and picked up a plate of food.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“Please.”

She accepted the steaming mug from him with hands that shook. Taking a sip, she set it down and turned her attention to the food.

They ate in silence.

After she set her empty plate aside, she peeked over at him. “If vampires have been around for thousands of years, then why are they not mentioned in our history other than in legends?”

Mel set his plate down. “In the beginning, humans and vampires had what you could call an unspoken pact. But after the falling out between them, humans basically wrote vampires out of their history. And what little knowledge that has survived the centuries is mostly bullshit.”

Breeana nodded and picked up her coffee. “Granted, I've never read the whole Bible, but I do know vampires aren't mentioned. So if it's true and vampires are real,” she swallowed. “Then is our whole history a lie? Is the Bible a lie?”

“No. From what I've been taught, humans were created by The Creator, which is who you refer to as God.”

“Who created vampires if it wasn't God?”

“The vampire's version of the Bible says we were created by one of the lesser gods, named Vampier. He wasn't supposed to create children, only The Creator was to have that power.”

“Lesser gods? I've never heard of them. How many gods are there exactly?”

Mel chuckled. “Humans refer to them as angels. And nobody knows how many there are. But the story is the lesser gods created the Earth, following instructions from The Creator. The Earth was to be home for his children.”

Breeana's heart sped up. “You mean...us—humans?”

He crossed his arms behind his head, a bright smile spreading across his face. “That's correct.”

“So you're telling me, the Earth was *made* for *humans*?”

“Yep. The oceans, trees, animals—all the Earth's wonders.”

“Wow.” She shook her head and laughed. “Well, the gods could have left out a few things: disease, floods and earthquakes, just to name a few.”

“It wasn't like that in the beginning. It was supposedly beautiful—a paradise. No disease, no extreme weather, no wars. Enough food for everyone.”

Breeana blinked then frowned. “Like the Garden of Eden?”

“You could say that, though there were more than just two. There were thousands of humans when vampires arrived. And that was after the troubles started.”

“If it was supposedly,” she held up her hands and made air quotations with her fingers, “so perfect, why did the troubles as you call them, start?” Breeana pulled her feet up onto the chair, covering them with his big, red shirt. “And what sort of troubles are we talking about here?”

He sighed, and then brushed his hair off his forehead. “A lesser god named, Lucifer—who you might refer to as the Devil—”

“Are you kidding me? The Devil?” She scrunched up her face. “Why does this suddenly sound like a movie?”

Mel laughed at that. “Lucifer helped create the Earth with all the other gods, and when it was finished, he couldn't bear to part with it. In short, Lucifer wanted it for his own. But it was made for The Creator's children,

not the gods. That pissed Lucifer off so he decided to get rid of humans. I guess he figured if they were gone, the Earth could be his.”

Am I hearing this correct? Is Lucifer real? “Since Lucifer's an angel, or a lesser god, then why didn't he destroy us all at once and be done with it?”

“He couldn't. He had no part in humans’ creation—none of the lesser gods did. So, he tried a different tactic.” His lips quirked. “He used the Earth.”

Breeana reached over and poured herself another coffee. She absently grabbed his mug, filled it and handed it to him.

“Thanks,” he said, accepting the cup. He sipped the black brew while rubbing his injured shoulder, rolling it back and forth.

Breeana's brows pulled together when a small hiss of pain escape his lips. “Are you okay?” She felt terrible that she hadn't asked about his stab wounds.

“Yeah. Why do you ask?”

“Your injuries. You look like you're in pain.”

“No. I'm fine. They're healing up. I'm just a little stiff and sore from lying down so long.”

Healing up? Already? “So the myth is true then? Vampires heal quickly?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“What about the sun? Is that myth also true?”

He picked at a stray thread on the comforter. “Yep. Sun is definitely not our friend.”

“Why? I mean, what happens?” Her eyes took in his tanned face and chest. “You look as if you have a tan. Like you have Melanin in your skin.”

“We do.” He smoothed a hand over his chin. “Have you ever had a sunburn?”

“Of course.”

“How long does it take for a human to burn?”

“In the summer when the UV index is high, about twenty minutes.”

“Well, our skin cells react the same as humans do to UV rays only at an accelerated pace—very accelerated,” he said, laughing. “We start to burn the moment the sun touches us. In two minutes, we're burned beyond recognition until we're a pile of smoldering bones, then dust.”

She couldn't stop the look of disgust she knew was evident on her face. “That sounds... not very pleasant.”

“Ah, no. Not pleasant at all. So anyway, where were we?” Mel flashed her a wicked grin and raised a brow.

His grin turned her mind from the gruesome picture he had painted to a more sensual one. Her heart did a somersault in her chest. Flustered, she licked dry lips and tried to refocus her thoughts back to their conversation. “Ah, I think you were telling me about the troubles Lucifer released on the world.”

“Right. Remember when I said in the beginning there was no extreme weather?”

She nodded.

“Lucifer changed all that.” He set his empty mug on the table. “He created violent wind tunnels, and huge storms from the oceans would collide with the lands—uprooting trees, causing floods, and destroying whole villages and crops. He caused the Earth to shake so violently that lands split apart and mountains erupted with fire. The earthquakes were said to have been so extreme, they changed the shape of all the lands.”

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me, he was responsible for the dividing of the continents? Because if you are, I hate to tell you this, but your history is wildly incorrect.”

“Hey, I'm just telling you what's written in the Vampire Testament, so take it with a grain of salt,” he said.

“Well, I for one don't believe it.”

A cocky grin lifted one side of his lips. “Oh, you don't, huh? You're sitting across from a vampire—one you saved from a *demon* I might add, but you don't believe a *god* could cause the lands to divide?”

He had a point. A few short hours ago, she hadn't known vampires or demons existed, and now... yeah, crap.

“Can I continue?” Mel asked, his lips stretching wider.

She waved her hand for him to proceed and laughed. “Sorry. I'll try to keep my comments to a minimum.”

The look he shot her said he didn't believe she would be able to stay quiet. “Lucifer figured this wasn't working fast enough, so he decided to speed things along. He created gigantic beasts to help with the destruction. His plan was working very well. These creatures destroyed over half of the small population of humans before the gods stepped in.”

“Come on, Mel. Monsters?”

“You don't believe me?” The skin beside his eyes crinkled and dimples appeared in his cheeks as his smile widened. “They're still digging up fossils from these creatures today.”

“That's impossible. If you're referring to dinosaurs, then again, your history is way off. Humans didn't even live when dinosaurs roamed the earth.”

“How do you know?”

“Science,” she stated.

“There's more to this world than what science knows or can explain,” he said with a chuckle. “Again, look at me.”

Breeana laughed, shaking her head. If someone would have told her yesterday, she'd be sitting across from a vampire, discussing history, she'd have reached over and felt their forehead, believing them to be ravaged by fever.

“So anyway. The Creator knew he needed to step in, so he instructed the lesser gods to destroy all the beasts. Faced with The Creator and the lesser god's wrath, Lucifer withdrew back to his realm.” He raised both eyebrows and asked, “Are you with me so far?”

“I think so.”

“This is where vampires enter the story.” Mel cleared his throat and shifted under the covers. “The Creator knew Lucifer's retreat was only temporary, so he allowed Vampier's children—vampires—to share the Earth with his. But there were conditions.”

Anger flashed in his eyes before he hid it. She was tempted to ask him about it, but decided to let it slide. “What sort of conditions?”

“The Creator didn't want Vampier's children to try and usurp his, so he made sure vampires needed humans to survive.”

Understanding hit her. “Is... is that how the drinking of humans' blood came about?”

“Exactly. See, The Creator wanted vampires to depend on humans for their survival. It was brilliant actually. In return, your Creator granted us great strength, awesome healing abilities, and we can live for six hundred years or more.”

“Are you serious?” She shot forward. “Six *hundred* years?” She ran her eyes over his face and hair, trying to gauge how old he was. He looked about thirty-five or thirty-six. “How... how *old* are you?”

Chuckling, he said, “Two hundred and ninety-eight.”

“Holy shit! You're not kidding, are you?”

“Nope.”

She mouthed the word, *wow*.

Mel's eyes narrowed. “But the gifts we received came with a price tag. We were bound to defend and protect you humans with our lives.”

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Chapter 10

Breeana drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. Apprehension crept along her spine. Mel's tone sounded ominous, and anger once again filled his metallic gray eyes.

The majority of their discussion had been light, but something changed. Her instincts warned the conversation was approaching dangerous territory and she wasn't going to like it.

She leaned back in her seat. “So, what do you mean by protecting us. And from what?”

His gaze shifted back to her face. “Lucifer retaliated. His answer to the vampires was demons. Remember when I told you lesser gods couldn't create their own children?” Without waiting for her answer, he continued. “Vampir alone did. Why? Foresight—who the hell knows? Lucifer tried to make his own children—if you could call them that. Their appearance was supposedly so hideous they wouldn't have fooled humans or vampires.”

A small smile flirted with his lips. “In the beginning, fifty different vampire families were sent to Earth. They're the ancestors to all vampires. These fifty families—we call them clans—were scattered amongst the population of humans. When vampires arrived, the remaining humans were scattered, leaderless, and understandably frightened. They gravitated toward vampires. Probably seeking protection. Well, it didn't take long before a bond formed between the two species. Humans willingly allowed vampires to feed from them, and in return, vampires protected them. Together, they prospered.”

“It sounds like they acted as partners,” Breeana whispered.

“Yeah, they did. It was a perfect relationship. Two species working together for the survival of both. Until it fell apart.”

The sadness in his voice tugged at her heart. She felt an overwhelming urge to cry. The idea of humans and vampires co-existing sounded beautiful.

She thought about all the conflicts within her own species. Different races constantly warring with one another. It had been that way from the

beginning. Seemed hard to imagine humans being tolerant toward a different species. Especially since humans' mentality had always been destroy what they didn't understand.

“What happened?”

His voice was solemn. “As the years went by, the bond between both species strengthened. Lucifer knew he had to put an end to it. Together, humans and vampires could defy him.

“My belief is Lucifer hates vampires even more than he hates humans. First, because we stand in the way of his main goal: the complete destruction of humans and ultimately, the Earth. And second, because we shouldn't have been created. We weren't part of the plan. The Creator was the only God with the power to create, though somehow Vampier did. And instead of destroying us and punishing Vampier, The Creator allowed us to live. Live and share the earth with humans. Protecting you.”

He stroked his chin and cleared his throat. “Lucifer knew the other gods were watching his every move. So he didn't dare show his face.”

Caught up in the tale, Breeana sat on the edge of her seat. “Is this where the demons come into the picture?”

“Yeah, it is. Lucifer sent his servants to do his dirty work.”

“But I thought you said they were hideous monsters? Because I've got to tell you, that woman last night was *beautiful*.”

“That's because her body is, or was, human. Like I said earlier, Lucifer couldn't create bodies that would fool humans or vampires, so he used humans' bodies.”

Anxiety sizzled up her spine and she gripped the arm rests of her chair. “Do you mean...used, as in possession?”

“Not like you think.” He chuckled. “It's not like *The Exorcist*. Demons exploit any weakness humans show, and they tempt them to turn away from their God. Once they do, their souls are free for the taking. After Lucifer steals the souls, he gives the empty bodies to his servants.”

“Oh...my God.” She stood up and paced near the end of the bed. Her head throbbed as she struggled to process all this new and strange information. After a lengthy silence, she glanced at him. “Was it the demons that destroyed the relationship between humans and vampires?”

He nodded before he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “The demons started whispering in humans' ears, planting seeds of doubt. They were sly, only visiting during the day, while vampires slept. They told

humans vampires were going to destroy them so they could take the Earth for their own. At first, not all humans listened to the whisperings, but as the rumors grew, more and more turned from vampires, denying them blood.”

Anger and disappointment gave her voice a sharp edge. “Why would they listen to demons?”

“Their bodies were human, so they appeared as human.”

“That's still no excuse.” She sat back down in the chair.

Mel smiled at her and crossed his arms behind his head. “I agree.”

Frowning, she asked, “If humans wouldn't allow vampires to feed from them anymore, then how did they survive?”

“They started sneaking into humans' houses at night while they slept. They were reduced to stealing blood like thieves. Over time, vampires learned how to... *hypnotize* humans, for lack of a better word. And they also learned how to erase short term memory.”

Breeana thought back to when she first woke up. She couldn't for the life of her remember how she had gotten here. “Did you use this little *trick* on me last night?”

His gaze shifted to the bathroom door. “Yeah. Sorry about that, but it was for your own safety and ours. Besides, I didn't have enough energy last night to field any questions you would've had.”

She folded her hands in her lap. “I'll let it go this time. Just don't do it again.”

He laid a hand over his heart and smiled. “I won't. Scout's honor.”

The sincerity in his voice made her smile. “Shouldn't you say, vampire's honor?”

He laughed—a deep, rich sound—then glanced away. It almost seemed to her that his laughter took him by surprise.

“So anyhow,” he continued. “Once humans figured out vampires were stealing their blood, they decided to ban them from their villages and towns. Vampires were forced to set up their own settlements, which was difficult since they relied on humans not only for blood, but also food. There were a few humans who were still faithful and stayed in contact with vampires. These *faithful* as we called them, still allowed vampires to feed, and taught them how to farm—to become self-sufficient.”

“So, not all humans listened to the demons?”

“Not at first.” Mel breathed a sigh. “Not liking this, Lucifer stepped it up a notch. Around this time, humans began to fall ill and die. The demons

lied, telling humans vampires were poisoning them—injecting it into them when they fed—and humans, never experiencing this before, believed this lie. Also, vampires weren't falling ill themselves.”

“Were there no diseases before this?”

“No. Lucifer couldn't have timed the introduction of disease any better. It sealed the fate of vampires like nothing else could. After that, the separation of the species was almost complete. Humans began raiding vampire villages, dragging them out into the sun; watching them burn. They hunted us endlessly for centuries.”

Breeana cleared her throat as tears spilled over her lashes. All the misunderstandings, all the pain—the betrayal. It was beyond a doubt the most tragic, most heart-wrenching thing she'd ever heard. “That's so sad. My heart aches for the injustice to both our kind.”

“Yeah, it's sad all right.” He stared across the room. “I often wonder what life would be like today had things been different.”

Brushing her tears away with her fingers, she asked, “How did vampires learn about the demons? Or did they just know?”

“Vampires had no idea at first why humans were turning from them—accusing them of things they were innocent of.”

Mel leaned forward and reached behind him, straightening the pillows. “The story of how we found out is rather long and mixed up with quite a few legends. So I'll give you the abbreviated version.” He rubbed his forehead with a thumb and forefinger. “The first king of the first vampire clan went missing for seven days. Most presumed him dead. But on the night of the seventh day, he returned to his village. He didn't say where he'd been or what happened to him, only demanded the kings from the other clans scattered around, to come as quickly as they could. Once the kings were gathered, he filled them in on what happened while he was missing.

“He told them he had been visited by Vampier who warned him about the demons. Informing him they were sent not only to corrupt humans, but also to destroy all vampires. Vampier instructed the king to create an army of warriors. The strongest males from all fifty families and their side families were trained in warfare.”

Mel stopped talking and glanced at his tattoo. He traced the patterns with his forefinger.

Breeana nodded in the direction of his arm. “That's beautiful by the way. Where did you get it done?”

“Oddly enough, this,” he raised his arm, giving her a better look at the dark swirls and patterns permanently etched into his skin, “ties in with what we're talking about.”

“Oh.”

“When we come of age, we receive this.” He leaned forward, showing her the tattoo that wrapped around his upper arm.

She ran her hand over his bicep in a whisper soft caress. “What does it say?”

“A lot of poetic bullshit. But in short, it displays our vow to serve and protect, and the family we hail from.”

With her hand still caressing his arm, only a couple of inches separated their faces. Their gazes met. “You're a descendant from one of the fifty first families?”

Mel's eyes locked with hers as he covered her hand with his, rubbing his thumb in a gentle circular motion over her knuckles. His gaze dropped to her lips, and he swallowed hard. “Yeah. I'm a direct descendant from the twenty-sixth family.”

Shock waves from the touch of his hand tingled up Breeana's arm and collected around her heart. Warmth spread through her. They were so close, she saw the darker gray flecks mixed in with the light silver of his irises and the shadows his long black lashes cast on his cheeks.

Two inches separated them. All she had to do was lean in and their lips would touch.

Seconds ticked by. Finally, he cleared his throat and looked away. He let go of her hand, then raked his fingers roughly through his hair.

Breeana sighed and leaned back in the chair. She curled her feet up under her as disappointment and guilt washed through her. Guilt, because she wanted him and she knew she shouldn't. Sex would just make a crazy situation even crazier.

A couple of deep breaths later, she felt she had herself back together. Heat flushed her face as she flashed him a nervous smile. “So, you can trace your ancestry back to the beginning?”

“Yeah.”

Awkwardness filled the room like thick smoke. She wanted to get back to the easy camaraderie they had shared earlier.

“Tell me if I have this correct,” she said. “Vampires have been fighting demons to keep humans safe for centuries?”

“Pretty much.”

“Are there lots of you guys?”

“Not enough. There's squads all over the world, on the outskirts of most cities and towns, but yeah, shit, it's still not enough.” Mel shifted onto his side. “Listen, Breeana. I want to talk about the reason you're here, okay?”

“All right.”

“Unfortunately, I've put you in harm's way. Last night, when we were...interrupted...” His eyes shifted down then back to her face. “From what I understand, that she-demon is after me and not just because I'm a slayer. She wants revenge against me because I killed her demon lover. When she saw us together...she thinks we're lovers. So she's after you too.”

“But we're not lovers.”

“I know. But she *believes* we are, so she's going to come after you as part of her revenge against me.”

Raw terror seized her as the meaning of his words sunk in. “What's going to happen to me?” She shot forward in the chair, her voice becoming louder. “It's not like I can call the police for protection. They'll think I'm nuts.”

“Nothing's going to happen to you. And no you can't phone the cops. I'll protect you. You'll stay here until I can fix this. And I will protect you. I promise you that.”

“But I...I can't. I have a life, a job and—”

Mel's gray eyes glittered as he froze her in place with his glare. And with amazing speed, he grabbed her hand. “Understand, there's no one who can protect you out there! Humans can't kill demons. They're too strong.”

They stared, linked by their hands. The sound of her ragged breathing and pounding heart filled the silence.

With a heavy sigh, his eyes and voice softened as he reached out and gently trailed a finger down her cheek. “I know you must despise me, but unfortunately, I'm your only hope.”

Breeana tugged her hand free and stood. She moved toward the door; fear stabbed through her gut like a red-hot poker. If only she did despise him, but hatred was the least of what she felt for him.

What was she going to do? She couldn't go home. But she couldn't stay here.

She crossed her arms over her chest in a protective gesture. Her mind reeled as she tried to figure out what was her best option. Leave and lose her life, or stay and lose her heart?

The latter caused the organ in question to speed up. And like a punch to the stomach, she realized last night she'd been so caught up in her passion that had they not been interrupted, as he so delicately put it, she most likely would've enjoyed her first *quickie* in a parking-lot.

Oh yeah, a lot of self-control there.

Red-faced over that little tidbit, she picked up the spilled contents from her purse, hating herself for her weakness. She shoved her keys and wallet back inside, and as she reached for her phone, the sound of the *Chipmunks* singing *Ol' Mac Donald had a farm*, filled the silence.

Her gaze shot to Mel's face as her phone continued ringing.

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Chapter 11

Mel released his pent-up breath when Breeana's cell-phone stopped ringing. He didn't say a word as she picked it up and rose to her feet.

She flipped her phone open. "I'm going to check who that was—if they left a message." She punched in a series of numbers, and then raised the phone to her ear. After a brief moment her face paled and her eyes lifted to his. The phone slid from her hand. She stumbled forward and grabbed for the edge of the bed.

Her eyes rolled upwards as her body crumpled like a house of cards. Mel whipped the covers off and caught her just before she hit the floor. He scooped her up and cradled her body before placing her back on the bed.

Her eyelids fluttered open. The moment her gaze settled on him, she screamed. With amazing speed, she launched off the bed, straight into his arms. Surprised, he wrapped his arms around her. She buried her face against his chest, weeping uncontrollably.

Fear took root, turning his blood to ice. "Breeana? What happened?" He sat on the edge of the bed, clutching her tight.

She gripped his shoulders until her nails dug into his skin. "That was my friend, Carol." Her voice was so soft he could hardly hear. "She left me a message saying two people, a man and tall women, were looking for me. Oh God, Mel. What am I going to do? The demon is going to kill me."

How the fuck did they find her so fast? Thank God she came with me last night or she'd be dead.

Her slight body trembled against his chest, hot tears dampened his skin. He clasped her arms and moved her back so she could see his eyes. "Nothing, and I mean nothing, will harm you. I promise. I'll keep you safe. You have to trust me." When she didn't answer, he lifted her chin. "Do you trust me?"

"Ye...yes," she stammered.

He snuggled her against his chest. "No demon is going to lay one filthy finger on you. I'll make damn sure of that."

At a complete loss, Mel rubbed her back in what he hoped was a soothing rhythm. He turned his face and buried his nose in her hair—loving the feel of her in his arms.

He rocked her until her sobs turned to hiccups. And he kept her in his embrace long after she fell silent.

“I'm so scared, Mel.”

He whispered into the softness of her hair. “Please believe me when I say you have nothing to fear. I'll hunt those two bastards down myself. And once they're dead, you can go back to your life.”

She let out a shuddering sigh.

Mel positioned her more comfortably in his lap. “I'm so sorry for all this shit. I honestly didn't mean for you to get in the middle. I didn't even want you to know what I am.”

“I know.”

A long silence followed as they clung to each other.

He continued stroking her back in slow circles, never wanting the moment to end. The feel of her in his arms was absolute heaven. Her warmth, her scent, her breath brushing his skin was pure pleasure. Though a pleasure he knew was wrong. To feel such comfort while she was terrified was despicable, but the bastard in him was going to suck it all in. Committing to memory the feel of her hair tickling his chin and her hands gripping him as if she never wanted to let him go. Maybe if he tried hard enough, he could almost believe the latter was true.

Ah, hell, he should let go of her. Stand up! Something, anything. Yet instead of listening to his mind, his arms tightened.

Who the hell was he trying to fool? It would be easier to stop his heart from beating than release her.

He closed his eyes and a strange peace settled over his heart. This closeness, this connection with another, was what had been missing from his life.

Even as a small child, he hadn't known the gentle touch of loving hands. After his birth, he'd been taken from his mother by his father, and all his old man showed him was pain, hatred, and servitude. The only touch he'd remembered was the bruising blows from his father's large fists and the rib cracking kicks from his father's soldiers.

Breeana shifted in his arms and sat forward in his lap.

Mel loosened his grip and she stood. The instant she slid off his lap, he had the crazy urge to snatch her back.

She moved about the room, then stopped in front of his dresser. She braced her hands on the top and hung her head. “Where can I go?” She glanced at him. “I have no family. My parents died five years ago. I don't have anywhere to hide.”

“You'll stay with me.”

A scowl crossed her face.

Inside he winced at her reaction. “Only as long as it takes for me to make it safe for you. Once the she-demon is dead, you can go back to your life.”

Fresh tears glistened in her eyes. “What about Carol and Dave? I live in a cottage on their property. What if they... kill her or her husband?” She covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, God. She's my best friend.”

Mel walked over to his closet. Flicking on the light, he grabbed a pair of jeans and tugged them on over his boxers. He stood in front of her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Listen, the demons won't harm her unless they sense she's lying. Since you can't tell her where you are, you have to tell her something she'll at least believe.”

She stared at his chest before raising her eyes to his. “I don't know. I'm on holidays right now, but...” Frowning, she rubbed her forehead. “I can't think of anything. Carol knows me too well. She knows all my habits.”

Breeana moved to the bed. She straightened the comforter and sat on the edge. “Can you promise me—honestly—Carol and her husband will be all right?”

“I give you my solemn vow. The demons won't hurt them if they tell the truth—or what they believe to be the truth.” Anxiety raced up his spine, kicking his heart into overdrive. Christ, he hoped he hadn't spoken too soon.

She nodded. “I guess I'll have to take your word for it. How long do you think I'll be here?”

“I don't know.”

Exhaling sharply, she stood and picked her phone up off the floor. “I better call Carol. She sounded worried. I was supposed to call her this morning and let her know what time I'm coming...” She glanced up at him and whispered, “home.” She dropped her eyes back to her phone. “Now I don't know what to tell her.”

“Look, take some time to figure out what you're going to say. The demons will know if Carol is lying.” He hoped his assumption about

demons was right. There was no guarantee they wouldn't kill them both just for sport.

"She's worried sick about me because I haven't called. The longer I wait the more suspicious she'll be. Trust me on this."

He gently gripped her arm, stopping her from dialing. "Breeana, please. Think this through. This is serious. She can't have any doubt in her voice."

She jerked away from his hold and glared at him. "You don't think I know this is serious? She's my best friend for shit sakes. Carol knows me better than I know myself. So yes, I know I have to lie to her and that's something I don't like doing."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you're not taking this seriously. And of course you don't want to lie to her. Again, I apologize." He sat down on the bed.

"I'm sorry I snapped," she said. "Do you think they will even bother going back?"

"Yeah, I do."

Breeana dialed. "I'm just going to wing the conversation and hope like hell Carol doesn't ask too many questions."

She turned her back to him and walked toward the door. "Hey, Carol. How's things? I was in the shower...It went really well...Yeah, I did... They're just trying to sell me insurance...No, don't worry about it...If they come back, just tell them you don't know when I'll be back...Actually, I'm not... Umm, I'm going to hang around here for a few days and do some shopping...I just want to take some time and relax, and you know if I'm at home I won't...Look, Carol, you know I've been busy at work and...I know and I appreciate it, but..." She lowered her head. "I met someone."

Mel's head jerked up. He dismissed all pretense of trying not to listen to her conversation and eyed her warily.

"No, he's not...I don't know. I just met him— Oh, for crying out loud, yes he does." Her voice dropped low and her eyes flicked over to him. She blushed and quickly looked away. "A ten."

A smile tugged his lips, catching the gist of the conversation.

Breeana stuck her middle finger up at him. "I'll phone you later and let you know...Of course I'll be careful...Yes, I like him...We'll see...I love you too...bye."

She snapped her phone closed and glanced over her shoulder. "I'm glad that's over with. Carol took it well." She walked over to the chair and sat

down. “I told her the demons were insurance agents. I think she believed me.”

He leaned back on the bed, resting on his elbows, smiling up at her. His chest swelled with the knowledge she found him good-looking.

“What?” Breeana asked, red-faced. “Do you mind telling me what you find so amusing?”

“Do you really think I'm a ten?” he asked, laughing.

Her face grew redder by the second. “I wasn't talking about you.” She glanced at her hands and pushed at the skin around her cuticles. “I had to tell her I met someone because she wanted to come and meet me. To keep me company.”

“I see.”

Still blushing, she crossed her legs and leaned back in the chair. “What's going to happen now? How are we going to fix this mess?”

“Well, we aren't going to do anything. *I* will visit your house tonight and wait for the demons to show up.”

“Hey. This is my life we're talking about, so don't think I'm not going to be involved.”

Mel rose to his feet and playfully touched her nose. “Exactly. Your *life* is involved so I don't want you involved in this anymore than you already are.” He moved toward the door and stopped. Her frown deepened and she opened her mouth to speak, but he held up a hand. “Don't bother arguing, Breeana. I'm not going to change my mind. I got you into this, I'll get you out.”

“But I—”

“Forget it. It's not up for discussion. Now, for the sleeping arrangements. How about you take my bed and I'll take the couch in the other room.”

She nodded and cleared her throat. “What I'm more concerned about is a change of clothes. And if I'm going to be here for a few days, I will need some things from my house.” She looked down at his red sweat-shirt. “Your clothes don't seem to fit me.”

His gaze traveled over her feminine frame hidden under his shirt. She looked adorable. “What's wrong with my shirt? It fits you great.”

She reached forward, pulled off one of her black boots, and massaged her foot. “As comfortable as your shirt is, I would still like something of my own to wear.”

Mel stared enchanted as she pulled off her other boot, dropping it on the floor beside its mate. She groaned and closed her eyes while her fingers pressed into the arch of her foot.

Shit, he wanted to replace her hands with his. Wanted to knead her cramped muscles and not just the ones in her feet. He imagined laying her on the bed, stripping her down, and giving her an all-over body rub. And when she was limp and relaxed, he would then give her a different kind of massage; the kind that would leave her limp and sated.

Mel pictured her, naked, spread before him like a delicious feast. His hands slowly traveled up her calves, over her thighs until they met at the soft, moist skin of her sex. Parting her folds, he got down on his knees and spread her legs. The sight of her wet—ready for him, stole his breath. Unable to resist, he replaced his finger with his tongue.

“Mel?”

The sound of her voice dragged him out of his titillating thoughts. He shook his head. “Uh, sorry. What were you saying?”

She shot him a strange look. “I asked if it would be all right if I took a bath. I feel like I'm covered in twenty pounds of dirt and grime.”

He couldn't speak; his tongue was glued to the roof of his dry mouth.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

Mel tore his gaze from her face and turned to the door. “Yeah. I'm fine. And go ahead. There's soap and shampoo underneath the sink, and toothpaste and a new toothbrush behind the mirror. Help yourself.”

“Are you sure you're okay? You kind of weirded out on me for a second.”

Oh, he was weirded out all right. He was on the verge of losing control and flinging her on the bed. Jesus, he really needed to put some space between them—like separate rooms. Hell, who was he kidding? Opposite sides of the planet wouldn't be enough space.

He gripped the doorknob, tight. “I'll give you some privacy. I'll be right in the next room. Holler if you need anything.” Without waiting for her reply, he yanked the door open and took off down the hall.

Chapter 12

Breeana stepped out of Mel's bathtub and wrapped a towel around her body. The warm water had soothed her stiff muscles and ragged nerves. She was surprisingly relaxed, which considering her current situation, seemed strange. With all that had occurred these past few hours, she should be terrified, curled up in a corner, babbling incoherently. Yet she wasn't. Mel made her feel safe, protected.

She pulled the towel from her head and tried to smooth out her wet hair. While she tugged at the tangled strands, her thoughts shifted to Carol.

I hope Mel's right and the demons don't go after Carol or Dave.

Again, her trust in Mel took the edge off her worries. Maybe it was unbelievably naive to have such faith, but she did.

A grimace crossed her face as she ran her tongue over her teeth. In desperate need of a toothbrush, she reached for the mirror. Steam clouded the surface, distorting her image. Without thinking, she wrote the word 'vampire' across the top. Under that she wrote, 'Mel,' and then, 'sexy'. She stared at the words.

What would it feel like if he bit my neck? If he drank my blood? His hands on me? Making love to me?

Underneath the word, 'sexy', she wrote, 'hot,' 'sweaty,' 'animal,' 'sex.' With a curse and an angry swipe of her hand, she erased it all.

Get your mind out of the gutter. You need to focus here. He's heartache wrapped up in a gorgeous package.

Breeana pulled open the mirror, grabbed a blue toothbrush, still in its plastic packaging, a tube of toothpaste, and started to shut the mirrored door. Pulling it back open, she glanced at the contents. Pain killers, aftershave, razors, and a first aid kit sat on the shelves.

It all seemed so normal. Just what she'd expect to find in any guy's—human guy's—medicine cabinet.

She closed the mirror and brushed her teeth. After rinsing, she dropped the towel and dragged Mel's shirt over her head. She sat down on the toilet and picked up her jeans. The knees and thighs were stiff with his blood.

Deciding against putting them back on, she pulled on her white socks and peeked out the door.

A quick glance revealed Mel's absence. She jogged over to his dresser and pulled her hair brush from her purse. She tugged it through the damp strands, slicking them back. Finished, she glanced around the room.

Now what? She paced, chewing her already short nails as the past few hours replayed in her mind.

Damn it, I need a distraction or my brain's going to explode.

Each second that ticked by became torture. It felt as if a flock of butterflies were holding Olympic games in the pit of her stomach.

She walked back to the bed, sat down, then stood. She stacked the dirty plates on the tray, and carried the works over to the dresser. As she set it down, she spied his TV remote.

Nothing like television to get my mind off my troubles. She chuckled. *Yeah, troubles. Nothing like having everything you believed to be reality, shattered in a few short hours.*

She clicked on the tube. The familiar monotone sound of a news announcer filled the room, calming her somewhat. She glanced at her wristwatch. The noon news hour. After a few moments of listening, she surfed through the channels.

Figures. Nothing on.

Ten minutes dragged by, feeling more like ten years, before she heard Mel's voice outside the door. Her heart jumped and her nerves sizzled.

He knocked once and then walked in, drying his hair with a towel. He shut the door and glanced in her direction. When his eyes met hers, he stopped, and a purely masculine smile stretched across his clean-shaven face.

Breeana's heart slammed and her breath stuck in her throat.

Oh God, he's too hot for words. His jeans hung low on his hips and a black T-shirt stretched tightly across his broad chest, emphasizing his large shoulders. His long black hair was tangled from the vigorous rubbing. The muscles in his arms flexed and relaxed as he continued drying his hair. The urge to plaster herself against him like a second skin was overpowering.

This guy belongs behind bars. He could steal a woman's self-control from her with one hand tied behind his back.

Lust flooded her body. She wasn't sure if she'd be able to keep her hands off him.

Her gaze followed him as he tossed the towel on the chair and disappeared into the bathroom. A brief moment later he returned. He glanced at the T.V. “Anything good on?”

It took her a second to process the question. She tossed him the remote. “Not really. Unless there's something you like.”

He walked over to the entertainment unit and bent down. “We could watch a movie. Come have a look. Maybe you can find something you like.” He peered over his shoulder and grinned. “Just so you know, I don't have any *chick-flicks*.”

I definitely see something I like. Something I want desperately, but can't have. Go figure.

Breeana slipped off the bed and padded over to him. She crouched and tried to concentrate on the shelf of movies and not the man—vampire—smelling like heaven beside her. Skimming over the titles, she stopped when she spotted the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. She pulled out the *Fellowship of the Ring* and stood.

“Good choice. Are you a fellow *Rings* fan?” he asked.

“I love ‘em. I read the books back in college and have been a huge fan ever since. I've seen the movies so many times I can recite the words.”

He glanced up at her with a humorous glint in his eyes. “I don't recall there being any vampires mentioned in the books.”

Breeana laughed, remembering when she told him about reading vampire romance novels. Heat diffused her face and she playfully punched him in the shoulder. “Smart-ass.”

He rubbed his shoulder as he sprawled on the carpet. “Hey, careful. You're tougher than you look.”

She reached down and offered him her hand.

Mel curled his fingers around her hand, dwarfing it. Tingles from his touch raced up her arm.

“So,” he said. “Have we decided on this one?”

“Sure.” She handed him the DVD and sat down on the edge of the bed.

As he set up the movie, he asked, “Are you hungry? I'm not sure what we all have in the kitchen, but I'm sure we could find something.”

Not really all that hungry, she was about to say no, but decided against it. She would need something to occupy her hands. “How about popcorn?”

“It's worth a look.” He walked over to the door and turned his head, raising a dark brow. “Well?”

“Well what?”

A smile stretched his lips. “Aren't you going to help? I'm not going to wait on you hand and foot while you're here.”

Breeana laughed, shaking her head. “Hey, I'm on holidays, buddy.” She hopped off the bed and walked over to the door.

He held it open for her. “After you.”

She poked his ribs and stepped under his arm.

Thirty minutes later, they made themselves comfortable on his bed, propped up by pillows with a bowl of popcorn between.

Halfway through the movie, Breeana fought to keep her eyes open; excitement from the day and previous evening took their toll. She was losing the fight to stay awake. Drifting, she faintly heard *Frodo* yell *Gandalf*, and vibrations from the deep base of the movie rumbled the bed. She detected the mattress dip as Mel shifted beside her. Still floating on the brink of sleep, she felt his lips brush hers. Faster than a hummingbird's wings could flap, she slammed back into her body.

Breeana's eyes fluttered open and she stared up at his face, only inches from hers. Leaning over her, supported by one elbow, his hot, feral gaze took her breath away. She was afraid to move in case she startled him, but she wasn't sure if this was a dream. Needing to know, she reached up and traced his lips with a forefinger.

If this is a dream, please don't wake up!

His lips not only looked amazing, they felt amazing. Soft, yet firm. His tongue teased her finger then drew it into his warm, wet mouth.

She moaned at the silken sensation of his tongue swirling around and around before he lightly sucked.

He released her finger and slowly leaned in until his lips brushed hers in a feather-light caress. The moment they touched, she felt something in him snap.

Please be his self-control.

His big body trembled beside her, but his mouth was hot, demanding. With a low growl, he deepened the kiss. He braced his upper body over her with his powerful arms. She gripped his biceps and pulled herself up against the solid warmth of his chest.

His tongue slipped past her teeth, found hers, stroked and flicked, then retreated. She tasted the tang of salt from the popcorn and the clean mint of toothpaste. His lips left hers to trail kisses over her jaw.

Breeana wound her arms around his neck. Her fingers tangled in his damp hair. She buried her face against his throat and inhaled his clean, spicy scent. His essence.

Her conscience whispered a warning for her to stop. Sex would make an already complicated situation much more complicated. Sex would open her heart more to him. But as his tongue stroked over her lips, penetrating her mouth, her warnings evaporated.

With a heavy sigh, her mind muttered, *complicated it is then.*

He dragged his mouth from hers and stared down, his eyes black with desire. With both hands planted on either side of her head, he balled the comforter in his fists. He breathed hard, dragging air into his lungs with deep, ragged gulps. “Are you sure, Breeana? If you want me to stop, it better be now because if I go any further, I won't be able to. I want you so damn much it's killing me.”

She didn't answer. Couldn't. The sight of him above her stole her breath and willpower.

He groaned. “Breeana, make up your mind, while I still have a thread of self-control.”

Staring up at his handsome face as he panted above her, she didn't want him to stop. His fangs slid out from behind his lips and her desire soared to incredible heights. Senses spinning, she was mindless, overwhelmed by the most fierce arousal she'd ever felt.

There was no going back; she needed him as much as she needed air.

She stroked his cheek and whispered, “Don't stop, Mel. Please...I need you.” She arched her body off the bed, stopping when she hit the solid wall of his chest.

His gaze dropped to her throat and his fangs lengthened further. He groaned, closing his eyes briefly. “Jesus, Breeana. Are you sure?”

“Yes...Mel, please...I want you.” She cupped his cheeks and pulled his face close to hers. Her tongue flicked out and traced his lips. “I've wanted this since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

He moaned. With a rough possessive kiss, he branded her, claimed her.

Mel trailed hot kisses across her cheek and jaw, then sucked her earlobe between his lips. His breath pushed hot into her ear before he continued kissing his way down her neck. His fangs grazed over her jugular.

The feel of his sharp canines triggered another wave of intense pleasure. Erotic visions of him sucking at her throat ripped through her mind in a

flash. She wanted him to bite her. The thought flooded her sex with moisture.

She burned for him. Passion seared her with white-hot heat, sapping her will. She was lost to him. With a growl of her own, she pulled his lips to hers and rubbed her breasts against his chest, urging him on.

He pulled back. "I...need you." He claimed her lips with a raw, dominant edge. His hands smoothed down her sides, stopping at the bottom of her sweatshirt. With a quick tug, he pulled it up and over her head.

Cool air brushed her naked skin, but his savage gaze warmed her like a heated caress. She arched her back, inviting him to take one of her nipples into his mouth.

"You're so beautiful. I want to take this slow, savor you, but..." He closed his eyes and when he opened them, the wildness she saw sent a trickle of fear up her spine. "I want you so much, I don't think I can wait."

He captured a nipple, drawing it into his mouth. His tongue swirled around the tight peak before flicking back and forth.

Waves of ecstasy traveled from her breast to her sex. The sight of his dark head against her pale flesh inflamed her. He released her nipple and blew on the swollen tip. She sucked in a breath, and bowed off the bed.

"You like that?" he asked, voice gruff with desire. She moaned her reply. He chuckled before turning his attention to her other nipple.

Breeana gripped his sinewy shoulders. Her nails raked his skin as she tried to anchor herself. His mouth on her breasts drove her wild, and when his fangs nipped her there, the pleasure made her almost black out.

"Mel...please...I need you to..." She writhed on the bed.

He kissed each tight bud, then kissed and licked his way to her navel.

"What do you need, sweetheart?" His breath brushed against her stomach. "Tell me what you want me to do." He shifted lower until he lay between her thighs. With a fierce growl, he pushed her legs further apart and swore when he looked at her most private place. "You're perfect. So beautiful." He leaned forward and stroked his tongue up her center.

She jumped at the light touch and then grabbed a fist full of his hair. "Mel, I want you inside me."

He rubbed her throbbing, wet flesh with a finger in a gentle rhythm. "Not yet, sweetheart. Not yet. I need to taste you. I want to feel you come against my mouth. I want to hear you scream with ecstasy."

Replacing his finger with his tongue, he circled her sensitive flesh. He slipped two fingers inside, moving in and out of her body with the same slow steady rhythm as his magical tongue.

Breeana looked down her body. His broad shoulders were bunched between her spread thighs. The sight and feel of him there was too much. With burning intensity, her orgasm barreled down on her. As the tremors started, her head kicked back against the pillows. Her body curved upward as she shattered.

“Oh God, Mel. Yes.” Her body continued convulsing as wave after wave of ecstasy tore through her. When she finally floated back down, she couldn't move. Her limbs were heavy and weak, as if fashioned from wax.

He rubbed his face against her core one last time, then kissed the inside of her thighs before rising to his feet. He grabbed her ankles and dragged her to the edge of the bed. He smiled wickedly as he made short work of his clothes. His huge shaft sprang between them, arrogant and demanding. He spread her thighs and stepped between them.

He was magnificent. Hard sculpted muscles covered by smooth skin. He was truly beautiful.

Her gaze moved down his body, over the ridges on his abdomen. When he grasped his swollen erection, her womb compressed. He stroked himself and desire once again bloomed within her.

“Mel...I want to feel you inside.”

“You will, sweetheart. Nothing can stop me. I need to be inside you so much it hurts.” He pushed her legs toward her chest and slowly entered her, inch by satiny inch.

There were no words to express the glorious feeling of his shaft filling her. The delicious friction created a wicked burn.

Once fully sheathed, they both cried out.

Breeana's inner muscles clenched around his hardness.

He gritted his teeth while he held himself still. Great tremors wracked his body. “I don't want to hurt you...I'm trying to stay in control.”

Breeana didn't want controlled. She wanted him wild, like herself.

His frantic black eyes regarded her with the intensity of an animal. His fangs were fully extended. They reached past his bottom lip. She shot him a seductive smile and started to move against him.

He hissed and bared his fangs. “Oh, fuck. You feel...” He pumped into her, picking up the pace. In and out in a fast frenzied rhythm.

“So...damn...good!”

The friction increased, and her passion soared.

Sweat dripped down his face. His hips rocked with wild, pounding thrusts. She knew he was lost in the moment—the passion. Instinctively, she tilted her head back, exposing her neck.

That was all the invitation he needed.

With a roar that could rival a lion, he planted his large fists on either side of her head. And as quick and precise as a cobra, he sank his fangs deep.

She jerked as his teeth broke her skin, but the pain quickly faded. Her pleasure intensified. He sucked her neck with the same grinding rhythm as his hips, bringing her body to heights she didn't know were possible. Another orgasm pulsed through her. Vision blurring, she screamed with ecstasy.

When she floated down from heaven, she felt his tongue glide over the bite. She glimpsed his face before his head tilted back. His eyes squeezed shut, veins popping out along his neck, muscles in his shoulders rippled, and his lips peeled back from his teeth. He shouted her name as his release gripped him. His erection jerked deep inside, filling her with hot liquid with each spasm.

He collapsed on top of her in a sweaty heap, his face shoved in the crook of her neck. He sucked in ragged, gasps of air, and his heart thundered against hers. He shifted, and then wrapped his arms around her.

Breeana draped her arms over his broad back. She kissed his shoulder, tasting salt from his sweat, and closed her eyes.

A few moments later Mel stirred. He lifted his upper body and rested on his elbows. “Are you okay?”

Breeana sighed. “I'm better than okay.” She smiled up at him. “That was...beyond incredible.”

A satisfied grin broke out across his face. He leaned down and touched his lips against hers. “You're right. That was incredible. You were incredible.” He kissed his way down her neck until he came to his bite mark.

“Mmmm, that feels good,” she whispered, closing her eyes again. They flew open when he grew hard within her.

He slowly, gently, started to thrust. “I want you again, Breeana. I don't think I'll ever get enough of you.”

Desire once more rose to the surface. Without speaking, she pulled his lips down to hers.

Breeana awoke to Mel's large, warm body spooned against her back with an arm wrapped around her waist.

He was an unbelievable lover, seeming to derive great pleasure from giving her pleasure. And he'd been insatiable; making love to her four times before they both fell into a sleep of complete exhaustion.

She pushed her hair away her face and stretched her legs. God, she was stiff. She had aches in parts of her she'd forgotten she'd had.

Well, no wonder after that marathon of lovemaking. Sex with Mel was more of a workout than a day at the gym.

She smiled. Five orgasms within a matter of hours. Unbelievable, considering she could count how many orgasms she'd had in the past on one hand.

Breeana lifted her head and glanced over Mel's bare shoulder at the clock radio. Six-fifteen. They'd been sleeping for three hours. With a sigh, she snuggled back and looked at his hand, curled in a loose fist beside her stomach. Gently spreading his fingers, she splayed them out on the tan sheet, laying hers over his. His hands were huge with long fingers and blunt nails. She turned his hand over and ran a finger over his calluses. Definitely man-hands, rough and hard. The sight of his long fingers—knowing how talented they were—sent shivers of desire through her.

She reached up and touched her neck, rubbing his two bite marks. They were a little tender to the touch but nothing more. Both times he drank from her, she'd experienced the most intense pleasure of her life. She'd never experienced the like before. Though, having never slept with a vampire could account for that.

Her thoughts turned to Tom. And for the first time, her stomach didn't cramp with pain and humiliation. She dissected their sexual relationship, realizing it had always been more about his needs, what he liked, and when he wanted it, no matter how tired she was. Which made sex feel more like a chore. Something she had to do to keep the peace. Actually, it had been that

way with all her lovers. No wonder she never cared for sex; never understood the hype.

But with Mel, sex was definitely not a chore. It was something she could quickly come to crave.

Anxiety struck hard and fast as the truth suddenly dawned on her. *Oh God, I'm falling for him. And the more time we spend together, the stronger my feelings will get.*

Flickers of panic churned her stomach. What could she do? Going home was out, and keeping her hands off him was not an option. So where did that leave her?

Screwed, that's where. Literally and figuratively.

"Mmm, you smell good," Mel murmured, nuzzling the back of her neck.

Breeana shoved her thoughts away and smiled. His erection pressed against her backside while his hand found her breast and gently rolled her nipple between his fingers. She arched her back, rubbing against his hardness.

Mel hissed and nipped her neck as his hand stroked lightly down her belly. When his fingers settled between her thighs, he groaned close to her ear.

A moan escaped her as she lifted her leg and draped it over his hip.

He continued stroking her clit, and circling her ear with his tongue. "Are you sore?"

"A little, but I don't want you to stop." She turned and captured his lips.

He broke their kiss and smiled. "I'll be very gentle. I promise." He slowly pressed into her and started a slow, gentle ride that soon had them both carried away.

Chapter 13

Saturday, June 14, 10:00pm

Mel finished tying his hiking boots and glanced up as Breeana slid off the bed.

She stopped in front of him and clenched her hands. Worry clouded her hazel eyes. “Please tell me you're not going looking for those two demons tonight? You've barely recovered from last night's tangle with them. What if this time you're not so lucky?”

He rubbed a hand over his mouth to hide his smile. The fact she was worried about his safety, warmed his heart. “I've been fighting demons my whole life. I know what I'm doing. Besides, I'm fine.”

He grabbed his leather jacket off the blue chair and tugged it on as he stalked over to the closet.

Though considering the outcome of last night's fight, no wonder she thinks I'm weak.

That thought didn't sit well. He wanted to appear strong in her eyes, capable of protecting her. Instead, he came across as an incompetent weakling. *Damn it.* Anger and shame loomed over him like a storm cloud.

“I'm...worried about you,” she said. “I don't want you to get hurt or killed because of me.”

He barked out a cold laugh. “Because of you? Make me feel worse, why don't ya.”

“I'm sorry. I only meant—”

Mel grabbed two daggers and a handgun off a shelf above his head. He sheathed his daggers at his waist, under his jacket, and then tucked the muzzle of the gun in the waistband of his jeans. A box of ammo he hid in his inside pocket.

“I know what you meant. It's because of me that your life is threatened. Not you. I knew the risks, and it's up to me to see that you're safe.”

“But I could've run. You warned me to.”

Mel turned to her. “You didn't know what was going on.”

She sagged down on the edge of the bed. “I know, but still, I should have listened to you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Forget it. It's not your fault. Though, what's baffling about this situation is the she-demon's need for revenge over me killing her lover. I never thought they formed emotional attachments.” He shrugged. “This is war. We've all lost someone we care about.”

“Have you lost someone close to you, Mel?”

Yeah, he had, his wife and mother, only in a personal war—a war between him and his father. But he'd also buried many fellow slayers who had lost their lives in this endless war; some whom he'd considered friends.

He looked down at his hands, then back to her. “Ah, yeah. Yeah I have.”

“I'm sorry,” Breeana whispered as she stared back at him with eyes that pierced his soul. “I know what it's like to lose someone you care about.”

The need to hold her and beg her to stay with him almost muscled his common sense aside. He cursed himself to hell and back and glanced away. “Thanks.”

“I won't apologize for worrying about you,” she stated.

Her words sent a thrill shivering up his spine, swelling his heart with bliss. He walked across the room and crouched at her feet. He framed her face with his hands. “Nothing's going to happen to me. It's my job, my duty. And in order for you to get back to your life, those two demons have to die.” He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I won't allow you to go back out there while they live.”

Her eyes never wavered. “I know. I don't mean to sound so...” She inhaled sharply. “I'm scared and well...just be careful.”

His heartbeat tripled. As he stared into the warmth of her eyes, his breath caught in his throat.

Oh shit. I'm in trouble—big time. I'm falling in love.

He placed his hands on her knees. “I have to do this. I can't rest until I know they're dead and you're safe.”

She glanced down and nodded.

He tilted her face up with a finger under her chin. “I want you to quit worrying, okay?”

A small smile flirted with her lips, but didn't reach her eyes.

“Forget about last night. I was worried about you, so I couldn't concentrate. That's the only reason that she-devil got the better of me.”

When she continued to stare at him with doubt in her eyes, he straightened. “You don't know what I'm capable of. I'm a vampire, not a human. I'm very strong, and believe it or not, I'm a good fighter.”

“I know you're strong. If I gave you the impression I thought otherwise, I'm sorry. It's just that demons fight dirty.”

“Yes they do, but so do we.”

She eased off the bed and walked slowly to the door. She leaned her hip against the dresser. “Is it normal for demons to openly go after humans?”

No. You're the unlucky exception, he thought.

“Not as a rule, no. Understand, Lucifer wants your souls. Killing humans out-right would defeat the purpose if your souls are still intact. Demons were sent to only corrupt humans. The killing they reserve for vampires.” He moved closer to her, hating the fear in her eyes. “Like I said, I'll fix this.”

She reached up and grazed her fingers over his cheek. “I know you will.”

Her trust swelled his chest even more. Her faith and acceptance of her situation stunned him. Plus, her obvious worry filled him with emotions he never expected to experience again.

Christ, what is she doing to me? She brought out feelings he didn't want to feel. Dreams and hopes he had no right wanting. He'd left caring and attachments behind long ago. And for good reason. He learned early on love was a wasted emotion—always leading to pain.

Irritated with himself, he headed back to the closet to finish strapping on his weapons. “Enough talk about demons. What would you like me to bring you from home?”

“I don't know—I'll make a list.” She grabbed a pen and paper and sat back on the bed.

While he fastened a small knife to his calf, she asked, “What about my truck? Won't someone see it and wonder why it's still there?”

“Kal and Soren went back last night and brought it here.”

“Oh. I have an overnight bag with a change of clothes on the passenger seat.”

He looked up from strapping another blade to his thigh. “I'll get it for you before I go.”

“Jesus. How many weapons do you need?” Her face paled and fear turned her voice to a hoarse rasp. “We really are at war, aren't we?”

He nodded.

“It seems so strange. We humans know nothing about it. We continue with our lives—paying bills, going to work, fighting traffic, all the while a war for our souls is raging around us. And our saviors are...vampires.” She laughed, a sharp crack that held no amusement. “It makes all the mundane stuff so insignificant.”

Mel straightened, twitching his long leather coat back into place to conceal his weapons. “Vampires aren't saviors,” he said with a cold laugh. “We're just doing our job.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. She sniffed and then swiped them away. Not knowing what to say to relief her trepidation, he walked over to the bed and glanced at her list. “You finished with that?”

“Just a sec.” She looked down, and then up. “What are you staring at?”

“You.” His eyes traveled over her body, hidden beneath his shirt. “Now that I think about it, I don't know if I should bring you back any clothes. I like you wearing my shirt. Easy access.” He laughed at the dark look she shot him.

A knock at the door brought both their heads swiveling in its direction.

“Yo, Mel? Ya ready?” Kal called.

“Yeah. I'll be there in a minute.”

He looked at her once more. She stared back.

Breeana's face reddened. She broke eye contact first and tried to smile. “Well, as sweet as that sounds, I would appreciate my own clothes, starting with the ones in my truck.”

Mel smiled and brought his hand to his forehead, giving a salute. “Yes, ma'am.”

A few minutes later, he sauntered back into the room with her black overnight bag slung over his shoulder. The sight of her sitting on the middle of his bed warmed his soul. He set the bag down and leaned over her, his leather jacket creaking with the movement. He planted his hands on both sides of her and whispered against her lips, “Kal's waiting for me outside.” His lips brushed lightly against hers. Nibbling, licking, teasing her to open for him. Her tongue met his as he slipped his between her teeth. The taste of her overwhelmed his senses. He groaned and deepened the kiss, his control slipping away. A soft moan escaped her as she gripped the front of his jacket, trying to pull him to the bed.

Mel wrapped an arm around her waist, crushing her breasts against his chest. He pulled back and moaned. She was flushed, and her arousal

perfumed the air. His groin throbbed hot and hard.

Swearing softly, he leaned his forehead against hers. "I better go before I can't." He kissed her quickly and grabbed her list.

She sat back on her heels and folded her hands in her lap. Her look of disappointment made him yearn to stay and finish what they had started. Instead, he moved to the door. "Help yourself to whatever you want in the kitchen. And if you get bored, check out Kal's video game collection. But don't break any of them or you'll see a grown male vampire cry."

She laughed. "I won't." After a short pause, she said, "Mel...please be careful."

"Always, sweetheart. Always." Opening the door, he glanced back at her. Her eyes were wide and she chewed at her bottom lip. Shit, he didn't want to leave. "My cell number is on the dresser if you need me. I'll come check on you later."

"I'll be fine. You don't have to drive all the way back from my place just to check on me."

"Who said anything about driving?" He grinned, then disappeared.

Breeana gasped, swinging her head around. "Mel?"

"I'm right behind you," he said with a soft chuckle.

She swung around and pressed a hand against her chest.

Stretched out on the bed with his arms crossed behind his head, Mel wanted to laugh at her surprised expression, but contained himself.

"Wow. How did you do that?" she murmured.

He jumped off the bed. "Just a little trick vampires have perfected over the years. Basically, you concentrate on a spot and then, wham you're there. The only problem is you have to be completely calm and think of nothing but where you want to end up or the consequences could be ugly." He cupped her cheek. "I'll be back soon." As he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, he vanished.

Mel and Kal materialized in the forest behind Breeana's cottage, in the rural farmlands outside of Abbotsford. They scanned the area for any sign of demons.

"I don't sense any, do you?" Kal whispered.

"No," With a last look, Mel stepped out from behind a tall pine tree. Keeping low, he darted across the small yard toward the sliding glass door.

He shielded his eyes with a hand against the glass, and peered at the dark interior. All was still. He opened his mind, but sensed nothing sinister.

“Anything?” Kal asked.

“Nope.” Mel unlocked the door with her key and stepped inside.

Kal followed and slid the door closed. “So, what's the plan? How long should we hang around?”

Mel inhaled, catching Breeana's scent in the air but little else. No trace of demons. His pupils dilated, adjusting to the lack of light as he walked around, taking in his surroundings. In the center of the living room, a blue sectional couch was placed in front of a flat screen TV. To the left of the glass door stood a wood stove on a brick hearth. A tall bookshelf, filled with books, stood flush against a wall. A large wooden wagon wheel hung suspended from the center of the ceiling. It had been converted into a light fixture. To his right, two stairs led to the front door. Across the living room, an open door revealed a tiny kitchen.

The whole room held an inviting warmth, just like Breeana.

Mel stepped over to the bookshelf. He read some of the titles on the spines. *Love's Embrace. Darkness and Fire. Dangerous Lover.* Mel slipped one out from its slot, turned it over and smiled. A romance novel. They were all romance novels.

Placing it back, Mel turned to Kal. “I'm going to hang for a couple of hours, see if they show up. If you want, you can split. If anything strange happens, I'll phone.” He walked down the short hallway and checked out her small bathroom, decorated all in white with chrome accents.

“Are ya sure, dude? I wouldn't mind grabbin' a couple drinks and checkin' out the lady situation at the Green Tree before I head out hunting.” Kal stepped past Mel and flicked on the bathroom light.

“What the fuck?” Mel switched it off. “Her friend lives close by, you fool!”

“Sorry, man.”

Mel shook his head as he walked into her bedroom. A queen-size bed covered by a red comforter took up most of the space. A dark stained, antique wardrobe stood against one wall and a small dressing table with mirror sat kiddie-corner to an open closet.

Kal stood in the doorway and leaned his shoulder against the door. “So, you don't mind if I split?”

“Go ahead. If the demons don't show, I'll meet you at the Green Tree, or if you're not there, I'll call your cell.”

“Cool.” Kal straightened, ready to leave when he stopped. “Yo, Mel?”

“What?”

“Honestly, dude, how did she take the news about us being vampires? I mean, I didn't hear her screaming or nothing, so...”

Mel ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “She took it very well.” He smiled, remembering when she thought her friend had played a practical joke.

“Good deal.” Clearing his throat, Kal pulled out his pocket knife and picked at the calluses on his palm. “She's quite the looker, eh?”

Mel frowned. Kal's gaze met his. “Yep.”

“That's all you gotta say?” Kal asked with a smile on his face.

Mel narrowed his eyes.

Kal laughed. He scuffed his boot against the hardwood floor. “Yeah, shit. I forgot who I was talking to. Mr. I-don't-talk-about-anything-personal. And I figure Breeana falls into the personal category.”

“Just because you're like an old woman, always wanting to yap about every detail of your life, that's your problem,” Mel said, curling his lip in a snarl.

“Whatever. But can you at least answer one question?”

“Depends on the question.”

“Did you tell her about the prophecy?”

“No, and I'm not going to. What's there to tell her? We know very little ourselves. Besides, I think it's just a strange coincidence she has a birthmark shaped like the prophecy symbol.”

Impatience over all the questions added fuel to Mel's annoyance. He knew Kal was fishing for information, and not just about the prophecy. He wanted personal info. What happened between him and Breeana was his business, no one else's.

Yeah, his business, until Roarik caught wind of her and her mark. Shit, he was afraid Roarik would lock her in a room until they figured out what the hell it meant.

That's not happening. Mel ground his molars. As far as he was concerned, the prophecy could burn in hell. He'd deal with Roarik himself, leaving Breeana out of it. He wanted her far away from the war, the prophecy, the whole fucking vampire world, and that meant he needed her

far away from him and his cursed life. His mother and wife were enough deaths on his conscience. He didn't need to add her to the list.

“Roarik is going to want to talk to her when he gets back,” Kal stated, cleaning his nails with his pocket knife.

“That's if she's still at the base. Hopefully, the demons will show themselves tonight. Once they're dead, she can go home.” He sat on the edge of her bed, resting his forearms on his thighs. “But if that doesn't happen, I'll deal with Roarik. And if he tries anything, he'll have to answer to me.”

“Yeah, I hear ya.”

The silence that followed made Mel twitchy as hell. He knew by the way Kal was picking at his hands he had something on his mind. “If you have something to say, just spit it out.”

Kal glanced up and shook his head. “Nope. I've got nothin' to say you don't already know, so peace, man.” He folded his knife and shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans. “I'll be at the Green Tree for an hour or so. Call when you want to hook up” He disappeared.

Mel continued sitting on Breeana's bed, rubbing his palms on the tops of his thighs. He wasn't looking forward to Roarik's homecoming tomorrow night. To say Roarik was going to freak when he found a human at the base was an understatement. As far as Roarik was concerned, humans were a necessary evil; only socializing with them when he needed to feed.

Mel hung his head. Once Roarik caught wind of Breeana's birthmark, shit would most assuredly hit the fan.

He paced around her bedroom, halting beside her dressing table. Three small framed pictures grabbed his attention. The first was of a younger Breeana and a curly-haired young woman, both wearing blue graduation gowns. The picture had snapped just as they jumped, tossing their caps in the air. Second was a picture of an older couple, and judging by the resemblance, they had to be Breeana's parents. The last showed her standing on a sandy beach looking sexy in a black bikini, with an arm draped around the thin shoulders of a tanned, blonde man. They both smiled, squinting in the bright sun.

He wanted to break both of the young man's arms. Not only for touching her, but because he had shared moments with her he would never be able to. Normal moments.

She had a life, a human life with others who loved her. Others who could give her what he couldn't. Security, happiness, and a life full of tender memories.

He turned. A red bathrobe draped over the back of the chair, stopped him. He brought it to his nose. Her fragrance flooded his senses. His need to see her, make love to her, wrenched his guts in knots.

Christ, he was torn. He knew the best possible outcome for all involved would be for the demons to rear their evil heads, but the thought of spending another day with her sent his heart racing with joy.

With a soft curse, Mel strolled over to the window and leaned his forehead against the cool pane of glass. He gazed out into the deep shadows amongst the trees surrounding the property.

He closed his eyes. His mind flooded with images of Breeana: the feeling of burying himself over and over into her welcoming warmth. The feel of her soft skin sliding against his. Her hot breath in his ear as his name tore from her lips as her inner muscles clenched around him.

His hands curled into tight fists as his body swelled and hardened in response. She was magnificent—more than he ever dreamed. Not only beautiful, but she was full of passion; answering his fierce desire with her own. He should regret his actions, regret losing his self-control, but as hard as he tried, he just couldn't muster it up.

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and pulled out her list.

In big, bold letters along the bottom, she had written: *Don't forget my clothes. I don't want to hear any lame excuses like you 'forgot'.*

He turned from the window, bent down beside her bed, and reached under to pull out a light blue suitcase, right where she'd said it would. He set it on her bed and unzipped it.

As he approached her wardrobe he stopped, frozen as a thought filled his mind with terror. Roarik would want to erase her memories before she went back to her world. But by then, her memories would be too deep. To erase them would definitely do damage to her mind. Knowing Roarik, he wouldn't give a shit what damage was caused, as long as her memory of vampires was gone.

Dread spread ominously across his heart.

Just try it. He'd rip the vampire limb from limb before he could even get close to her.

Mel stalked over to her dressing table and yanked open the drawers. He grabbed a handful of panties and bras and tossed them on the bed. When he finished packing the articles of clothing on her list, he headed to her bathroom for the remaining items.

Three hours later, he materialized in an alley around the corner of the Green Tree.

After waiting at Breeana's, surrounded by her things, her scent everywhere, he was wired. She consumed his thoughts. He wanted to flash himself back home and take her in his arms. Make love to her over and over.

Annoyed with his inability to stay focused, he phoned Kal's cell to see where he was at. Surprise, surprise, he was still at the Green Tree.

Mel entered the nightclub. Thumping music, thick smoke, and the sweaty press of bodies was enough to give him a headache. He pushed his way through the throng of humans. His search ended when he spotted Kal sitting at a table tucked away in back, surrounded by three women.

Kal looked over. "Yo man. What's up?"

"Let's go out back where we can talk."

"Sure." Kal grabbed his leather jacket from the back of his seat. "This shouldn't take long ladies, so don't start without me."

Mel shook his head as the women giggled.

As they stepped out the back exit, Kal glanced at the suitcase slung over Mel's shoulder. "Going on a cruise to the Caribbean for some fun in the sun?"

"Funny. I take it the she-demon didn't show."

"Sorry, dude. I take it they didn't show at Breeana's?"

"Good deduction, Einstein." Mel crossed the metal landing and gripped the handrail. He gazed out across the parking-lot. "Have you patrolled at all tonight or have you just been wasting time here?"

"I just got back here maybe thirty minutes ago. I was patrolling with Sin near Pit Meadows."

"Anything?"

"Whole lot of nothing. I heard Soren and Ace took out three demons in the White Rock area. Two males and one female, but the female wasn't the one you're looking for."

Mel slammed his fist on the railing. "Shit. Where the hell is she?"

“What do ya want to do, man? Dawn's a couple hours off so we still got time to search.”

“No. Go back to what you were doing. I'm just gonna hang here for a bit and then head back home.”

“Ya sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Kal shrugged. “I guess I'll see ya at home.”

Mel leaned close to Kal and inhaled. “You reek of cheap perfume.”

Kal wiggled his brows. “I said I didn't find action in a fight. But that doesn't mean I didn't get any action.”

“Asshole.”

After Kal returned inside, Mel walked down the steps and stopped. He rubbed his lower back where he'd been stabbed.

Has it really only been twenty-four hours since I met Breeana? It feels like I've known her far longer.

He couldn't explain it, but it seemed as if they were meant for each other.

Not surprising, considering he'd been dreaming of her for years.

He couldn't deny a large part of him was glad he hadn't run into the she-demon and her boy-toy. He wasn't ready to let Breeana go just yet, and once the two were dead, he'd have to send her back. Back to a life that couldn't include him.

This is going to hurt like hell. Yeah, well, that can't be helped. Find them, send her home, and get on with your life, such as it is.

Since he knew this had to come to an end, he should probably show a little more self-restraint and try to keep his hands off her.

Yeah shit, he should, but he didn't know if he could.

Chapter 14

Sunday, June 15, 3:30am

Mel took form in his living room and dropped his coat on the brown leather sofa. He stripped off his weapons, placing them on the coffee table along with Breeana's blue suitcase. All was quiet. A part of him had hoped, like a love-struck fool, she'd be waiting up for him.

Feeling low, he headed to the kitchen and grabbed a beer out of the fridge. He popped the top and tilted the can to his mouth, swallowing half the contents in one gulp.

Now what? Crawl in bed with her or sleep on the couch in the living room?

Sleep on the couch? Yeah right. He was itching to see her, taste her...hold her again. But he reminded himself he should at least try to hold back.

Go ahead. Let's see if you can.

Mel rubbed his eyes and sat on a stool in front of the counter. He drummed his fingers. Instead of worrying where he should sleep, he should be researching more on the prophecy. Since a human carried the mark, maybe the answers could be found in their history, hidden in some forgotten legend or folklore. It was worth a try.

A noise from the living room jarred him out of his thoughts. He turned his head. Expecting it to be Kal returning home, his body vibrated when Breeana walked into the kitchen. A warm smile lit up her face.

"I thought I heard someone moving around out here," she said.

Mel's heart rate escalated at the sight of her. God help him, she was beautiful. A pair of faded jeans fit her like a second skin. Unquestionably, the jeans had seen better days with their frayed bottoms dragging on the floor and her knees showing through two worn holes, but on her they looked magnificent. They molded to her hips, emphasizing her feminine shape. Her washed out, pink T-shirt looked as if it too had worn out its welcome. But again on her, it looked glorious. Her long, dark hair was piled high on top of her head; thick strands escaped from the clip.

The sight of her neck filled his mouth with saliva and his fangs slid down in anticipation.

“Mel?”

He swallowed, trying to stop his fangs from descending. “Uh, yeah, it's just me.” He downed the last of his beer and tossed the can into the sink across the room. “I didn't mean to wake you.”

“You didn't. I was already awake.” She sat on the stool beside him and nodded in the direction of the sink. “You wouldn't happen to have another beer, would you?”

He stood. “Yeah, I do.”

Breeana laid a hand on his arm. “I'll get it. Sit down. You look beat.” She opened the fridge and took out two beers. She placed one beside his hand and sat back down on the stool.

She pulled the tab and the crisp crack of the can opening filled the silence. “So,” she said before she took a sip, “are you going to let me know if I'm still to be your...house guest?” She placed the can on the black counter, rolling it between her palms.

Mel cocked an elbow on the countertop and rested his head in his hand. “Looks as if you'll be staying at *Hotel Mel* at least one more night. Sorry I don't have better news. The demons were a no show at your place and also at the Green Tree.” He swallowed a mouthful of beer and glanced at her. “But don't worry, I'll find them.”

She blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. “I know you will. And besides, *Hotel Mel* isn't such a bad place to spend my vacation.” She looked away and took another drink.

Was that relief he saw in her eyes? Could she be...happy she was staying?

Hope flared in his chest and he smiled. He laced his fingers with hers. “What is it you like about *Hotel Mel*?”

Blushing, she turned her eyes back to him. “The personal touch.”

He laughed. She was amazing. Christ, she'd made him laugh more in the past twenty-four hours than he had his whole life. Just being around her helped him forget his worries and problems. This is what it must be like to stand in the sun on a beautiful summer's day, feeling as if all was right with the world.

“Anyway,” Breeana said. “I phoned Carol earlier and the demons, or should I say, insurance agents, haven't been back.”

“It's only a matter of time,” he murmured, crashing back to reality.

“Are you sure? Maybe she won't even bother.”

“She'll be back. It's just a question of when.” Mel traced the top of his can with a finger. “And when she does, I'll be waiting.”

He had no doubt the demon would be back. She wanted to use Breeana as a tool to torture him. Killing her or himself outright was definitely not in her plans.

“I guess you're right. You know more about demons than I do.” She glanced at her hands and then back to him. A teasing smile curled her lips, revealing twin dimples. “Did you remember to pack some clothes for me or did you conveniently forget?”

He closed his eyes and smacked his forehead. “Damn. I knew I forgot something.”

She nudged his shoulder. “Ha, ha.”

“Against my better judgment, I packed everything on your list. Your bag is in the living room.”

“Thanks.”

“What did you do while I was gone?”

“Not much. Watched TV for the most part.” Breeana rose, collected the empty beer cans, and placed them in the sink. She leaned her hip against the counter, crossing her arms over her chest. She stared at her feet.

Unease pulsed through Mel. He sensed it from her as well. “Any particular reason why you were still up? I thought for sure you would have fallen asleep as soon as I left.”

She shrugged. “I couldn't sleep.”

Guilt ate at his stomach like acid.

“I can imagine. With your world turned upside down, knowing a demon is on the hunt for you; yeah, that'd be enough to keep the sandman at bay.” Mel cleared his throat and slid off the stool. He stood in front of her. “I know I said it already, but I'm so damn sorry for putting you in this predicament.”

She raised her head and looked deep in his eyes. “And I said already it's not your fault. And that's not why I couldn't sleep.”

He ran his knuckles over her cheek. “Care to tell me why?”

Color rushed to her face. “Ah...I was...never mind.”

“You were what?” He bent his head and brushed the side of her neck with his lips.

“I was...thinking about...you,” she finished with a sigh.

He straightened. “You were, huh? What exactly was it about me were you thinking?” He planted his hands on the counter behind her, trapping her with his body.

She placed her hands on his chest, smoothed them over his shoulders, then down his arms and back. “Nothing, really.”

He leaned in, stroking his tongue up her throat and over her jaw before he captured her lips with his.

She moaned, pressed herself against him and wound her arms around his neck.

The taste and feel of her exploded through him. When her tongue brushed against his, once again he was powerless to stop.

Groaning, Mel broke off their kiss and turned her so she faced the counter. He bent her forward and leaned in until his chest was flush with her back. His eyes latched onto the satiny skin on back of her neck. A low growl rumbled from deep in his chest as he gently nipped the delicate flesh on the side of her throat.

Breeana arched her back and tilted her head to the side, giving him better access to what he wanted, needed.

“I dreamt of this all night.” He bit her harder and then soothed her skin with his tongue. “It took all my self-control not to flash myself back here.” He kissed the underside of her jaw and tilted her head back a little further. “Visions of you filled my head until I thought I would burst.” He ground his erection against her round backside.

She turned her head slightly. Her tongue darted out and danced with his, wringing another moan from them both.

“I couldn't stop thinking of you either.” She captured his bottom lip with her teeth. “I could hardly wait for you—” she kissed him, a deep, passionate kiss, “to come home.”

Mel nudged her legs apart with his knee. From behind, he reached around and slid a hand over her belly, her hips, coming to rest between her legs. He rubbed her through her jeans in a slow rhythm. Knowing the answer, he asked anyway, needing to hear her say the words. “Why could you hardly wait?”

She rocked back and forth, grinding herself against his hand. She leaned the back of her head against his shoulder. “That feels so good.”

“Breeana.” Her name came out in a breathy whisper. He growled, nuzzling the back of her neck up to the base of her skull. The fresh smell of

shampoo—nectarines and berries—tantalized his senses. He had to slow down, he was losing control; wanting to strip her down and drive himself deep into her body. He needed to take her slowly, savor her, but he was way past the gentle stage. His arousal pounded through him like a living monster, demanding to be satisfied.

He bit down, pinching her skin between his teeth. “Was this why you could hardly wait, sweetheart?”

She rocked harder. He could tell her orgasm was close by her frenzied movements.

“Yes...Mel...yes.”

“Sweetheart, I could hardly wait myself.” He slowly pierced her skin with his fangs. Her warm blood filled his mouth with its intoxicating flavor. He drank while stroking between her thighs.

She stiffened in his arms, shouting his name. She collapsed against the counter, held up by his arm around her waist.

Mel released her neck and sealed the wounds. He scooped her up and carried her to his room.

He lay her down, stripped her jeans off, and tossed them to the floor. Her legs flopped open and he almost came right there. The sight of her sheer pink panties, wet with her honey, fueled his desire.

He dropped to his knees, eased her panties to the side, exposing her sweetness. “I can't get enough of you. No matter how many times I have you, it'll never be enough.” He bent forward and sucked her into his mouth. The taste of her almost sent him crashing over the edge. “God damn, you're delicious.”

With his tongue and lips he drove her hard, sparing no mercy. Her hips bucked off the bed as another orgasm rolled through her. He held her in place with his hand firmly on her stomach.

“That's it, come for me.” He drank her in, wringing out every last drop. When he couldn't stand another second, he turned her so she rested on her hands and knees, and ripped off her panties.

The need to be inside her had his body quaking. He unzipped and tugged his pants to his knees. He found her opening and thrust forward. Her wet warmth gripped him tight from tip to base.

They both called out.

The feel of her hot, wet sex sheathing him almost did him in, but he held himself still. Panting and trembling, he squeezed her hips.

“Mel...that feels...” She arched her back. “Good.”

His hips pumped wildly, taking her hard and fast. “I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I want you,” he said through gritted teeth.

She balled up the comforter, raised her hips higher, taking everything he gave.

He pumped faster. “Come for me again. I want to feel you release all over me.”

Breeana sobbed his name. Her sex tightened, squeezing him.

Mel closed his eyes and thrust harder, faster. He seized her hips as he flew over the edge, straight up to heaven.

He collapsed over her, their bodies still connected. He didn’t want to leave—wanted to stay within her warmth forever. Worried he was crushing her, he withdrew and rolled to his side.

After a few moments, she lifted her head and glanced at him.

He smiled. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she replied with a brilliant smile. She groaned and slowly rolled onto her back. “Although, I can barely move.”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “I hear ya there.”

She glanced down his body and laughed. “Your pants are still on.”

He lifted his head and then let it flop back. “So they are.” He turned to her, fingering her T-shirt. “We seemed to have gotten carried away again.”

“Yeah, we did.”

Mel grabbed the edge of her shirt and dragged it over her head. Unclasping her bra, he then drew it down her arms. “Maybe we could try that again, only slower.” He leaned over her, drawing a nipple between his lips.

Breeana moaned, arching her back. “I think it’s worth a try.”

Chapter 15

Sunday, June 15 12:06pm

Breeana glanced at the red numbers on the clock radio. Noon already. She'd been in bed for six hours, but slept maybe two.

After making love twice, they'd fallen asleep—well, Mel slept while she lay awake listening to his snores. Finally he stopped, but just when she was drifting off, his tossing and turning started.

She punched her pillow and closed her eyes.

Mel mumbled something before he flipped onto his side, taking the comforter with him.

“Errr.” She reached over and tugged, but the blanket wouldn't budge. As she pulled harder, he rolled onto his back. His arm almost struck her head.

“Great. Now I have to watch he doesn't bash me in his sleep.”

She gave another quick jerk, successfully freeing a corner of the comforter. Sighing, she tucked her legs under and laid back against the pillows.

The problem wasn't really with Mel's snoring or restlessness; it had more to do with the time. Exhausted as she was, her body wasn't use to sleeping during the day. But since she was bunking with a vampire, she wasn't left much choice.

It still seemed so surreal. Even thinking the word *vampire*, seemed odd.

She gazed at him.

In sleep, his face appeared younger—more relaxed. His long eyelashes fanned out on his cheeks and the furrows along his brow had disappeared.

Breeana touched the tip of his nose. She smothered a laugh when he mumbled, swatting at her hand.

God, I'm going to miss him when this is over.

Sadness crept into her heart. It skipped a beat, then jumped with excitement as a thought struck her. Maybe it didn't have to be over. Maybe they could continue seeing one another. Why not?

Now she was getting ahead of herself. Mel had never given any indication that whatever was going on between them would carry on after she left. She knew he felt lust, but he'd said nothing about deeper emotions. And she was smart enough to know that while lust and love started with the same letter, they were miles apart in meaning.

As for her, she feared it was too late. No matter how hard she tried to deny it, she was in love with him. She'd only been in love, or what she thought was love, once before. Actually, she now understood her feelings for Tom hadn't been love. Not even close. It had been more or less being in love with the idea of love.

Granted, she'd only known Mel for just over forty-eight hours, but there was a connection between them that defied logic. It was...cosmic. The thought of never seeing his face again, hearing his voice, his laughter, was a notion she couldn't comprehend. This knowledge didn't sit well. No matter how she looked at it, she was headed for sorrow.

Sorrow or not, she allowed herself a moment to fantasize. She pictured walking down a pink rose petal strewn aisle wearing a beautiful wedding gown. Mel would be waiting for her, handsome in a tuxedo, his dark hair loose about his broad shoulders. Her thoughts skipped ahead, imagining them growing old together—

Panic sliced deep and she bolted upright. Her movement caused Mel to moan and roll onto his side.

Growing old!

Oh, God, no. The only one who will be growing old is me. Mel said vampires live for six hundred years and he's only two hundred and ninety-eight. I'm already thirty-two.

Her heart raced and ice filled her soul. She couldn't imagine herself at eighty, tottering around with a cane next to Mel when he'd be virtually unchanged.

Breeana squeezed her eyes shut against her tears. There it was. The cold hard truth. There was no way for their relationship to continue.

“Bethany! Bethany, nooo!” Mel's loud shouts filled the darkness as he shot off the bed.

Terror jolted her. She scrambled off the bed and fumbled around in the dark. Her outstretched hands skimmed over the night table until she felt the lamp. She switched it on and light bathed the room in a soft glow.

He stood in the center of the room. His arms thrashed about and his breath whistled out in fast erratic bursts.

“I know you did it, you murdering bastard.” He looked wildly around at no one she could see. “I know you did it.”

She ran around the bed and grabbed his flailing arms. “Mel, wake up!” She couldn't hold him. With a vicious curse, he tugged free. He backed away from her with panic-filled eyes.

Mel,” she called louder. “Wake up. You're having a nightmare.”

His gaze stopped bouncing around the room and settled on her. “Breeana?”

“Yeah, it's me.” She cautiously moved closer to him and placed a hand on his arm. “Are you all right?”

“Fuck,” he murmured. With a trembling hand, he pushed his sweat drenched hair out of his eyes. “Ah, yeah. Yeah, shit...I'm fine.”

Breeana laid her hand alongside his neck. His pulse thumped frantically under his skin. “Don't tell me fine. You looked like you were caught in a heart-attack inducing nightmare.”

He glanced around the room again. “I'm fine.”

When her heart slowed to a more normal pace, she rubbed his shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Mel grabbed her and pulled her close. He buried his face in her hair. “Not really. I'm sorry I woke you. I probably scared the shit out of you.” His voice was soft, shaky.

She pulled back and looked up at him. Sweat beaded his upper lip and his eyes still moved around as if searching for someone or something. “Are you sure you don't want to talk about it? As cliché as this may sound, it does help sometimes.”

He held her hand and kissed her knuckles. “No, I just want to go back to bed.”

Doubt and suspicion wiggled into her mind. She wanted to ask him who Bethany was, but she stamped down her own questions and insecurities. She walked back to the bed, switched off the light and climbed in.

Yet her insecurities wouldn't be silenced. Thoughts and questions whirled while jealousy ate at her like poison.

Mel climbed in and pulled her stiff body close to his warmth, but she remained rigid in his arms.

Maybe Bethany is his sister or cousin? Or maybe Bethany is an ex. Maybe I remind him of her.

With painful clarity, the words he'd spoken when they'd first met crashed through her head. *"I'm sorry I was making you uncomfortable earlier. You look a little like someone I've...met before."*

He lifted his head. "Are you okay?"

No, I'm not, she wanted to scream, but said, "Yeah. Why do you ask?"

"You seem tense."

She glanced at his face. In the dim light shining in from under the door, she made out the grim set of his lips and the creases marring his brow. Her anger melted away, replaced by sadness. "I'm worried about you."

He brushed her lips with his, and then stretched out on his back. "Don't be, and I appreciate the concern. If I thought talking could help, I would."

Breeana snuggled her head against his chest and sighed. "I understand." And for the most part, she did. There were events in everyone's life that were best kept hidden, never to be talked about.

"We okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. We're good." She closed her eyes, willing her tears to stop.

Yeah, I'm real good. Just aces. The man I love is in love with someone else.

Time passed in silence.

She pressed her ear against his chest. His heart beat slow and steady. Her hand resting on his abdomen rose and fell in a similar slow rhythm.

If she was totally honest with herself, she didn't really want to know. Like the saying goes, ignorance is bliss.

Not this time.

She cleared her throat, hating herself for feeling like a jealous shrew. "Who's Bethany?"

His body tensed, the only indication he gave that he'd heard her question. Breeana's blood pounded in her ears as she waited.

"She was...my wife. She was," he cleared his throat and shifted under her head, "killed many years ago."

Sorrow and sadness engulfed her. "I'm so sorry, Mel. I shouldn't have asked."

"It was a long time ago."

"It's none of my business."

Way to go. She just couldn't keep her mouth shut.

The quiet made her crazy. The only sound heard was Mel's slow even breathing and the occasional drip from the bathroom faucet.

When he spoke, it took her by surprise. “I was young, around seventeen—Bethany a year younger—when we got married. We had known each other since we were children. Bethany and her family were vampires from a lesser branch. They had served my family for many generations. After we were married, I moved to her small village where I became—against my better judgment—the leader.”

Breeana rose up on an elbow and touched his face. “If this is too painful, you don't have to tell me.”

He drew a finger over her cheek. “Foolishly, I believed our village was well hidden but we were discovered by a band of human warriors. After nightfall this particular evening, the other soldiers and I went on a hunt to replenish our stores of meat, leaving only old males and farmers to guard the females and young.”

He fell silent, twirling a strand of her hair.

She stroked a finger down the side of his neck, but didn't say a word. She sensed this trip into his past was hard enough for him; his voice held the detached quality of someone narrating a story.

Mel crossed his arms under his head. “I was arrogant, thinking our village was safe from both demons and humans. I'd heard the rumors of distant vampire villages being raided, but I hadn't heard of any vampire slayers or demons in our area.

“The night was warm and the hunt had gone well. I decided to stop at a small lake a mile from our valley and bathe sweat and deer blood off me. I sent the others on ahead, lingering far longer than I should have. By the time I started back, I could see the sky lightening as dawn approached.”

Breeana listened to the monotone sound of his voice. A big part of her wanted him to continue, but another part wanted to beg him to stop.

“When I...” She heard a click as Mel swallowed. “As I got closer, I could smell smoke. At first I thought nothing of it, but the closer I got the stronger it became until I could see smoke rising over the hills surrounding our village. I panicked and ran. When I came to the top of the hill overlooking our village, I stopped and looked down... I couldn't believe it.”

His voice picked up speed. “Bodies were everywhere—slaughtered—and all the buildings were on fire. I knew right away humans were behind this massacre because all the heads were severed. Humans believed that

was the only way to stop a vampire from coming back to life. Then I saw her. I saw Bethany lying in the dirt, a blade sticking out of her back...her head was..."

Breeana gasped, a sharp sound that cut through the silence. Tears stung her eyes. "I'm so sorry. I can't even begin to imagine what you must have gone through—what you're still going through."

Her heart bled for him. She wanted to wrap her arms around him. Wanted to try and take away some of his suffering and misery, but knew she couldn't.

"I screamed her name, begged her to get up." Mel covered his eyes. "I carried her body into the forest and buried her. After I returned, the fires had burned low. It was so quiet as I stood there—lost. Everything—everyone I cared about—gone. I felt the first sun rays heat up my skin. I've never hated the sun more than at that moment. I wanted to go after the son-of-a-bitches—avenge my wife's death. I wanted to rip them apart with my bare hands."

Mel turned his head toward her.

Breeana's heart broke. The look on his face was one of utter torment.

His voice was hollow as he said, "I should have gone after them then and there, but dawn was coming fast...so I—" he turned away and closed his eyes. "I hid. I hid like a goddamn coward."

"Don't do that, Mel. Don't attach a name to yourself that doesn't fit."

He swore and shoved a hand through his hair. "I was a coward. I was afraid to die. I was the head of my village. They depended on me. It was my responsibility to keep them safe. They all died—my wife," he choked, "died because of my arrogance and poor judgment. I should never have left our village so unguarded."

"How can you think for one second that it was your fault? You were so young, and there was nothing you could've done." She turned his face toward her, but his eyes remained closed. "I can't believe you're blaming yourself for their deaths, not the evil, cowardly bastards whose fault it truly is."

"I know who's to blame." Mel sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "At the very least, I should have died along with them."

Breeana switched the lamp on. Mel leaned down, grabbed his jeans off the floor and tugged them on.

She clasped his shoulder before he stood up. “That's bullshit and you know it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You know life is unpredictable, and to second guess every decision we make is unrealistic. And there wouldn't have been anything to gain from your suicide. And that's what it would've been. If you were caught by the sun, your death would've been a complete waste.”

“You don't—”

“From what you've told me, you had no other choice. If you had pursued them and been burned up by the sun, what would you have you gained? Would it have brought them all back? Would it have brought your wife back?”

“No, but...”

“Exactly.” Breeana picked up his red sweatshirt and pulled it on as she walked over to where he sat. She crouched in front of him. “It would be great if we could see the consequences of every action we make beforehand, but life doesn't work like that.”

“You don't understand. I am to blame. I failed them.” Mel stood up and paced around the room. “It was because of me the humans came upon my village.” He looked away, shaking his head. “I was warned not to marry her.”

“What do you mean warned? And by whom?”

Mel stalked over to the dresser and hung his head. With a growl, he gripped the edge and squeezed hard. The wood groaned from the force. “It doesn't matter. Just forget I said anything.”

Breeana walked up to him. “It does matter. Who warned you?”

He didn't answer.

She opened her mouth, ready to pose the question again when he spoke so quietly she could hardly hear him. “My father.”

His father?

“My father was the squad leader of the vampire warriors in our area. He told me if I married Bethany, she and her village would no longer be under his protection. I was a fool. I should have listened, but I didn't. I thought I could protect them. The day Bethany said yes to my marriage proposal was the day she signed her life away.”

She couldn't take much more. The pain and shame she detected in his voice were killing her. “You were young—in love. And no one listens to

their parents when it comes to matters of the heart.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against the hot, smooth skin between his shoulder blades. “I know I sure didn't.”

“There's more to it than that, but I don't want to get in to it. Let's just say I had many reasons to have heeded his warning. My father wasn't your typical...parent.”

“Typical or not, it's not like your father attacked your village. Though, I must say, that was pretty cold of him to have denied your village protection just because you married someone he didn't approve of.”

Mel stepped out of her embrace and turned. His face looked as if it had aged ten years in a matter of minutes. His eyes were dull and full of self-hatred.

Breeana's stomach dropped as if it was full of lead. She sensed there was more to this story, but also sensed he wasn't going to talk about it. “Mel?”

“You're right. My father was cold and he didn't take kindly to anyone defying him. Especially his son.”

“I still don't see how it's your fault.”

He gazed deep into her eyes and for a moment, for a split second, she saw fear, panic and defeat. He swallowed then opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something, but stopped.

“Please don't blame yourself. Guilt is pointless and destructive, and you don't deserve to live that way.”

*

As Mel stared into Breeana's trusting face, the sound of his father's evil laugh filled his mind, echoing through his skull.

“Look at her,” his father's demented voice said. “What a pathetic fool she is. She's so quick to absolve you of all guilt, but you know better don't you, son? Go ahead, tell her. Tell her how you honored your father. Would she look at you the same if she knew? Would she be so quick to defend you if she knew you are a murderer?”

Fear paralyzed Mel's limbs.

“What's the matter, son? Do it, I dare you.” His father's evil laugh became louder and louder until that was all he heard. “Tell her who's really to blame for your wife's murder.”

Breeana stepped up against his body, wrapping her arms around him. Her warmth seeped into his stiff limbs, instantly cutting off his father's voice.

She pressed a cheek over his heart. While she held him, his tremors slowed then stopped, his mind cleared and a feeling of calm enveloped him.

She looked up at him and brushed his hair off his forehead. “Did you get the bastards who murdered your wife?”

A fierce light shone in her eyes. He caressed her cheek. “Yeah, I did. It took me over a month but yeah, I destroyed them.”

“I'm glad,” she said without hesitation.

His chest tightened as love swelled his heart, spilled over, and invaded his scarred, lonely soul.

“I know the circumstances are less than ideal, but I'm glad I met you. I'll never regret the time we've shared,” she said.

His eyes burned and a lump formed in his throat. “Breeana.” He crushed her to him, molding her to his body. She had no idea how her words affected him. How wonderful it felt to hear someone say the death of his wife—of them all—wasn't entirely his fault, even though he knew it was. Shame over being the only survivor of his village had burned him for so long. Her words helped douse the pain, if for only a moment.

Her cool hands smoothed over his back. “I know I don't know all the facts, but one thing I do know is you're a good man—I mean vampire.”

Love for her flowed through him, almost taking him to his knees. “If you believe that, then you're deranged,” he whispered, against her hair.

“Maybe, but I pride myself on being able to read peoples' hearts and you my friend, have a good one.” She leaned back in his embrace, stretched up on her toes and kissed him.

When she broke off their kiss, Mel wrapped himself around her once more. At that very moment, he could honestly say he was happy. Happy he had chosen to live.

Chapter 16

June 15, Sunday, 6:30pm

“Which button do I push to select a player?” Breeana asked.

Mel looked up from his computer and glanced across the living room at Breeana. She sat on the brown leather couch with her back to him facing Kal's 52 inch flat screen TV, a video game controller in her hands. A black, velvet scrunchy held her dark hair in a thick ponytail at the nape of her neck.

Kal shoved aside a stack of car magazines on the coffee table to make room for his glass of juice. He leaned forward on his green, beat-to-shit La-Z-boy recliner and pointed to her controller. “With the B—the blue button.”

“Thanks.” She scrolled down the list of characters on the screen. “Ready.”

“You sure you've played before?” Kal asked.

“Only a couple times with Carol's nephew. Why?”

“You positive you wanna choose Link?”

“What's wrong with him?” She chuckled. “I think he's kind of cute in a cartoon kind of way. And he fills out his tights nicely.”

Kal winked. “Well hell, so do I.”

Mel barked out a laugh. “Now there's a horrid vision.”

Shooting him a sideways glance, Kal said, “Whatever, dude. You wish I would wear tights. Your eyes would be so glued to my tight ass.”

“Yeah? Do you want to tell me how that'd work when you're always behind me staring at my ass?”

“All right boys, that's enough.” Breeana shook a finger at Kal, then turned and wagged it at Mel. “It's all fun and games until the fists start flying. Besides, I'm ready to play.”

“You just got saved.” Mel laughed and turned his attention back to his computer to continue with his research. He was checking through ancient human religious records and legends hoping to find any mention, no matter how obscure, of the vampire prophecy. But so far, nothing.

He typed in another website address from his list, and leaned back in his seat. Christ, he'd only been at it for half an hour and was already sick of it.

He wanted to call it quits to spend more time with Breeana. Ten more minutes he promised himself, then he'd shut off his computer and join her on the couch.

With a sigh, he typed in another site, and then another, all with the same result.

"Hey, I'm new at this game," Breeana said. "Try to go a little easy on me, would ya."

"I am," Kal replied with a laugh. "But if I go too easy you'll never learn."

She stuck her tongue out at Kal. Mel smiled.

This had to be, hands down, the most amazing, peaceful day of his life. No, Breeana was amazing. She was the cause of this sudden peace and joy. With her gentle spirit, her sunny sense of humor and unbelievable passion, she was a balm for his empty soul. Yeah, all that plus her undeserved faith in him.

What she saw in him, he'd never know. He was an emotionally scarred—no, emotionally ruined—bastard who didn't deserve her. A used and abused product of his horrific upbringing. His father had been an insane, malicious monster like his father before. And naturally, Mel was afraid it ran in the family. So yeah, not a whole lot of boy-scout qualities here.

He remembered the nightmare from earlier in the day; how his heart almost gave out when Breeana asked about Bethany. His first instinct was to keep his yap shut but once he started talking, he couldn't stop. Hell, telling her about it felt sort of... liberating? Yeah shit, it was liberating. To have her believe in him, tell him the death of his wife and the others in the village wasn't all his doing, was music to his ears. Even though he hadn't told her the whole truth.

Mel picked up his coffee mug and swirled the cooling black liquid. Maybe this was why he'd dreamt of Breeana. Maybe she was a gift from the gods.

Right. Like the gods suddenly decided to be anything other than selfish, cold-hearted bastards. They never concerned themselves with his or other mortals' pain and misery before, so why start now?

Breeana's laughter drew Mel out of his thoughts. He chuckled as she gave Kal hell for cheating. Kal laughed so hard he dropped his controller, giving her the advantage.

This place would feel cold and empty once she left. *He* was going to feel cold and empty... again.

With a heavy sigh, he brought his eyes back to his computer, deciding to check one more site before he gave up for the day.

Absorbed by what he was reading, he almost jumped out of his skin when Breeana spoke from beside him.

“Hey, this looks exactly like my birthmark.”

His gaze shot to her. She held a copy of the vampire prophecy. If his foot could have reached, he would've kicked his own ass.

Shit, why the hell did he leave it out in the open? And she was right of course. Her birthmark and the dagger symbol on the bottom of the page were identical.

“Yo, Breeana,” Kal called. “Come have another game. I'll even let you win this time.”

“In a sec.” She shoved the paper in front of Mel's face. “Look. It's totally the same.”

He glanced at it and smiled with relief. This particular copy was written in the ancient language of the vampires. Few vampires alive today could read it, let alone a human. He leaned closer, pretending to examine it. “Yeah, it does. Sort of.”

“Sort of? Are you nuts? They're identical.” Breeana turned around and lifted the bottom of her shirt, showing him her lower back. “See.” She glanced over her shoulder.

“Uh...you're right, they do look similar.”

She dropped her shirt back into place and squinted at the words. “What does this say? Can you read this language?”

He gently took the page from her. “I'm not too sure what this is, and no, I can't read it.” The lie felt bitter on his tongue, but it was best she didn't know. “It's a very old language, written and spoken by ancient vampires. It's been so long since it's been in use, most of us have forgotten how to read or speak it.”

Her eyes narrowed, her gaze zeroing in on his face. He sensed her wheels turning and he saw questions blooming in her hazel eyes. “Oh. That's weird about my birthmark and that drawing, don't you think?”

“Uh, yeah. It's strange all right.” Mel opened the bottom drawer of his desk and quickly shoved the page inside.

“Is there any way you could find out what it is?”

Easier said than done. “I’ll try if it means that much to you, but don’t hold your breath on me finding anything.”

He stood, grabbed her hand, and tugged her back over to the couch. “Come on. I wanna watch you kick Kal’s ass. Knock his ego down a few pegs.”

Breeana followed, laughing. “I’ll have one more game, that’s it. He cheats.”

Mel hoped she didn’t look at him. He knew she’d see the lies he told her plastered all over his face. The last thing she needed right now, with everything else going on, was to find out she may be part of a screwed up vampire legend.

Well you see, sweetheart, there’s this prophecy. A vampire prophecy to be exact. And this prophecy tells of a new breed of warrior who will bring an end to this war. According to the prophecy, these warriors have this mark and the ones carrying this mark will deliver us all from evil. Oh and hey, coincidentally, it’s the same as your birthmark.

Definitely not a conversation he was eager to have.

Thirty minutes later, the sound of Mel’s cell-phone interrupted their laughter. He grabbed it off the coffee table, checked caller I.D, and then cursed.

He stood and headed toward the kitchen. “Hey, Roarik. What’s up? Yeah, we need to talk about that.”

Shit. His defenses were already up and he hadn’t even given Roarik the happy news a human was staying at the base, or that a human carried the mark.

He rubbed his closed eyes with a forefinger and thumb. “I’ll be right up. No, I’ll come to you.”

Mel grabbed a beer from the fridge and gulped it down before heading back into the living room. He sat beside Breeana. Dread ate a hole through his stomach like acid.

“I have to go upstairs for awhile,” he said. “Will you be okay here with Kal?”

“I’ll be fine.” She linked her fingers with his. “Is everything all right? You look a little stressed.”

“Everything’s good. I’ve gotta report to our captain, but it shouldn’t take too long.” *I hope.*

“Yo, Mel. Do ya want me to go with?” Kal asked.

“No. Stay, keep Breeana company. Like I said, this shouldn't take too long.”

She grabbed his arm, stopping him from rising. “Is this about me being here?”

She was way too perceptive. Mel cupped her cheek and kissed her lightly on the lips. “It's nothing to worry about.”

“Are you going to get in trouble because I'm here?”

“Get in trouble?” Mel laughed. “Do I look like the type of guy whom someone could give *trouble* to?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, Mel. Be careful, you might end up grounded.” Unmistakable laughter filled Kal's voice.

Breeana smirked. “Oh, come on. You two are such idiots. All I meant was—”

Mel kissed her, cutting off her words. “I know. I'll be back shortly.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I'll laugh if you do end up grounded.”

The stern look on her face made Mel laugh. God, she was the most amazing woman he'd ever met. What the hell was he going to do without her?

Once upstairs on the main floor, he stood in the large entryway and stared up at the third floor. Roarik's wing. He slowly made his way up the stairs, down the hallway, until he stood outside of his captain's study.

This wasn't going to be good.

With a heavy sigh, he knocked on the door. The hollow sound of his fist echoed against the wood like the hammer strokes of doom.

Christ, can anyone say melodramatic? He shook his head.

When he heard the barked command to enter, he opened the door and stepped inside. He closed the door quietly and leaned his back against it as he stared across the long rectangular room. Roarik sat hunched over his desk, his blond head bent as he wrote in a black leather bound book.

Roarik motioned to a wooden chair in front of his oak desk. “Have a seat. I'll be with you in just a sec. If I don't finish this thought, it'll fly right out of my head.”

“Something important?” Mel asked.

“Important enough for me to finish it.” Not looking up, Roarik pointed to a small fridge in the corner of the room with his pen. “Grab yourself a

beer.”

“Thanks.” Mel opened the fridge and grabbed two. “Want a cold one?”

“Yeah, thanks.” Roarik scribbled two more lines, then closed the book. He accepted the beer and cracked the top, taking a long drink. “Ah, much better.”

“Long day, or should I say weekend?”

“Both.” Roarik sat back in his black swivel chair and twirled his pen in between his long fingers.

Mel took a seat, leaned back, and rested an ankle on his knee. “So, what's the Kelowna squads' new captain like?”

“An arrogant asshole.”

“I see.”

Roarik sighed. “He's some young dick from the third family. I can tell he's going to be nothing but trouble. He's not much older than Kal.” He looked at Mel and smiled. “Can you imagine Kal as a squad leader?”

Mel laughed. “That I can't imagine.”

“I would've come down to your suite for this, but for some reason you didn't want me down there.” Roarik leaned forward, resting his giant forearms along the polished top. “And I can't help but wonder what the reason could be.”

Trepidation shivered up Mel's spine as he stared into Roarik's dark brown eyes. Eyes that pierced through his skull, reading his thoughts as if they were spread out before him like a menu.

A bead of sweat trickled down his temple. *Jesus, he knows.*

“Kal wouldn't happen to have a female downstairs again, would he?”

No, not Kal. Shit, this conversation was too close to the truth. “No.”

Roarik steepled his fingers under his chin. “Good. Anyway, to the reason why I needed to talk to you. Black tells me you may have found a clue about the prophecy.”

Dread turned to rage. Soren he figured would have talked, but Black?

“Come on. Don't keep me in suspense,” Roarik said.

Mel cleared his dry throat and plucked at an imaginary piece of lint on his jeans. “I wouldn't say a clue, more like I found one who carries the mark.”

Roarik's eyes widened and his jaw dropped, his expression similar to someone who just won the lottery but couldn't quite believe it. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope.”

Roarik slumped back in his seat. “Someone actually has the mark of the prophecy? Holy shit. I thought the whole fucking thing was a joke. Nothing but a legend.” He stood and walked over to the large fireplace flanked by floor to ceiling bookshelves. After a few moments of silence, he turned and smiled. “This is insane. There really is some truth to this bullshit?”

“It's starting to look that way, but believe me, the finding of this...person raises more questions.”

“What's his name? What family is he from?”

Mel ran a hand through his hair. “Ah, it's not a...male, it's a female.”

“A female? What the hell?” Roarik stalked back to his desk and sat down, confusion clouded his eyes. “What family is she from?”

Here we go. Time for shit to hit the fan. He caught and held Roarik's gaze. “Brace yourself, because you're not going to like what I have to tell you.”

Roarik's eyes narrowed. “Out with it.”

“She's not from a family. She's a human.”

Roarik's frown deepened until his brows were an angry slash across his forehead. The explosion was building.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Because if you are, I don't find it amusing.”

Mel remained calm. “Sorry, captain. I wish I were. This human female carries the mark. I was as stunned and confused as you.”

Shoving his hands roughly through his shoulder length, blond hair, Roarik gazed up at the ceiling. “A fucking human?” He looked over at Mel and exhaled. “How did you discover the mark? Was it plastered on her forehead?”

Mel got up and paced over to the empty fireplace. He gazed at the red roses in a vase on the mantle, then fingered a delicate petal. The satiny feel reminded him of Breeana's skin.

“I'm about to lose it here,” Roarik said, through gritted teeth.

“She saved my life.”

“I see. Or should I say, I don't, so spill it.”

Mel sat down in a high backed, chintz chair placed beside the fireplace. “Friday night, after Kal and I were patrolling, we stopped at the Green Tree for a drink. I met a woman and we stepped out back...” He cleared his throat again.

“I get the picture.”

He filled him in, leaving out a couple of details. Like the fact Breeana was here.

“Quite the story,” Roarik said after Mel finished. “How are you now? Everything good?”

“Yeah. I've healed up fine.”

“Did you happen to get the human's address? We'll need to contact her when we find out what the fuck this all means.”

Okay, shit hitting fan right about now. He opened his mouth, ready to speak, but stopped. His tongue couldn't form the correct movements conducive with speech.

“Well, did you or didn't you get her address?”

“I do have her address, but...” Mel's voice trailed off. He bolted up, moving to stand beside the fireplace.

“What...the... hell...did you do?”

The angry tone in Roarik's voice caused Mel's own anger to boil over. “I brought her here.”

“You did what? Are you fucking insane?”

“Yes, I am insane, but not about this. And I'd do it again. I was not about to leave her to die a painful death at the hands of the demons.”

Roarik's face turned red with rage, which cranked his own higher. With a vicious curse, Mel marched over to the desk and shouted, “She saved my life! How the fuck could I leave her? And before you say anything, she stays until I find those two bastards and kill them.”

Anger seethed behind Roarik's narrowed eyes, ready to explode with destructive force. He jumped up and bared his teeth. “How dare you bring a goddamn human into my house!” He stormed over to the fireplace, clenching and unclenching his large hands; rage pouring off him in hot waves. “I don't give a rat's ass if she carries the mark. When we figured out what the hell this all means, then we could've taken her, not before.” With a roar, he spun around and slammed his fist into the wall, cracking the plaster.

Mel decided to get it all out. Let Roarik do his worst. “Her memories will not be touched when she leaves. They will be too deep and I won't have her damaged.”

Roarik swung around, pegging him with a murderous stare. “Not your call to make, Mel. She will not be allowed to wander around spreading

rumors about vampires.” He marched back over to his black chair and sat down, scrubbing his face with his hands.

Mel slammed a hand on top of the desk and shoved a finger in Roarik's face. “Don't you dare touch her. God help you if you erase one memory in her head. Do I make myself clear?”

Roarik's hands slowly drop from his face.

Rage coursed through Mel like wildfire. He braced himself for the expected and deserved detonation of wrath, but his captain remained disturbingly quiet.

Shit! This silent routine was more menacing than his anger.

After a few more moments of the eyeball to eyeball routine, Roarik finally broke the silence with a heavy sigh. “My friend. What the hell is going on with you?”

Confused beyond words, Mel couldn't reply.

Roarik stretched back in his seat. “How long have we known one another? Over two hundred years?”

Not knowing where this was going, Mel nodded.

“I'd like to think after all this time we've become friends.” Roarik rose. He walked over to the small apartment sized fridge, withdrew two beers, and slid one across his desk toward Mel. Sitting, he opened his and guzzled a large drink. He raised one golden brow. “Am I wrong?”

With shaky hands, Mel cracked his beer, swallowing a mouthful. “No. I'd like to believe we're friends.”

Roarik nodded. “I know all about your wife and mother's deaths. Your abusive upbringing.” He swallowed another mouthful of beer. “And I know about the rotten son-of-a-bitch who called himself your father.”

“Your point?”

“My point is, I know you and what makes you tick pretty well. But this outburst over this human has caught me completely off guard. So do you mind telling me what's going on, because if I didn't know any better, I'd think you have feelings for her.”

Jittery, Mel moved around the room. He stopped when he reached the fireplace and stared inside at the cold ashes. How could he explain what he felt for Breeana when he didn't even understand it? The dreams, the deep feelings she brought out in him, the strange connection they seemed to share?

He couldn't without sounding like a lunatic. So instead he said, "I'll deal with the demons, then she'll go back to her life and I'll cut all contact with her."

"She'll talk. We can't risk our discovery. You know this."

"I promise you, she won't. And even if she did, who will believe her?"

"We can't take the slightest risk." Roarik crushed his empty can and tossed it into the garbage. "So unless you give me a good enough reason not to erase her memories, you know I'll have to do it."

Mel cursed under his breath. "All right, but it's going to sound insane." He walked back over to the desk and flopped down in the seat. "I've dreamt of her. Not just once or twice, but many times over the past fifty years. When I saw her at the club...shit, I couldn't believe it." He eyed Roarik, trying to gage his reaction but the vampire's face remained blank. "To make a long story short, we seem to share some kind of connection."

Roarik smirked. "A connection? She's a human for God sakes. Hell, bed her if you want, but don't confuse lust for love."

"It's more than just lust," Mel snapped.

"Well then, gratitude for saving your ass maybe?" Roarik said with a sarcastic smile.

His anger once again swam to the surface, threatening to crack open the tight lid he had on his self-control. "Fuck you."

"Sorry, cheap shot. But nevertheless, humans have no place with us, or we with them. I don't like risking our discovery, so find those two demons and deal with them as soon as possible. Because I'm feeling generous, I will grant your request and not erase her memories. But know this, she'll be monitored— not by you." He looked pointedly at Mel. "By another to keep an eye on her because of the prophecy, but if I find out she's spreading rumors, you know I'll have to."

Relief was too weak of a word for what Mel felt. Why Roarik was going to allow Breeana to leave with her mind still intact was a mystery.

"Thank you," he said.

Roarik inclined his head in acknowledgment. "We need to concentrate harder on figuring out the prophecy. What about looking into human history? Their ancient religions perhaps?"

"I've already started and so far nothing, but there's a lot of material to cover."

“Good. I'd like to meet this little warrior woman of yours.” A slow smile stretched Roarik’s lips so wide, the tips of his canines came into view.

His heart leapt into his throat as he glanced down. Shit, Roarik was intimidating as hell. Definitely not the easiest guy to get along with. Even Mel and the rest of the clansmen feared him at times. He couldn't imagine Breeana being grilled by him and not fainting in terror.

He raised his eyes to his captain's. “Why do you want to meet her?”

Ignoring his question, Roarik laughed, “Come on, Mel. I won't scare her...too much.”

Damn it. He couldn't deny the request as much as he wanted to. “How about tomorrow night?”

“Good.”

“Word of warning. She knows nothing of the prophecy and I would like to keep it that way.”

“I agree.” Roarik rose and clapped Mel on the back. “Oh, one more thing before you go. Did you really say a little human female saved your life, or was I hearing things?”

Mel tried to hide his smile, but failed. “Asshole.”

Chapter 17

Monday, June 16, 12:45am.

Mel and Kal patrolled the dark, quiet streets of Surrey's downtown core. They'd been hunting for an hour without so much as a twinge to alert them demons were in the area. Mel's frustration mounted. He had to find the female demon—kill her—so Breeana could get on with her life. Roarik may have been in a rare generous mood, allowing her memories to remain, but Mel wasn't sure how long that would last. He needed her gone from the base before Roarik changed his mind.

“Quiet, eh?” Kal asked.

Mel glanced at him, unsure if he meant the lack of demons or the lack of conversation. “Yeah.”

They continued in silence; their footsteps echoed off the buildings. A siren wailed in the distance and a dog barked a couple of streets over. Mel inhaled, catching nothing but garbage, the fresh scent of baking pizza dough, and car exhaust.

A few blocks up, he stopped as a familiar current raced up his spine. Mel laid a hand on Kal's arm to let him know a demon had been detected, but there was no need. By the way Kal sniffed the air, he seemed to have sensed it.

“Bingo,” Mel whispered.

Kal stared off into the distance, his nostrils flared as if trying to catch the demon's scent. “Can ya tell how many?”

Mel closed his eyes. His senses reached out and locked on the demon's essence. “I think only one—two maybe, but there's a human with it. You knock out the human, I'll go after the demon. I have a few questions for it.”

“Gotcha, man.”

Mel glanced around the immediate area. The streets were mainly deserted, just a couple cars cruising by. He pointed ahead at an old warehouse and a derelict apartment complex. “I think they're in an alley

between those two buildings. Let's make this quick before the demon catches wind of us, if it hasn't already.”

To make sure they weren't spotted, they stepped behind a construction barricade and disappeared.

As soon as they took form in the alley's entrance, Mel scanned the scene. It was nothing more than a dark narrow strip between two tall structures. A blue dumpster and a stack of flattened cardboard boxes were shoved against one wall. Standing in the center of the space, a thin male demon with spiky blond hair spun around. Its black eyes widened with surprise. What little light the alleyway provided, danced off the many earrings in its ears.

Recognition slapped Mel. His rage intensified. The black-haired witch's sidekick.

A young human male, no more than seventeen or eighteen, shoved a baggy down the front of his dirty blue jeans and turned to run. Kal grabbed the kid from behind and spun him around. With their faces close together, Kal stared into the boy's eyes until he went limp, falling into a deep sleep.

Once Mel knew the kid was passed out, he chased the demon fleeing toward the back of the alley. It dove, grasped a hold of the chain link fence, and tried to scramble up.

He jumped and grabbed the back of the demon's gray suede coat, yanked it down, then locked a forearm around its throat; his dagger pressed tight under its chin.

“The she-demon, where is she?” Mel jerked his arm tighter.

A strangled croak came from the demon as it tried to pry loose.

As he leaned closer, the putrid essence of the demon's sweat assaulted him. The stench almost made him gag. He tightened his hold. His desire to snap its neck almost overcame him. It took all his will to stay his rage.

Loud gasps came from the creature and its face turned blue.

Mel eased his grip slightly, but pushed the tip of his blade higher. “Where is she?”

The demon coughed. “I...I don't...know.”

The dagger's point broke through the tender flesh under the creature's chin. “I'm warning you, if you don't—”

Laughter shook the demon's body. “You'll what, vampire? You have no leverage. You're going to kill me no matter what.”

“True, but I can make your death less painful. Your choice.”

“Ah, slayer, you're a fool. Where I'm going, no amount of pain will come close to what's waiting for me. Do your worst, but know this, she will find your little whore. And when she does, the human's screams of agony will be heard for miles. And if she catches you too, you'll be bound with your eyes taped open so you can watch the torture—”

The words shoved aside Mel's sanity. Black rage filled every corner of his mind. His arm squeezed as he lifted the demon off the ground. Its legs flailed, its mouth opened, trying to suck in air.

“Just kill the fucker,” Kal yelled. “The maggot sack isn't going to tell you anything.”

Mel lowered the male until its feet just touched the pavement. “Tell me where the fuck she is!”

The demon wheezed as it drew in oxygen. “F...fuck...you.”

With a sharp twist, he snapped its neck. The demon dropped to the ground, twitching, but still breathing.

Kal plunged his dagger into the heart. A black mass seeped out of its open mouth and the body exploded into dust.

Mel panted as he stared at the pile of debris. His fury burned out of control. His fear for Breeana, his worry he wouldn't be able to protect her came to a head. It built higher, stronger. His body resonated as his head swam with thoughts of pain, torture, death. He needed a release before he lost it.

The demon. He would have carved the mother up good, but Kal—his head swung around. Kal wiped his bloodied blade on a piece of discarded newspaper. He had taken that pleasure from him.

Mel's fingers clenched around the hilt of his blade. “Why did you kill it? I needed answers.”

Kal sheathed his dagger. “Dude. It wasn't going to tell you squat. It would've only kept taunting you. Besides, you snapped its frickin' neck. It wouldn't have been able to speak.”

“I would've made it talk.”

“That's bullshit and you know it.” Kal sighed. “We'll find her. The other warriors are on the lookout too. She can't hide forever.”

Mel paced the length of the alley. His fingers curled into fists until his nails bit into his palms. He tried to calm his anger, but it circulated around and around until it consumed him. He grabbed the dumpster and hoisted it over his head before hurling it through the chain link fence. The heavy

metal container landed, rolled, and smashed with a loud crash into a brick structure across the street. The sound reverberated off the buildings. A car alarm blared. And from the apartment complex, a man yelled out a window. “You filthy punks! Keep it down or I’ll call the cops.”

Mel and Kal jumped into the darker shadows next to the building. “What the hell, man? Let’s get outta here before he does call the cops.”

Kal was right but at that moment, Mel couldn’t have cared less. His fury swirled through him like a tornado and just as destructive.

He roared and smashed his fist through the side of the warehouse. Wood fragments and dust flew up in the air. Blood dripped off his scrapped knuckles. The pain was good. It helped him focus.

Kal grabbed his shoulders and spun him around. “Get a grip, man. You’re on the edge.”

He shoved out of Kal’s grasp and marched across the alley.

Kal appeared in front of him. “You need to calm yourself. You’re losing it, big time.”

Mel looked away. He knew he was losing it. He didn’t need Kal to point that fact out. With each passing day, Breeana’s life was on the line the more his sanity slipped.

“Let’s go, dude,” Kal said. “If that asshole didn’t call the cops, you can bet someone else did.”

Nodding, he stepped past the human lying on the filthy pavement. He glanced down at his face. In sleep, the teen appeared younger than he was. Under the dirt, grime, and drug addiction, this young human was someone’s child. Someone out there was probably worried sick about him.

His hatred for the demons skyrocketed. Hatred for the games they played, the tricks they pulled. The way they manipulated humans made him sick. Demons preyed on the weak, lying, tempting the ones whose lives were hard enough.

He knelt beside the young man.

“What are ya doing, man?” Kal asked.

“Helping this poor bastard out if I can. I’m sick of the demons ruining people’s lives.”

“Well, ain’t you just the humanitarian.”

“Whatever.” Mel’s mind drilled through the human’s brain until he found the addiction. *When you wake up, you’ll no longer need drugs. You’ll find a job and clean up your life.*

He straightened. "I'm ready. Let's go bag us some more demons."

Kal laid a hand on Mel's shoulder. "How about we end the night with a drink at The Green Tree? You look like you could use a belt or two."

"No. We need to keep hunting."

"You're completely wired, Jack. One drink, just ta calm ya down."

He didn't need a drink. What he needed was an outlet for the anger still seething within. He sampled the air, drawing a great lungful in, hoping to catch the rotten scent of Lucifer's lackeys, but it came up clean. *Dammit.*

"Hey, whadda ya say?" Kal asked. "At least you better calm your ass down before going home or you'll freak Breeana out."

Mel went motionless.

Breeana. He didn't want her to see him like this. With the way he was feeling, he was liable to scare the shit out of her. "One drink, then we hunt for a few more hours."

"All right. Now you're talking." Kal motioned toward Mel's mouth. "Ah, dude, you might want to do something about those."

Mel touched the tip of his tongue to the needle sharp point of one of his canines. He hadn't realized his fangs were exposed. Shit, he really was pumped. He forced them to retract.

They disappeared, reappearing in the back parking lot of The Green Tree. Once seated at a table in the back of the club with a drink in his hand, Mel tried to relax.

Kal leaned back in his seat. "Do you think maybe the she-demon has left the area?"

"Doubtful," Mel drawled. He tossed back the last swallow of his Jack Daniels and rolled the empty glass between his palms. From their dimly lit corner, he watched a large group of drunken men hollering and laughing. With another loud shout, they downed their shots of alcohol and banged the glasses hard on the table.

Didn't these idiots have a life? Monday night and they're at a nightclub.

Yeah? And where exactly was he?

Yes, but he longed to be at home with the woman he loved.

Shit.

Mel blew his breath out and rubbed a palm over his whiskered chin.

Kal leaned forward. "Has Breeana's friend seen them again?"

"No. Breeana called her earlier this evening and nothing so far."

Kal reached into his jacket and pulled out his pocketknife.

From the corner of his eye, Mel watched as Kal picked at his nails. Just fucking great. Kal's mouth must feel the need to yap and that was the last bloody thing he felt like doing. Especially after being grilled by Roarik earlier.

Mel raised two fingers to the waitress as she passed their table and then glanced at Kal. "Out with it."

"Out with what?"

"As soon as you pull out your goddamn pocketknife and start picking at your hands, I know you're going to start hounding me with questions."

Kal chuckled and folded his knife, putting it back into his pocket. "What did Roarik have to say?"

"Not much."

"Come on, man, what did he say about Breeana and the prophecy?"

"Well, he's not too happy about a human having the mark."

"Couldn't have been all that bad, the house is still standing. I thought for sure when you told him Breeana was at the base, he would have exploded."

"Yeah, you're right. It could have been a hell of a lot worse." Mel propped his elbow on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "I just hope tomorrow night goes smoothly."

"What's happening tomorrow night?"

"Roarik wants to meet Breeana."

Kal whistled through his teeth. "Shit, dude. She's going to think she's met the Bogeyman. Roarik can be one freaky mother when he wants to be."

"No kidding."

Their waitress approached the table with their drinks. As she set them down, she glanced at Kal through her lashes and smiled.

Mel nudged Kal's foot under the table.

With a wink, Kal slowly stuffed a folded twenty dollar bill in her ample cleavage. With a blush staining her cheeks, she hurried off, swinging her hips.

Kal's eyes tracked her movements. "I think I've figured out who I'm having for dinner and desert tonight."

"She looks tasty."

"Speaking of tasty. What's going on between you and Breeana?"

Mel opened his mouth, ready to tell Kal where he could shove that question, but Kal beat him to it.

"Before you tell me to shove it, I just want to say I'm not blind or deaf."

Believing he was referring to their lovemaking, Mel narrowed his eyes and asked, “What the fuck does that mean?”

Understanding crossed Kal's face and he leaned to the side. “Whoa, not what you're thinking, so chill. All I meant was I've never heard you laugh so much. I've watched you with her and shit, man, you're like actually a nice guy.”

Mel relaxed his stare. “Yeah well, she brings out the best in me, what can I say?” He lifted his drink and took a healthy sip.

“I think she cares for you too.”

“Just stop right there, Kal. It's not going to happen.”

“Why not? Shit, Mel, why the hell not? If you care for her, and I know you do, why not go for it?”

“Because!” Mel's shout reverberated off the back wall causing heads to turn in their direction. He lowered his voice. “How the fuck do you suppose it'll work, huh? She's a human. Their life span is a lot shorter than ours, but more importantly the life I lead is too dangerous. You know for her safety and ours, she would have to leave everything familiar to her to be with me. Her friends, family, her career. How the hell do you ask someone to do that?”

Kal took a drink of his beer and set it down on the table. “How about you ask her, see what she has to say. And as for the aging difference, you know there's a way.”

“Are you drunk?” He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Kal knew the repercussion. “You want me to ask her to bind her life-force with mine? Are you insane?”

“It's just a suggestion—”

“A suggestion? Do you mind telling me how the hell I'd go about asking her? Because it's not like asking someone to marry you, asshole.”

Kal dropped his gaze to his beer. “Fuck you, I was just tryin' to help.”

“Help?” Turning, Mel shoved a finger into Kal's face. “Don't, and I mean don't, mention it again. She leaves as soon as this is over, we clear?”

“Yeah?” Kal asked, his eyes narrowing to lethal slits. “What about the prophecy?”

“That has nothing to do with her.”

“Oh, and how you figure that? She's the only clue we've got. And it's not your call, Mel. It's up to the Sacred Order.”

Mel couldn't reply. Rage and fear momentarily strangled him. When he could finally speak, he said, "They can all fuck themselves. I make the decisions pertaining to her, no one else. She's not to be involved in any of our crap and that includes the prophecy"

"Okay, okay. Shit, you don't have to bite my head off."

Guilt over his behavior quickly replaced Mel's anger.

What the hell was the matter with him? Attacking Kal like that was uncalled for. This whole situation was making him insane.

With a weary sigh, Mel reached out a hand as if to lay on Kal's shoulder, but dropped it. "Look, I'm...sorry, all right? I'm under a lot of stress and I guess I took it out on you. Obviously I'm not handling it too well."

Kal downed the last of his beer and glanced in Mel's direction. He smiled, relieving the tension. "Peace man. I know what a closed book you are."

"Thanks."

The bartender shouted out, 'last call.' The humans seated next to the bar banged their empty glasses, demanding a refill.

Mel motioned toward the bar with his head. "Looks like your dinner's ready."

Their waitress leaned against the bar, coat in hand, eyeing Kal like he was a tempting feast.

Kal smiled and waved. "Good, I'm starving."

Chapter 18

Mel left Kal at The Green Tree and materialized in his living room. The glow of the floor lamp illuminated Breeana as she slept on the couch, curled on her side with one hand under her cheek. He smiled, then squatted in front of her.

She's beautiful; not just her outside, but inside as well.

He brushed a dark strand of hair off her cheek, curling it around his finger before letting it fall to her shoulder. His hand, poised over her face, shook. He itched to touch the pale softness of her cheek, her satiny lips, the graceful curve of her throat. Instead he lowered it to his lap and bowed his head. Christ, he couldn't even be around her for two seconds without needing to touch her. Probably because her touch had breathed new life into his soul and thawed his frozen heart.

Mel moved to Kal's recliner. With a sigh, his body sank into the worn comfort of the chair. Of their own accord, his eyes found her again. Shit, he was hooked good and tight.

Hope had flared in his chest when Kal reminded him there was a way to prolong her life, but as quick as it came, he squashed it. The price to pay was too damn high. Probably why the thought had never occurred to him.

He drummed his fingers on his thigh. Besides, that was neither here nor there. Presumptuous on his part, really. They've never spoken of feelings. He knew she cared for him. He could feel it in the way she touched him, kissed him, and he could see it in her eyes. How intense her feelings ran was another question. Enough to drink his blood to lengthen her life?

Doubtful. She'd most likely run screaming the moment he mentioned it. And if that wasn't enough to frighten her away, wait until he informed her that her life would forever after be in his hands. Literally. When he died, she'd die. Poof, gone. One second alive, the next...not. And hell, his days were numbered; every slayer's days were numbered. Hunting and fighting demons was extremely dangerous.

In actuality, he'd be shortening her life, not prolonging it. So, no. Definitely not an option.

“Hi,” Breeana said, yawning as she rubbed sleep-filled eyes. “When did you get in?”

“Fifteen minutes ago.”

She sat up and stretched. “Why didn't you wake me?”

“You looked comfortable and I figured you must be exhausted.”

“Well, if I look exhausted, you look half-dead.”

“Thanks.” He laughed. “Is that your way of saying I look like shit?”

“Not shit, just tired.”

He moved, sat beside her, and pulled her into his arms. She snuggled against him with a sigh. He closed his eyes, absorbing her soft weight, loving the comfort just being around her provided. “Listen, I was thinking —”

She chuckled against his chest. “That's dangerous. You should really stop doing that.”

“Smartass.” Mel gave her a light squeeze. “Do you want to hear what I was going to suggest, or not?”

She looked up at him with a wide smile. “Sure, sorry, but you left yourself wide open. I couldn't resist.”

Mel stared at her soft, pink lips, remembering their taste and how they felt against his. Not able to resist himself, he leaned down and kissed her. When he pulled back, her hazel eyes had darkened to a deep green. She licked her lips and sighed. Desire coiled through his limbs, but he shoved it aside.

“I was thinking we could go for a walk around the grounds. It's a beautiful summer night and there's an hour or so before the sun comes up.”

Breeana quickly sat up. “I'd love to.”

Her enthusiasm was contagious. “Well, let's go.” Mel set her on her feet.

“Do I need a jacket?” she asked, looking down at her green T-shirt and jean pants that stopped just below her knees.

“No, it's warm.”

She shoved her feet into her running shoes and grabbed his hand. She followed behind as he led the way down the long, dimly lit underground tunnel to the stairs leading above.

When they stepped through the door to the main house, Mel moved aside, giving her a better view. All was quiet; the others were either still out or asleep in their rooms downstairs.

Delight brightened her face as she walked in circles. She gazed at the large, spacious entranceway.

“Wow,” she whispered.

Mel glanced around, seeing the splendor of the room for the first time. The space was rectangular in shape and the ceiling soared high above. Dark brown tile covered the floor and the walls were painted a cheery, pale yellow. The wainscoting and trim were stained a deep rich mahogany, and the floor to ceiling velvet drapes covering two large windows were the same dark rich color.

She pointed toward the drapes and arched an eyebrow. “Are there windows behind those drapes?”

“On the outside, yes. For aesthetics only. But they're boarded up behind for obvious reasons.”

“No kidding. If I were a vampire, I'd hate to be caught in here when the sun's out.”

“Exactly.”

She walked closer to the wooden double doors and stopped. Her head swiveled from side to side as she glanced at the two sets of stairs, starting on each side of the doors, leading up to the second and third floor. Wrought iron hand railings ran the length of both.

Her eyes caught and held his. “This is absolutely glorious.”

He stared back. “Yeah, you're right. You're absolutely glorious.”

Blushing, she gazed up at the third floor balcony. “What's up there?”

“Our captain and his wife's suite, and his office. But mostly just empty rooms. Same with the second floor.”

“So, you and the others live downstairs?”

“Yeah.”

“What's behind all these closed doors down here?”

“Your standard rooms: kitchen, dining room, TV room.”

She peeked at him sideways and laughed. “Yeah, standard.” She gave the room one more all over look, and then grabbed his hand. “Well, as amazing as this house is, I'm dying to be outdoors.”

Laughing, Mel followed behind her. He punched in the code to unlock the doors. He flicked a switch that controlled the outside lights. Holding one door open, he again stepped aside, giving her a view of the gardens. “After you, sweetheart.”

She stepped out onto the veranda and her breath caught. “Oh, my God! These gardens belong in a fairytale.”

Mel stood beside her. He had seen the gardens a million times, but had never given much thought to them. Flowers bloomed everywhere, filling the night with a riot of color and sweet perfume. Pots filled with large ferns adorned every corner on the veranda and two urns, overflowing with brightly colored petunias, were placed on either side of the opening to the stairs leading down to the yard.

He let Breeana take the lead. She stopped, standing on the circular driveway and glanced over her shoulder. “The house is beautiful, but this,” she held her arms out wide, twirling in a circle, “is exquisite.”

He tried to imagine seeing the grounds through her eyes. He was struck by how picturesque it all was. The driveway meandered down until it came to a wrought iron gate standing twelve feet high with tall spikes gracing the top. Beyond the manicured lawns and many flower gardens, the wrought iron fence proceeded, surrounding the half-acre property. A dense forest made up of pine, cedar, fir, and maple trees went on for miles until it met the gravel road.

Breeana slipped her hand into his, lacing their fingers.

They wandered down a brick path flanked with LED lights, and glowing white daisies. Moonlight bathed the path in a soft gray light. The large trees lining the fence sparkled with thousands of twinkling lights, like stars that had fallen and gotten tangled in their branches.

Breeana bent and picked a daisy. She plucked the petals off one by one. “He loves me, he loves me not.” She laughed as she glanced at him. “Did you ever play this game when you were a child?”

“What game is that?”

“You pick the petals off a daisy saying, he loves me, he loves me not. When you come to the last petal, it tells you whether or not he cares about you.”

“Does it work?”

“Honestly? I don't know.” She pitched the flower and clasped his hand again.

I love her. How can I let her go?

The day she left would be the day his heart would wither up and die. Yet, she was too good for the likes of him and his world was no good for her. And because he loved her, he would let her go.

“So,” Breeana said, turning and walking down the path. “Am I still going to be a guest at *Hotel Mel*?”

He slowly followed. “I’m sorry, looks as if you’ll be spending another evening at Hotel Mel.”

“I told you not to apologize. And I also told you that Hotel Mel isn’t a bad place to be spending my vacation.”

He draped his arm around her shoulders, hugging her to his side. “I’m glad you find it so accommodating.”

She glanced at him through her lashes. “Among other things.”

His heart pounded with love. All of a sudden, the need to know everything about her—her likes and dislikes, her dreams and desires—became an obsession. “What’s your favorite color?”

“My favorite color? Hmm, let me think...There are so many I like. It’s difficult to choose just one.”

“Try.”

“Okay. Let’s see...I guess I would have to say orange. What about you? What’s your favorite color?”

“Hazel,” he said, gazing deep into her eyes.

“Hazel?” A frown creased her brow before she smiled, apparently catching his meaning. “Come on, Mel. Pick another color, and it has to be from a rainbow, or at least a mixture of colors from a rainbow.”

“I’ve never seen a rainbow, so I don’t know what colors one holds.”

“In that case, let me describe one to you.” She moved around the garden, picking choice colors of flowers. When she was done, she sat down on a small wooden bench and pulled off the petals.

He sat beside her. She placed the petals in a colorful arc across her thigh.

When she was finished, she beamed. “This is a rainbow. Smaller, but the colors are the same. When it’s raining and the sun peeks out, the light reflects off the water droplets and, ta da, a rainbow.” She swung her arm in a wide arc. “The bands arc across the sky in a brilliant display of colors. It’s truly a sight to behold.”

A sudden sadness crept across her face. Mel tilted her chin up so he could see her eyes. “It sounds beautiful, so why the sad look?”

“You’re right, rainbows are beautiful. The majority of us take them for granted. Like me. I see a rainbow and think, wow, how beautiful, then that’s it. Gone. Forgotten.” She gazed out over the lawns and gardens. “I wonder if rainbows are one of the marvels the gods created for us and we just

ignore them. Like flowers, the stars, and the moon. They're always there, we just overlook them.”

His love for her engulfed him. The intensity of it was akin to pain; a pain he was afraid would never go away. She looked up at him, smiling at first, then sadness once more dominated her features. And he knew she was thinking the same thing he was; their love had no future.

He grazed his knuckles down her cheek. “It's funny how we can forget some things so easily, but others you know you'll never forget.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. Clearing her throat, she stood and walked a short distance from him. He watched as she struggled with her emotions but he could offer no comfort. He was having a difficult enough time with his own.

After a few moments, she said, “You never gave me an answer.”

“Excuse me?”

“Your favorite color?”

“Right. Well, since you won't accept hazel, how about black.” *Like my soul.*

“That's not even a color, smartie, and it's definitely not from a rainbow.”

Mel stood next to her and grasped her hand. Her small fingers intertwined with his. “You choose for me.”

“All right, I will. How about red?”

“Why red?”

She reached up and fingered his hair. “I think red would work very well with your coloring.”

“Then red it is. How about your favorite food?”

“What is this, twenty questions?”

He pulled her closer and kissed her lips. “Just humor me.”

With an exaggerated sigh, she laughed again. “A hot fudge brownie delight from Dairy Queen.”

“That's not food.”

“Spoken like someone who doesn't like chocolate. What about you? What's your favorite food?”

“You.” He laughed out loud at the look she shot him.

She leaned against his chest and smiled up at him. “Will you be serious?”

“I am, but if you won't accept that, how about...spaghetti.”

“Good choice.” Breeana bent and picked another large daisy. She stretched onto her toes and gently placed it behind his ear, then stepped

back to get a look at her handiwork. She burst out laughing.

Mel straightened to his full height and assumed a mock fierce look. “What's so funny?”

“You. You look so cute. Definitely not like a dangerous vampire warrior.”

He smiled, and then flung his arm around her shoulders and continued walking down the path. He plucked the flower from his hair and placed it into his jacket pocket. “Yeah. Cute isn't a good look for a warrior. At least not if he wants to be taken seriously.”

They came upon a bench hidden amongst large maple trees, surrounded by an abundance of flowers. Mel sat and pulled her into his arms. He stared out from the secret grotto, overlooking the property.

“What was your childhood like?” he asked against her hair.

She exhaled a heavy sigh. “It was wonderful. Full of laughter, love, and happiness. My parents were extraordinary people. I loved them very much. They died in a car crash on their way back from their vacation in Ontario. It's been five years since their passing and I still miss them terribly.”

He rubbed his cheek against the top of her head. Her sorrowed lay heavy between them. “I'm very sorry.”

“Thanks. The only regret I have is I've no brothers or sisters. Maybe if I had, the death of my parents wouldn't have left me feeling so...alone.”

“You have no family?”

“Distant cousins, but that's it. I've always wanted to belong to a large family. I'd hoped I'd marry into one, but....” She cleared her throat. “What about you? Any brothers or sisters?”

He stiffened. Why the hell did he ask about her family? Of course her natural response would be to then ask about his. His goddamn family and up-bringing was so different from hers. Definitely not filled with love, laughter, and kindness. Only pain and insanity.

Breeana shifted in his arms and looked at him. “Mel?”

Fear stole the warmth from his blood. He swallowed hard. His eyes shifted to her face. As he stared into the hazel depth, he was struck by how much she had given him since the night they met. How she honored him with her trust, her faith, her passion, and her understanding. At that moment, he wanted to tell her all. Every dark secret he held. He wanted to pour his heart out to her and beg for her understanding. He needed her to assure him that there was more to him than what was in his dark soul. But for the most part, he wanted to honor her with the truth.

Mel cleared his throat and glanced up. The darker images of the trees were silhouetted against the deep navy blue of the sky.

“Dysfunctional doesn't even begin to describe my family. As for my childhood, well, it was anything but happy. There was no love, no joy, only pain and hate. My father was an abusive bastard that beat the shit out of me at every opportunity.”

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Chapter 19

Breeana stared at Mel, appalled by his words. The gardens—the beauty of the evening—forgotten.

“The first memory I had as a child was of my father dragging me from the slave dungeon and locking me in the killing cage.”

She jerked back. His arm slid from around her shoulders. “The what?”

His eyelids lowered as he looked at the grass. “It was an iron box suspended outside from the top of the castle by a chain. The front had narrow slits, just wide enough to allow the morning sun to shine in. He used the cage to punish his slaves or his soldiers, hell, sometimes just for sport.”

“Oh my God!”

Mel's gaze drifted out over the yard. The look on his face told her he no longer saw the gardens or smelled the perfume scented air. His mind must have drifted back hundreds of years, reliving what sounded like a horrific nightmare.

“When I realized what he was about to do, I panicked. I fought back but I was young, maybe four or five. My arm snapped as he shoved me inside but I didn't feel the pain, it paled in comparison to the terror I felt when I heard the lock click.”

His eyes filled with terror and bounced around like the eyes of a trapped, frightened animal. “I knew what was coming. I'd heard the screams of others who had burned alive.” He swallowed. A trickle of sweat coursed down his temple. “I clawed at the bars, pleaded with my father, but he just laughed. The look in his eyes was pure hatred.”

His words chilled her to the bone. Nausea churned her stomach.

“I tried to sift—disappear—but vampires can't sift through metal or rock, and the spaces between the bars were too narrow. I was trapped. I...I continued begging my father to release me. Then as the first rays touch my skin, just when the pain began, he ordered his soldiers to pull the cage back in.”

Numbness spread through her. She opened her mouth, but shut it. What did you say to someone who had lived through such a traumatic

experience?

“That was the first, but not the last time he locked me in,” he said in a flat tone. “Each time he pulled me back in. I don't know why he didn't end it there.”

“Where—” she cleared her throat. “Where was your mother? Was she... gone?”

A soft breeze lifted long strands of his black hair and blew them off his face. “No. She was alive.”

Breana sucked in a sharp gulp of air. Her hands clenched until her nails dug into her palms. “If she was alive, then how could she have allowed your father to treat you like that?”

Mel glanced at her; his eyes mirrored the look of someone in the throes of agony. “She didn't know I was alive.”

“How is that possible?”

He moved out of her embrace and stood. He walked over to a large maple tree and gripped the lower branch.

Breana bit her lip to stay quiet. As much as she wanted to yell at him to answer, something stopped her. She had a feeling if she pressed him he'd clam up, and she sensed the telling of his past was crucial for him; as needful as drawing poison from a wound.

With his back to her, he spoke. “Most of my early years I spent wondering why my mother abandoned me. Eventually, I worked up the courage to ask my father about her.”

She was afraid to ask, but she couldn't stop her words. “What did he tell you?”

“He told me that she was nothing but a slut. That I was the product of her whoring around, so she gave me to him to do away with or use as another slave.” He gave her a cold smile. “Deep down, a part of me was thrilled because that meant the bastard wasn't really my father.”

She choked on her sobs. “Mel. . .”

He heaved a heavy sigh. “On rare occasions, I would see my mother out walking. She was beautiful and elegant. She reminded me of an angel. I'd watch her from the shadows. I desperately wanted to ask her why she didn't want me, but I didn't. I already knew. I was nothing more than a mistake. Just a filthy little urchin and she, she was this beautiful, noble female who walked right past me like I was nothing more than a speck of dust. I can't tell you how much I despised her. I blamed her for all the crap I went

through. I blamed my father, but my hatred toward her was...intense to say the least.”

Breeana stood and closed the distance between them. She stopped behind him, reached up to lay a hand on his back, but dropped it back to her side. What comfort could she possibly offer?

Mel turned so she could see his profile. “I lived in the dungeons with the other slaves until I was around seven or eight, then my father brought me from the cell to live in the main hall. I served him and a handful of his knights. I was their personal slave and whipping boy.”

A sarcastic smile lifted one side of his lips. “You'd have thought my existence would have improved but if anything, it became worse. Now I was underfoot—a constant reminder to fuel his anger and hate. I tried to stay out of his way as much as possible, but...”

Her heart clenched with sorrow as a fresh bout of tears spilled over her lashes. The need to touch him was overwhelming; the need to try to comfort him. But by sheer willpower alone she held back.

“As a child, the beatings became just part of life. What I couldn't understand were the words Father repeatedly screamed at me. Not a day would pass without him grabbing me by the scruff and shouting in my face that he was my father and being such, I was never to disobey him. But, there were also times when he would hold me down, screaming over and over that he wasn't my father. That I was nothing but a worthless sack of shit, who slithered out from between a filthy whore's thighs, and he'd rather die before he raised someone else's bastard to be a warrior.”

Mel closed his eyes, rubbing them with his fingers hard enough to poke them out. “I pleaded with the gods to either kill me or my father, but they didn't listen.”

She couldn't bear to hear anymore. She didn't know how to ease his pain. All she could do was stare as he battled his internal demons. Grabbing his hands, she brought them to her lips. He looked down at her and she reached up to swipe a strand of hair behind his ear before leading him back to the bench. After they were seated, she pulled him into her arms. At first he remained stiff, but when she stroked his back, he finally rested his weight against her.

“Do you want to know what was worse than the beatings?” His warm breath blew along her throat.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

“The hatred and insanity in his eyes. He didn't see me, as if I didn't even exist. I was just a body he used to take his rage out on.”

Breeana laid her cheek against his hair and tightened her hold.

“When I was about nine, my brother was born. Once he arrived, my father ignored me for the most part. He would parade around the grounds and the castle with my brother perched on his shoulders, showing him off. I despised my brother. He had everything I didn't. Yet as much as I hated him, I was thankful for his birth. My life, for awhile, became tolerable. Father was busy with his new son, his golden child—his heir—so I was mostly forgotten. Around this time, I met Bethany. We became friends.”

The sadness in his voice broke her heart. She glanced at his face, watching the play of raw emotions cross it.

Mel's body went rigid again.

“Around fourteen, my father informed me I would start my education. Surprised, I asked him why and he told me he couldn't very well present an illiterate, useless sack of shit to the Sacred Order. And if I even thought to embarrass him, he'd kill me. Of that, I had no doubt. But even his words couldn't dampen the thrill I felt at the prospect of being trained as a warrior. Something I believed would never happen.”

A deep frown creased his brow and his silver eyes darkened. “I enjoyed school, at least the academic part. My father taught hand-to-hand combat. I learned quickly and became very skilled with a blade and my fists. My brother was the youngest of the group, and not very good. Father didn't like this so he gave him private lessons. I was my brother's target. Father held me down as my brother honed his cutting techniques. Nothing fatal, but painful nonetheless.” He laughed, a cold, mocking sound. “The little bastard enjoyed it.”

Cringing inside, Breeana groaned. That wasn't school. That was just another outlet for his father to torture him.

“When I was fifteen, I was fostered at my uncle's so I could start my basic training. That was the happiest time of my life. The only thing that subdued my spirits was Bethany. I missed her. I wanted her to become my wife but I had nothing to offer her. I wasn't foolish enough to believe I would inherit any wealth, and becoming a warrior was a high honor. So I practiced hard and my skills improved.

“During my stay, my uncle and I became very close. It was my uncle who taught me how to feed properly.”

He glanced at her and cleared his throat. “My father was quite brutal when he fed, loving to overcome humans by force. When he was finished, he'd clean their memories but even though they couldn't remember the attack, they still suffered from fear. My uncle taught me how to restrain them with my mind.”

He laughed, a genuine happy sound that filled Breeana's heart. “I remember practicing on deer for hours. I'd use my mind energy to find theirs. And once they were tame, I could walk right up to them.”

She tried to smile. “That sounds a lot more pleasant than your father's way.”

“Yeah, it was. The technique my uncle taught me worked great. I always dreaded feeding before that because it was such a savage act.”

“Well, from a human's perspective, you learned very well.”

He smiled and murmured, “Thank you.”

“Did you stay with your uncle?”

“No.”

Breeana sat forward on the bench. Shock and confusion momentarily rendered her mute. “Why didn't you stay with him?”

“If I was to become a warrior, I needed to act like one. I couldn't run from my troubles. Plus, I was older and stronger. Also, my mother had been on my mind lately. My uncle would often try to ask me about her but I ignored his questions. On my last night with him, he begged me to talk to her upon my return.”

“Did you?”

Mel got up and leaned against the maple tree, his large arms folded across his chest. With a weary sigh, he glanced up at the sky. “Yeah.”

She followed his gaze. The stars were gone and a faint light rose just above the horizon. Dawn was not far off. Her attention returned to him. “What did she say?”

He pushed away from the tree with a shoulder and paced in front of her. His movements were stiff, his body tense. “The truth. The first time she met my father was the day before they were to wed. Her parents had arranged her marriage to him when she was very young. She was relieved that he was handsome and already, even though fairly young, a great warrior. It wasn't long after their marriage that he became a leader of his own squad. And it wasn't long after he left on his mission that her innocence was shattered.”

Breeana rose on shaky legs and moved to stand beside him.

“After they were bound together, my father set out on a demon raid. She said he was away for some time. But one evening, drunk out of his mind, he paid her a visit. He brutally raped her and left.”

Breeana gasped. Blinking, she tried to clear her vision. She took a step closer to draw him into her arms, but his rigid stance let her know he needed space.

When he looked at her, his eyes were cold, cruel. “Two months later he returned to the happy news that my mother was pregnant with me.”

His face contorted with barely suppressed anger. “He couldn't remember raping her. Can you believe that? He fucking well couldn't remember!” Mel paced in front of the bench, clenching and unclenching his hands. “He figured she'd been with another and got caught, and tried to pass off her mistake as his.”

With each word he uttered, her heart shrank. Having been loved and sheltered as a child, she feared she wasn't equipped to handle this. She wanted so much to take away his pain, but instead she felt helpless.

“She begged him to believe her. Believe that she carried his child, but he beat her for lying. He beat her so often, she was convinced he wanted to end her pregnancy...wanted me dead. And I believe—no—I know she was right.”

“Mel, I—”

“After I was born, the problem of my conception was still up for debate. I took after my mother and her clan in appearance. My father had blond hair and blue eyes while my mother,” he fingered his hair, “had black hair and gray eyes.”

His words and the look of despair in his eyes sliced her deep. She reached out to him, but he brushed past.

“My father took me from her. He told her he was going to dispose of her bastard child. She told me that for the first six years of my life she actually thought I *was* dead. And honestly, I wished I had died.”

Steeling herself against the rush of emotions that assailed her, she wrapped her arms around her middle and walked over to him. “Mel, I'm so very sorry.” As soon as the words were out, she wished she could snatch them back. Even to her they sounded weak, useless.

“Once she found out I was still alive, she was beside herself. She said she wanted to come to me, but...she stayed away to protect me. Father had warned her if she interfered in my life, things would go very badly for me.”

He looked in her direction briefly. “I know what you're thinking, it sounds like a cop-out. I know, because that's exactly what I thought. But it was true. She said she loved me and that it killed her to stay away, but she did it for my safety.”

He bent and picked a yellow daisy, pulling off the petals. “The real kicker was she never knew that no matter what she did, no matter her sacrifices, it didn't help me.”

Breeana's anger rose to the surface until it almost choked her.

“Not only did Father make my life a living hell, but hers as well.” Mel rubbed a hand over his chin. “One evening, when I entered her chamber, she was in her bed with the remnants of a bruise on her cheek and her arm bandaged. I asked her how it happened and she said she fell. I didn't believe her, but she insisted that's what happened. Shit, I wanted to confront that miserable bastard but I figured if I did, things would go worse for her. So, I kept my mouth shut. And to this day I hate myself for not doing anything sooner.”

“You thought by staying quiet you were helping her,” Breeana said.

“No. I did nothing because I was still afraid of the rotten son-of-a-bitch. I was a coward. I should have made damn sure he never laid a hand on her again!”

She didn't know how much more she could hear without screaming. She couldn't stand that he carried the burden when it wasn't his to carry. “Don't you dare blame yourself.”

His hands curled into fists, like he was strangling an invisible person. “I should have killed him then. Maybe I could have prevented— Fuck!” He slammed his fist against the tree trunk. With a roar, he gripped the thing as if he wanted to pull it up from the roots.

Breeana ran to him. She grabbed his arm and pulled as hard as she could to get his attention.

He shook off her grip and moved away. With another vicious curse, he turned to her. “If I had killed him then, I could have prevented him from murdering my wife and mother!”

Shock stopped her in her tracks.

Anger twisted his face until he no longer resembled the vampire she loved.

Breathing hard, Mel threw his arms up and shook his head. “That's it. I'm finished. I can't...you wouldn't understand...I can't talk about this

anymore...it's too...painful.” Abruptly, he turned and stalked across the trimmed grass toward the house.

Stunned, she watched him walk away. Then clear as if someone spoke the words directly into her mind, she knew he had to finish his tale. No matter how horrible it was, he needed some kind of closure or he'd never be free.

“Mel!”

He kept walking.

“Tell me what happened.”

He stopped, but didn't turn around.

She took a step then stopped. “Don't run from your past anymore. If you do, you'll never be free of it.”

He slowly turned his head. The look in his eyes shocked a gasp from her. She had never witnessed such complete despair. Such self-loathing. She walked up to him. When she stood in front of him, she laid her hand on his muscular arm. “Tell me.”

Panic flared in his eyes and then his great shoulders slumped. With a curt nod, he clasped her hand, and led her back to the bench. He sat her down, but remained standing. “My old man ordered the attack on my village. I had no proof and he didn't admit it then, but I knew.” He exhaled and raked his hands through his hair. “I didn't want to believe it.”

“Of course not.” Though from he had told her about his father, she could see him doing just that.

“I tried to rationalize my suspicions; tried to tell myself that he wouldn't risk our exposure having vampire slayers in the area. Asked myself what he could possibly gain by killing everyone in my village.” He shrugged. “But underneath, I knew the truth. I just chose to ignore it.

“After that, I watched him closely and he knew it. I was older, stronger, so he never laid a hand on me again. I believe he even feared me in some small way. And he was right to. After my wife's death, I was dead inside. Hollow. I cared for nothing. I feared nothing. Pain was second nature to me and I was already dead inside, so I didn't give a shit what happened to me.

“The only good thing in my life at that time was my mother. We continued getting to know each other. During that time the bastard never laid a hand on her...until that night.”

His face closed up. And as quick as a cat, she grabbed his arm and forced him to look at her. “All of it, Mel. You need to tell all of it.”

“Father came up with a plan to have my uncle—his brother—murdered.”

Breeana's gasp was out before she could stop it.

“My grandfather—bastard that he was—was nearing the end of his life. My uncle was next in line to inherit, being the eldest son. This didn't sit well with my father. He was greedy and he wanted it all, and he didn't give a shit who got in his way.

“The plan he hatched would have killed two birds with one stone.” Mel's eyes bore into hers. “He wanted me to murder my uncle. Can you believe that? I loved him, and my father wanted me to murder him.”

She covered her eyes, to try and block out the anguish in his. “Mel. No.”

“Oh, yes. See, if I killed my uncle, father would have made damn sure I was killed for the murder of his brother. He would've ended up with the two things he wanted most; all the wealth and my death.”

“My God!” Breeana grabbed her head, her mind spinning. “Your father was certifiably insane.”

“You got that right. Anyway, I refused and he didn't take too kindly to me foiling his plans, so he tried blackmailing me. He said if I denied his request, he'd make my mother pay the price with pain and misery. I laughed and told him he'd already accomplished that and walked away.”

A dark cloud crossed his face and sweat formed on his upper lip. His eyes jerked around, seeming afraid to settle on one thing.

Hot tears coursed freely down her cheeks. “Mel, please. Spit it out and be done with it once and for all.”

In a voice that hardly registered, he said, “My father gave my mother to his soldiers.”

Raw fury filled her body, boiling her blood. If his father stood before her, she knew at that moment she could have killed him. And if no weapon were available, she'd have done it with her bare hands.

Mel closed his eyes and when he opened them, a chill shivered up her spine. They were utterly empty.

“This happened two weeks after I told father to shove it. He knew exactly where to stage it so I would discover them. I was on my way home from feeding in a human village a few miles away and—”

She flung her arms around him, trying to help him bear the pain. He buried his face in her hair and gripped her tight enough to crush her bones.

“I went berserk. I killed five or six soldiers before they jumped me. They hauled me down to the dungeon. I can't remember how I escaped, but when I came back to myself, I was outside of my mother's chamber. I heard her

cries and my father's laugh. She begged him to just kill her. As I gripped the knob, I heard him call her a filthy whore. He said he was finished with her and her useless son who could have prevented her rape had he only followed orders.”

Mel's body shook and his fingers dug into her back.

“I crashed through the door and before I could get to her...he stabbed her in the chest. I lunged at him, taking him to the floor. We wrestled and I grabbed the knife and held it to his throat.

“He just glared at me, daring me to do it, but I hesitated.” Mel's voice rose. “I wanted to kill him. I wanted to watch his blood spill out, watch the life drain from his body. I could see it happening. It was like I was floating above, watching myself do it. Christ, his voice, it filled my head; it still fills my head, making me crazy. 'You can't do it, you worthless bastard.' he said to me. 'You don't have the guts.'

“Still, I hesitated and he sneered, 'I knew it. You're weak. Useless. You wouldn't listen when I warned you not to marry that piece of trash. But I showed you what happens when you disobey me. But you didn't learn, so I had to show you yet again. Too bad your whore mother had to pay the price for your disobedience, son.'

“I pushed the knife in farther, nicking his flesh. And I saw it, finally. I saw fear, but then he laughed. 'If you kill me, know this, you will forever be cursed. You will never be free of me.’”

Bile filled Breeana's stomach. She gagged then swallowed it down.

“I just stared at him, frozen, listening to his insane laughter. He was right. I was weak. I couldn't save my wife or my mother.”

Tears dripped off her chin. Sorrow for all Mel had been through ripped at her soul. Sorrow for all the lives destroyed by one madman.

“I killed him.” His arms tightened around her even more and his great weight sagged against her, almost taking her to her knees. “I hated him so much for all he had taken from me; for hurting those I loved...for what he turned me into. I told him I was already cursed and I rammed the knife into his black heart, twisting it, making sure he was dead.” His breath caught. “My mother stayed alive long enough to tell me she loved me and that I was her only joy in life. That she was proud of the warrior I'd become.”

Breeana wrapped him tighter in her embrace. She tried to absorb some of his torment. Tried to show him he wasn't alone any longer.

“Can you believe that?” he asked in a voice throbbing with pain. “I was the *cause* of all her pain and suffering. She would have been better off if I hadn't been born.”

Breeana heard enough. With all her strength, she pushed him from her and held him at arm's length. “You listen to me and you listen good. You were not the cause of her pain, suffering, or her death. You are not to blame for any of it. Do you understand me?” When he didn't answer, she screamed, “Mel. Answer me!”

Her shout seemed to break through his grief. He blinked and nodded slowly.

“Your father was a disgusting, psychotic bastard who deserved to die.” She framed his cheeks with her hands, holding him still. “You did the right thing by killing him.”

He slumped down on the bench.

Breeana sat beside him, covering his hands with hers. “Don't let your father win. For God sakes, don't let him hurt you anymore.”

His head remained bent.

She knelt in front of him and lifted his face. She gazed into his eyes, letting all her love pour out. “Your mother loved you. Don't dishonor her by blaming yourself. Think of everything she endured for you and all you endured for her. You need to let the blame and guilt go. Please, Mel. Don't let your past ruin your future.” He didn't answer. “Can you try? If not for yourself, then try for your wife and your mother.”

He nodded, but kept his eyes averted. “I'll...try.”

His answer didn't sound too convincing.

“I don't know why I burdened you with all my baggage.” His gaze darted to her face then back out across the yard. “Roarik is the only one I've ever told. Kal and the others know a little, but...I've spent most of my life trying to forget. Trying to keep it buried, but I needed...” His face reddened. “Anyway, I didn't mean to dump this on you. I can only imagine what you're thinking—”

Breeana framed his face with her hands. “I'm glad you trusted me enough to tell me.”

As they stared into each other's eyes, there was so much she wanted to say. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him. How in their short time together he had become her life, her heart. How the thought of never

seeing him again crippled her to the point she'd never be the same. She wanted to spend the rest of her life showing him love.

Instead, she pulled his face closer and kissed him. He drew in a sharp inhale then kissed her back as his arms wound around her.

After a moment, she pulled away and smiled through her tears.

His eyes shone. Love and trust filled them, turning his dark gray irises back to silver. He smoothed a palm over her cheek. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"You deserve love and happiness," she whispered.

His eyes clouded over once more. "You mean more to me than you'll ever know." His words sent her heart racing. His lips brushed against her in a sweet, tender kiss. A kiss that was more than just a joining of lips. It was a joining of hearts and souls.

Mel pulled her hard to his chest then kissed his way over her cheek and jaw, stopping at her ear. "We better head in."

He stood and held out his hand. Placing hers in his, she peeked up at him and her breath stuck in her throat. His expression was a mixture of love and pain. She knew exactly what he was feeling because she felt it too.

"I need to hold you, Breeana. I need you to help me feel alive."

Yes, she needed that too. She recognized in him the same desperation, the same all-consuming love. But also, she recognized the same fear for an ending they knew was inevitable.

Chapter 20

June 16 Monday, 6:30pm

“Are you serious?” Breeana asked. She bent forward in her seat, laughing.

“Yeah, he did,” Mel replied with a laugh. “I thought Ace was gonna murder Kal for sure.”

She reached for a nacho chip from a plate on the center of the table, then popped it into her mouth. “Why didn't he?”

Kal grabbed a chip dripping with cheese. “He would have, but I hid in Roarik and Celeene's closet.” He crunched down on the chip, then laughed. “The one place I knew Ace wouldn't look.”

Breeana wiped her hands on a napkin and leaned back. “How long was he itching?”

Kal stood up and opened the fridge. “I think a good three days.” He grabbed out three beer cans, slid two across the antique trestle table and cracked his open. He took a long drink, then burped.

Mel pulled the tab on his. “You put itching powder in all his boxers, didn't you?”

With his mouth full of beer, Kal started laughing.

When liquid shot out of Kal's nose, Mel lost it. Shoulders shaking, he tilted his head back and roared with laughter.

The sound was music to Breeana's ears. She smiled as Mel tried to get himself back under control but couldn't. His joy warmed her heart. Especially after last night's horrific trip into his past. It amazed her how he had endured so much physical and emotional torture. And not only did he survive, but he survived with his heart still in the right place. He had internal scars and issues, most revolving around his own misguided guilt but from what she'd seen so far, his soul remained intact.

Mel continued shaking with laughter. Tears of happiness blurred her vision. She quickly blinked them away. Not wanting them to see her watery eyes, she turned to look at the large, modern kitchen in the main house. It

was masculine, but lovely. Every appliance was black, as well as the counter tops and floor tiles. The cabinets and cupboards were a beautiful cherry-wood, which complimented the cedar plank ceiling. Bright white walls helped give the room a sleek, contemporary feel.

Her eyes dropped to the table she'd been sitting at for the past hour, listening to Kal talk about his escapades. Most of the practical joke variety.

Kal's laugh brought her attention back to the conversation.

"Every time we saw Ace, he was furiously scratching," Kal said. "Shit, at dinner, he'd excuse himself every ten minutes to hide around the corner so he could scratch."

Mel folded his arms across his chest. "Yeah, after awhile it was painful to watch."

Kal was such a character. It was hard to imagine a big vampire warrior pulling pranks, but he was like a large kid. She shook her head.

"From what you guys told me about him, I'm surprised he didn't kill Kal when he found out," she said.

"Believe me, sometimes when he looks at me, I can tell he still wants to." Kal leaned his hip against the counter and downed the last of his drink. Tossing the empty into the sink, he laughed. "I believe the guy goes commando to this day."

Breeana grinned. "After that, I would too."

Mel leaned over and nuzzled her ear. "Please, feel free."

Heat radiated outward from her cheeks. She playfully pinched his thigh.

"Yo, Breeana, Mel, want another beer?" Kal asked with his head inside the fridge.

Mel snagged her chair and pulled her closer to him. "Sure. Breeana?"

She snuggled against his side. "No, I'm good, thanks."

Kal tossed a can over to Mel. He turned his chair, straddled it, then folded his muscular forearms along the backrest. A sneaky smile curled the corners of his lips. "Want to hear about the time I got Mel and Soren in shit?"

Mel glanced at her and then shot Kal a look full of warning. "She doesn't need to hear that."

Breeana laughed, clapping her hand over his mouth. "Oh, I sooo have to hear this." She chuckled at the murderous expression on his face.

"You know, Kal. One day your pranks are going to get you in trouble," Mel's muffled reply came from behind her hand, but his eyes were bright with amusement. He kissed her palm then pulled her hand away from his

mouth. "As much as I'd like to watch you two share a laugh at my expense, it'll have to wait for another time." He gave her a tight smile. "We're due to meet Roarik soon."

At the mention of the meeting, anxiety shot through her, quickening her pulse. She'd been so wrapped up in Kal's stories and her own delight over Mel's amusement, she'd all but forgotten.

Kal nodded. "Another time then. But this is a story you have to hear. I still laugh about it to this day."

Mel snorted. "Idiot."

She gazed at Mel and fingered his gold earring. He smiled back, leaning in closer.

Still looking at Mel, she said, "I'll hold you to that, Kal."

Mel laced his fingers with hers. "Hopefully, you'll forget."

"I won't forget. You can count on that."

His eyes sparkled as he laughed. "I know you won't."

She would much rather listen to humorous stories about Mel than meet his boss, but in this she knew she had little choice. Her gaze dropped from his to the floor.

Mel smoothed his hand over her hair. "What's up?"

She shrugged. "I'm very nervous."

He leaned down until his face filled her vision. "Hey, you have nothing to be nervous about."

"Wouldn't you be if you were me? What if I say the wrong thing?"

Chuckling, he pulled her into his arms. "He just wants to meet the woman who saved me."

"Mel's right," Kal said. "Roarik's bite is worse than his bark, and thankfully he doesn't bite that often."

Breeana looked over at Kal and frowned. "Thanks. That makes me feel a whole lot better."

"Hey, don't worry, dudette. Everything'll be okay. You'll see." Kal slapped her gently on the back as he headed to the kitchen entrance.

"I'll try," she murmured.

"Well, guys, it's been fun, but I'm grabbin' a shower and then I'm out of here. Mel, phone me later when you wanna hook up. I'll be at the Green Tree till about ten."

"I'll do that."

After Kal left, she stood and leaned against the counter. Her nerves buzzed, making her queasy.

“Sweetheart, you have nothing to worry about. Roarik just wants to thank you.”

Breeana dried her sweaty palms on the tops of her jean clad thighs. “I just want to get this over with.”

“How about when it's over, we pick up some fast food and head down to the beach?”

She loved him for what he was trying to do. She knew he didn't have the authority to deny his captain's request, which made his effort to ease her mind that much more appreciated.

He raised a dark brow. “Okay?”

She smiled. “Okay.”

He sprawled back in his chair with his long legs in a pair of faded blue jeans, stretched out in front. He crooked a finger at her. “Come here.”

Desire took the edge off her nerves. She walked over to him and straddled his thighs. Her arms wound around his neck and she nibbled at his lips.

A low growl escaped him and he tried to deepen their contact, but she pulled back. His eyelids grew heavy as he gazed at her mouth.

She kissed her way across his jaw to his ear; her tongue swirled around the outer edge before she moved back to his lips. She tunneled her hands through his thick hair as their tongues entwined. He tried to pull her flush to his body, but she once again pulled back.

“Breeana.” Her name came out like a desperate plea.

Her lips pressed feather light kisses up and down his throat. When she found his thumping pulse, she gently bit him. He groaned and leaned his head to the side. She sucked his earlobe into her mouth, and sat forward onto the hard bulge in his pants.

Mel's breath whistled through his teeth. He grabbed her hips and held her still.

Wetness flooded her panties and her nipples hardened, pushing against her lacy bra.

With a mighty surge, he pushed his shaft against her bottom. “Breeana, please. You're killing me here.”

She sat back and stared into his hooded eyes. She grabbed her hair and pushed it over one shoulder.

His burning gaze locked onto her exposed neck.

His fangs slipped past his lips, and she arched her back, and dragged a finger slowly down her throat. “Is this what you want, Mel? Is this what you need?”

“Yes.” He licked his lips, and his eyes turned from silver to black as he stared at her neck, while grinding their lower bodies together.

Desire pounded through her. She wished they had time to finish what they'd started, but time was against them both. Framing his face in her hands, she whispered, “Mel?”

“What?”

“The time.” The confusion in his eyes made her want to laugh.

“The time?”

She nodded.

His gaze shot to the microwave. “Shit!” He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. After a few moments, he set her on her feet and stood. He paced around the kitchen, alternating between running his hands through his hair and cursing under his breath.

She loved that she could get him so worked up. “You okay?”

He stopped pacing, and when he looked at her, the intense desire in his eyes wiped the smile off her face.

As an answering call, her body loosened, and the sensitive skin between her thighs throbbed.

His eyes traveled over her like a caress. “As soon as this meeting is over, you better hightail your sweet ass downstairs quick or we'll be making love in the first place I find.”

Her heart slammed and her legs turned to rubber. Molten lava replaced her blood.

Mel stalked across the kitchen and gently gripped her arm. He steered her through the main room, up the stairs to the third floor, along a long carpeted hallway that overlooked the main floor, until he stopped in front of a closed wooden door.

He glanced down at her. “Are you ready?”

No, she wasn't. She was nervous as hell.

How did that saying go? Never let them see you sweat?

Yeah that was it.

Breeana stretched her head side to side and shook out her arms and legs before she glanced up at him. “I'm ready.”

Mel nodded once before he knocked.

Breana's heart leapt into her throat when she heard a deep masculine voice call for them to enter.

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Chapter 21

Breeana stepped through the door and kept her eyes on her feet. She stayed as close to Mel's side as possible without tripping him. Her muscles shivered and twitched like she'd been thrown naked in the snow.

What happened to not showing nerves?

Mel gave her elbow a reassuring squeeze.

She closed her eyes and drew in a big breath, trying to find courage hidden deep behind her fear. She exhaled slowly and opened her eyes. Plush, light cream carpeting, matching the ceiling and crown molding, created a stark, breathtaking contrast with the vibrant red walls. On her left was a slate fireplace, and on top the mantle was an oversized vase filled with the most stunning red roses she'd ever seen. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, crammed with books, flanked the fireplace.

Mel gently tugged on her arm to get her moving. She started down the room then stopped. Placed under a grand window sat a massive oak desk. And sitting behind the desk was the source of her anxiety. She swallowed. Make that fear. And rightfully so. Animosity flowed in waves off the man—vampire—hitting her like a cold blast from a winter wind.

Her stomach cramped into a hard knot.

Okay, get yourself under control and quite acting so dramatic.

The last thing she wanted to do was embarrass Mel in front of his boss by acting like a frightened rabbit. She'd handled sick two-ton bulls in her job, so dealing with this guy shouldn't be that difficult.

Roarik leaned forward in his seat, twirling a pen between his fingers. A grim expression set on his handsome face. His dark blond hair fell in soft waves to his massive shoulders. He focused directly on her with rich brown eyes. Heavy brows drew low in a scowl. She found it hard to determine his age; he neither looked young nor old.

His eyes narrowed to slits as they passed over her. She was sure she detected...hatred in them.

Oh, God. I can't do this.

Whatever courage she had drained away.

Beside her, Mel spoke. "Roarik, this is Breeana."

She took a step toward him with a hand outstretched. "It's nice to meet you."

He didn't answer. Instead, he dropped his pen and stood.

Holy crap! He was taller than Mel and bulged with muscles.

Crossing his arms over his broad chest, Roarik strode to the fireplace. He kept his scrutinizing gaze trained on her. "Have a seat." He waved a hand in the direction of chairs placed in front of his desk.

Mel guided her to the chairs and gently pushed her stiff body into one. He sat next to her and placed a hand on her knee.

"So," Roarik drawled in a deep voice. "This is the human who saved the life of my clansman. I would...thank you."

Thank her? He sure the hell didn't sound thankful. He sounded angry and rude.

She cleared her throat, ready to tell him he was welcome, when he said, "What do you think of the fact vampires exist?"

Completely caught off guard by the question, she glanced at Mel. His face was stern, but he nodded for her to answer.

"Umm, I was...shocked, naturally. But Mel has explained why humans no longer have knowledge of vampires. Well, except in old wives' tales."

"Has he now?" Roarik's frown deepened as he looked at Mel. His gaze shifted back to her. "What do you think will happen if humans find out vampires exist?"

What the hell kind of question was that? Did he really expect her to answer that honestly? She feigned ignorance. "I beg your pardon?"

"You know what I'm asking."

She sensed Mel stiffen beside her before he grabbed her hand. He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles, lending her courage. She swallowed and squared her shoulders. "Well, I think humans would panic."

Roarik nodded as he walked over to the desk and sat down. "Do you think you humans would hunt us down to our extinction?" When she didn't answer, he snarled. "Do you think humans would willingly share the earth with vampires?"

"That's enough." Mel's hold on her hand tightened, and he started to rise. "If you have nothing else to say, then we're out of here!"

"Sit down, Mel," Roarik barked. He passed a hand through his hair and glanced in her direction. "I apologize if I made you uncomfortable."

Yeah right, he was sorry. He was trying to trap her with his questions that, if answered honestly, would only get her into hot water.

Sweat trickled between her shoulder blades. A faint smirky smile lifted the corners of Roarik's lips. Anger built within her. He knew exactly what he was doing. Well, if he wanted to play, she was game. She'd answer as honestly as she could.

"That's a hard question for me to answer," she said. "But this, I suspect you know." She concentrated on the white knuckles of her balled hands before she forced herself to meet his gaze. "There are some who would definitely hunt down vampires. But there are those who, if they knew the truth, would protest against the slaughter of another species."

Roarik's cheeks turned red. His lips formed a straight line across his face. "I highly doubt any human would fight to save what they would consider blood-thirsty monsters."

"We're out of here," Mel said, grabbing her arm again.

Anger muscled aside her fear and her common sense. She tugged her arm free and glared back at Roarik. "Like I said, if they knew the truth."

Roarik leaned forward, slamming his hands on the desk. "Truth? Humans knew the truth once and they turned their backs on vampires, slaughtering us without just cause!"

How dare he condemn her whole species? Blame them entirely for the rift when clearly the demons were partly to blame. Consumed with fury, she tried to stand, but Mel pressed her back into her seat with his hand on her shoulder.

She shrugged off his hold and shot up. "That's not fair. Demons were spreading lies and...so it's not all our fault."

Mel bolted up, grabbing hold of her waist. "Look, this is getting us nowhere." He pulled her back to the chair. "Either you both calm down or this meeting is over."

Breeana slumped back, raking her hands through her hair. "You're right, Mel." She turned to Roarik. "I'm sorry."

He ignored Mel's outburst and her apology. "When or *if* you return to your life, what will you tell other humans about us, I wonder?"

Was that a threat? She was about to ask him when Mel stood again. "That's enough! I will not sit by and let you badger her anymore."

Breeana laid a hand on his forearm. The last thing she wanted was for Mel to come to her defense, getting himself into trouble in the process.

“Mel, please. I appreciate you trying to protect me, but let me handle this.”

Before he could reply, she said, “I promise not to say a word about the existence of vampires.”

Roarik made his way over to the fireplace. After a few moments of silence, he turned to them and crossed his arms over his chest. “Mel doesn't want me to erase your memories of this place or of us. But I feel it will be necessary.”

What the hell was he talking about? Erase her memories? Her eyes jerked to Mel. His face blanched. All of a sudden, understanding dawned on her.

Oh no. No way would she allow Roarik to touch one beautiful memory she had of Mel and the time they shared.

Mel glowered at Roarik. His lips peeled back off his elongated fangs. A deep, menacing growl rose up his throat and filled the room. “You said you wouldn't—”

Roarik held up his hand.

Breeana's body hummed with barely suppressed anger and fear. “For all your wisdom, you know nothing about humans if you think that *when* I leave here I would start telling people I was kidnapped by a vampire. Or that vampires exist. Think for a second. What do you think that would get me, huh?” She didn't give him a chance to speak. “I'll tell you what it'd get me. A one-way ticket to the nut house!”

“I don't trust that you'll remain quiet.”

“Well, that's your problem. If you can't accept my promise, then too bad. But I'm telling you now, you will not be erasing any of my memories.”

Roarik stalked back to his desk. “Humans are an untrustworthy species. The past has proven it many times over.”

That's it. She couldn't take his bad-mouthing her species anymore. She jumped up, placed both hands flat on his desk, and leaned forward. “You know what you are? You're a racist.”

Mel put his hand on her arm. “Breeana, that's enough. No more—”

“I'm a what?” Roarik asked, roaring with laughter.

“You heard me. You hate all humans because of a few bad ones.”

“A few bad ones,” he scoffed. “I would say more than a few.”

“You shouldn't condemn a whole species just because of the rotten ones. There are a lot of people who are kind, caring, and generous. There are some willing to give their time and money to help total strangers. To help those in need.”

She couldn't stop. Inside she knew she should, but anger had a firm hold over her rational mind. "I know my species isn't perfect, hell, far from it, but can you sit there and say yours is? Is every vampire a paragon of virtue?"

A wide grin broke out across Roarik's face. "As much as I wish I could say we are all paragons of virtue, I cannot. We also have our share of rotten vampires. Like humans, our jails are full to capacity, so no, we are far from perfect."

She wanted to wipe his smug smile off his smug face, but instead counted to five, trying to calm down.

Roarik smirked as he stared directly in her eyes. A sharp pain flashed through her head. Something brushed at her mind, scattering her thoughts. A loud growl penetrated her ears. She tried to focus on the sound, but it took too much effort. Then the pain vanished and she once again gained control of her thoughts. *What the hell?*

Mel pulled her to him. The deep growl had come from him. His body resonated. "You son-of-a-bitch. Don't try that again."

"Relax, Mel. All her memories are intact. I merely poked around a little to make sure she could be trusted."

Breeana stared dumbfounded. Poked around a little? "You were in my mind?" She quickly ran through her memories of Mel. They all seemed present and accounted for.

"We're done here," Mel said, heading to the door. "Come on, Breeana."

She backed away from the desk and looked at Mel over her shoulder. His face was twisted with fury. She didn't want to leave on a bad note. "Hold on," she said to him then turned back to Roarik. "As much as I don't appreciate the invasion of privacy, I do understand why you did it. But you could've asked. I would've said yes, if that's what it took for you to believe I'm telling the truth."

Roarik nodded. "I apologize."

Mel stood beside her and wrapped an arm around her waist. "She didn't deserve that treatment. She has been nothing but truthful."

"Are you at least satisfied?" she asked Roarik.

"I trust you when you say you'll stay quiet on the subject of vampires." His eyes hardened. "A word of warning: do not make me regret it."

Breeana's muscles tensed and her knees quivered. She leaned against Mel and his arm tightened. "I won't breathe a word."

A slow smile stretched Roarik's lips. "Good."

"If that's all, we will take our leave." Gripping her tight, Mel hurried her toward the door. As he clasped the knob, Roarik stopped them.

"I will speak to you later about other matters of importance," he said, coming to stand beside them. "I've scheduled another meeting for tomorrow night. I made the mistake in—" his eyes flicked to her before he looked back at Mel. "Informing the Sacred Order that we may have found a clue."

Mel sighed, then cursed under his breath. "You should have held off. But I'll put in some time researching later tonight or early tomorrow."

Roarik clapped Mel on the shoulder. "Thank you."

As they stepped into the hallway, Roarik stopped them again. He stuck a large hand out to her. "Breeana, it's been a pleasure."

She placed her hand into his. He folded long fingers over her much smaller ones. "Umm, yes. Although, I would like to apologize for losing my temper."

He smiled and the creases beside his eyes deepened. "No need. Have a good evening." He stepped back, closing the door.

Mel was silent as they made their way down the hall. She glanced at him, trying to guess his mood, but his face was unreadable.

Not quite, she thought. He looked angry. His jaw clenched so tightly, a muscle twitched in his cheek and his lips formed a straight slash across his face.

"Mel, I'm sorry for my behavior, but I couldn't help it—he made me so angry."

He didn't answer.

"Mel, please," she pleaded, grabbing hold of his forearm. "I said I was sorry. I hope I didn't embarrass you in front of your boss."

He stopped and ran a hand over his whiskered jaw, but didn't look at her. "I'm not angry with you. I'm pissed at myself for letting him speak to you like that and for him invading your mind. I'm the one who should be apologizing."

"Don't be silly. I know you have to watch what you say, and he didn't erase my memories. Look at this way, if it helped him to trust me then no harm done. Besides, if he'd have asked, I would have allowed it."

He cupped her cheek. "You handled yourself beautifully in there."

She laughed at that. "Were you at the same meeting? At one point he looked as if he'd like to squash me like a bug."

Chuckling, Mel draped an arm over her shoulders as they continued down the hall. “I think he's quite taken with you.”

“I wouldn't go that far,” she replied. “Did you see the vein on his forehead? It looked like it was going to explode.”

“Yeah, but it turned out better than I'd hoped.”

When they made it to the door leading to the suites underground, Mel stopped and backed her up against the wall. He stared down at her. “We have some unfinished business of our own we need to conduct.” His irises darkened as he bent his head, kissing the side of her neck.

Desire ignited in her as his tongue lick a path up her throat. Tilting her head to the side, she whispered, “We do? I don't recall any business we need to conduct.”

Mel straightened, smiling. “Oh, really? In that case, let me refresh your memory.”

He took her lips in a rough, demanding kiss, plunging his tongue into her mouth. He grabbed her bottom, lifted her up, and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Breana moaned and wound her arms around his shoulders. She broke contact and kissed her way over his jaw to his ear. “Ah, yes. Now I'm starting to remember.”

“So, are we making love here, or downstairs?”

She pulled his lips back to hers for another heated kiss. “Downstairs, but hurry.”

His fangs slipped from behind his lips. He bolted down the stairs, along the dimly lit tunnel, then charged through the door of his suite. He kicked it closed and sank his fangs into her neck.

She yelled out with pain and pleasure as his mouth worked at her vein. Her arousal grew, burning through her like a flame set to dry grass. “Mel—I need you.”

He set her on the kitchen table and released his hold on her neck. His hands found her zipper and tugging, he tore her jeans and panties from her body. Breathing heavily, he spread her thighs with one hand while the other worked the zipper of his jeans. As soon as his erection sprang out, he grabbed her hips and pulled her forward. The look he gave her was part desperation and part seeking permission. “Breana.” Her name came as a whispered plea.

The same urgent need pulsed through her. She lay back on the table.

With a shout of triumph, he brought the tip of his shaft to her moist opening and plunged inside.

They both shouted as he sank deep.

Breeana arched her back. Her hands clutched the edges of the wooden table as her release quickly built. She tried to hold it off but the moment his thumb found her swollen flesh, she lost the fight. Her orgasm sent her flying out of her body, straight toward heaven.

Mel wasn't far behind. Pounding out three more powerful thrusts, he released deep inside her, filling her inner walls with hot liquid.

She collapsed under his weight as he flopped over her with his face wedged between her shoulder and neck. Hoarse rasps filled her ear while he dragged gulps of air into his lungs. His body felt like it was crushing her ribs, yet she was too sated to care. With a contented sigh, she dragged her fingers through his damp hair, moving it away from his face.

Moments later, she giggled.

Mel shifted, leaning up on his elbows. "What's so funny?"

"I was just thinking that again, your pants and my shirt are still on."

The smile he flashed sent her heart racing. "Yeah. We seemed to have gotten carried away again. You drive me wild. I just can't seem to control myself around you."

Arousal once again heated her blood. She leaned up and kissed him. "The feeling is mutual."

His grin deepened and his eyes sparkled.

"Don't we have a date tonight?" she asked.

"Umm, not that I recall."

"Oh, you don't, huh? Well, I haven't forgotten your promise to go for a drive and stop at Dairy Queen for a hot fudge brownie delight."

Mel's booming laughter filled the room and her heart. "I don't remember saying anything about Dairy Queen, but if that's what you'd like, then consider it yours." He thrust his hips, slowly. "But first," he kissed her. "I believe we have a little more unfinished business to conduct. Don't you?"

"Oh, yes," she whispered against his mouth. "I believe we have a lot of unfinished business."

Chapter 22

Monday June 16, 10:24 pm

Mel parked his '57 Ford Mustang behind a large beach log and shut off the ignition. He glanced out the windshield at the black ocean. The waves lazily climbed the sand only to slink back. In the distance, lights from a freighter or a cruise ship floated by and across the small bay, the lights from the city reflected in the inky waters.

He turned to Breeana and smiled. She licked ice cream and chocolate sauce off a red plastic spoon. "How's your—what did you call it?"

"A hot fudge brownie delight. And it's delicious."

He chuckled and looked out the window again. "You sure seem to be enjoying it."

"Do you want a bite?"

He turned his head. A spoonful of ice cream and chocolate came his way. He leaned back. "Ah, no. Thanks, anyway."

She brought the spoon closer to his lips. "Just one taste."

"No, you go ahead." He gently pushed the spoon toward her. "I'm not an ice cream kind of guy."

"How can you not like ice cream?"

"Hurts the fangs."

She brought the spoon up to her mouth. "Okay, but you don't know what you're missing." Rolling her eyes and moaning, she licked the spoon clean, ending with a satisfied smile.

He smiled back, wanting to tell her he wasn't missing anything because he'd taste the sugar in her blood later when he fed from her throat as they made love. On second thought, probably better he kept that to himself.

After she scooped up the last mouthful, she placed the empty container back in the bag. "Mel, can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"What does my blood taste like?"

He closed his eyes and smiled. "Delicious doesn't even begin to cover it."

“Oh, really?” She laughed. “I’ve tasted my blood before and I got to tell you, it didn’t taste that good.”

Mel stifled his laugh when he caught her confused, doubtful expression. “Vampires are blood connoisseurs. Believe me when I say your blood is the most delicious I’ve ever tasted.”

Frowning, she crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll take your word for it, but you didn’t answer my question. What does it taste like?”

“Ripe blackberries.”

“Blackberries? Yeah, right.”

His grin grew wider. “You think I’m a lying?”

She shrugged. “No. I just thought all blood would taste pretty much the same.”

“Everyone is different. It depends on the person. Whether they’re heavy drinkers, smokers, use drugs or are ill. So yeah, you never know what you’ll get until you bite.”

“Mel!” She laughed, swatting his arm. “That’s awful.”

He caught her hand and flipped it over, exposing her pale wrist. His tongue traced the tiny blue veins. Her scent and warmth surrounded him. Her frown suggested she still didn’t quite believe him. “What? It’s the truth.”

The look she shot him made him laugh so hard tears sprang to his eyes.

“So, if you’re going around biting all these different people, don’t you worry about getting sick? Getting a disease?”

“Nope. Human illnesses and diseases don’t affect us.”

Her smile vanished. “What are you saying? No colds, flu, Hepatitis, AIDS...cancer?”

“None of the above.”

She slumped back against her seat, staring out the window. When she turned to him, annoyance flared in her eyes. “Must be nice.” She glanced down at her hands and then brought her gaze back to his. “Humans sure got the short end of the evolutionary stick. Christ, vampires live longer, you don’t get sick, while the average lifespan for us is eighty years, if we’re lucky enough not die from cancer, heart disease, or diabetes. That’s just naming a few.”

She once again looked out into the night, her body stiff with ire.

Her anger irked the shit out of him. She had no clue what a vampire’s life was like. If she thought their life was a breeze, she was sadly mistaken.

“Yeah, vampires may live longer, but most are slaves—soldiers—bound to a fate they didn't choose.” Mel gripped the steering wheel. “Also, humans can go out in daylight. I would give it all up if I could see and feel the sun. If I could see a rainbow, walk on the beach during the day, get a suntan. If I didn't have to hide from the light. Humans have the luxury of being able to move in the light or the dark while we're trapped, knowing if we get caught out during the day, we,” he snapped his fingers, “burn up just like that. I'd give it all up if I didn't have to fight in this war. If I could settle down to a life of peace.”

Sighing, she laid her hand on his arm. “You're right. I didn't think of it like that. It would be hard to be trapped, not being able to come and go as you please, or to be able to choose your own destiny.”

Sadness jabbed at his gut like he'd swallowed a handful of nails. “It's funny,” he said, reaching out to tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. “How we always want what we can't have.”

Tears gathered in her eyes and her voice cracked. “True.”

Shit. He didn't want any sadness between them tonight. There'd be enough of that when she left. Clearing his throat, he gazed out at the dark water. “Would you like to go for a walk?”

Without a reply, she reached around to the back seat, grabbing his red sweatshirt. She pulled it over her head and opened the door.

The moment Mel stepped outside, salty air hit all his senses. This scent brought back memories of his childhood. He'd never forget standing on the rocky cliff behind their castle, staring down at the ocean as it pounded endlessly against the rocks far below; the refreshing spray hitting his face.

Inside, his old wounds started to bleed as the scabs lifted. The sour taste of fear and hatred flooded his mouth. He tried to stop the awful memories from surfacing again.

Suddenly, the poisonous images clambering to gain a hold were cut off when Breeana's hand slipped into his.

She smiled up at him and tugged. “Come on, slowpoke. Let's go.”

He followed behind as she led him down to the water's edge. She stooped, picked up a stone, and bounced it on her palm for a second before she launched it out toward the water.

“So,” Mel asked, bending to pick up a smooth rock. “Did you talk to Carol today?”

“Yeah.” She selected another rock. “And no, the demons haven't been back. But I have to quit asking her because I think she's starting to get suspicious.” She threw it out into the blackness. A second later, a plop signified the rock landing in its new watery home. “She asked what sort of insurance they're trying to sell me.”

“What'd you tell her?” He propelled his rock out into the ocean.

They watched, waiting for the telltale sound of the stone meeting water, but none came.

She glanced sideways at him. “Show off.”

“Show off? It's not my fault you throw like a girl.” He laughed, ducking out of her reach as she ran after him.

“Hey, get back here. Or are you afraid of a girl?”

Mel stopped and advanced toward her. “I eat girls for breakfast,” he said with an affectionate growl. His fangs dropped down and he hissed, taking off after her.

Breeana ran, giggling and glancing over her shoulder as he caught up to her. He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off her feet.

She squirmed in his arms as he playfully nipped at her neck. After a few minutes of play, he set her back on her feet and took her hand, heading back to the water.

“You didn't give me an answer,” he said.

“About what?”

“What type of insurance you told Carol that the demons were trying to sell you.”

“Oh, right. I told her the demons—*insurance agents*—are trying to sell me life insurance.”

Mel's head whipped toward and he frowned. “That's really *not* funny.”

“It is...sort of.”

They walked along the shoreline, dodging the waves. After a few moments of silence, Breeana leaned her head against his shoulder. “Mel?”

“Yeah?”

She inhaled before speaking. “I don't wan—I'm going to miss you terribly after I leave.”

Her words cut him deep. He pulled her closer to his side. “I'm going to miss you too. It's going to kill me when you go.”

She looked up at him, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “Can we still see each other after I leave?”

He wiped away a tear tracking down her cheek. “No. I wish to God we could, but it would be too dangerous for you and everyone you care about. Eventually, another demon would find out and you'd become a target. Again.”

Breeana squeezed her eyes shut. “I don't want to leave you, Mel.”

Shit, he couldn't bear the thought of never seeing her again, but there was no other choice.

“I know,” he replied solemnly, hugging her to his chest. “But if you were to stay with me...” He stopped. “For your safety and ours, you'd have to leave your old life behind: your friends, your practice...everything.”

She stirred against him. “Everything?”

“Yeah.”

She stepped out of his embrace and walked slowly along the beach. Moments later, she turned to him. “So, what you're saying is I'd never be able to see Carol or Dave again? I'd have to quit my job?”

Shock painted her face. Hurt and rejection ripped through his gut.

What the hell was the matter with him? Did he want her to toss everything to be with him?

Yeah, shit. The selfish bastard in him did, which was ridiculous because even if she agreed, he'd still say no.

Mel exhaled a vicious curse. “Everything, Breeana. Everything you've worked for, everyone you love, gone.”

“Why does every goddamn thing have to have a price?”

“I don't want you giving up anything, especially for me. I would never ask that of you.”

She swiped at her tears, then rubbed her hands on her jeans. “I know you wouldn't. It's just I've worked so hard my whole life to get where I am today. And Carol is more than just a friend, she's like my sister. She's always been there for me. If it wasn't for her, I don't know how I would have made it through my parents' death, and to never see her again...”

Pain twisted his gut tighter. “Breeana, I'm not asking you to give up anything.”

Her gaze was fierce. “Do you want to know what scares the shit out of me?”

“What?”

She hesitated. “I would leave everything. I'd leave it all behind because I...love you.”

Mel's heart ground to a halt when her softly spoken words filtered through his brain. An instant later, it jumped, slamming so hard against his ribs it felt like it was going to burst free.

She loved him? Did he hear correct?

He searched her face and saw it was true. She loved him.

Joy, love, sadness, and God help him, hope pumped through him, adding to the chaos of emotions he already felt.

He tilted her face up with a hand cupping her chin and kissed her hard. A kiss brimming with love, despair, and frustration over a situation that held no other solution than heartbreak. And he sensed she experienced the same whirlpool of feelings. He felt it in her kiss, in the desperate way she gripped his shirt, and he tasted it in her tears.

He pulled back and stared into her eyes. "I love you, Breeana. The short time we've known one another, you have become my everything. My heart. My breath...My life. I was dead inside before you."

She crumpled against his chest and sobbed. "Oh God! I can't let you go. Don't ask me to."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. He couldn't speak. His throat choked up, strangling him, which was a good thing since he didn't trust what would come out. He was afraid the moment he opened his mouth, he'd start begging her to stay; to leave everything behind to remain at his side...forever. Only with her did he feel whole, alive and loved. He couldn't go back to the lonely state his life had been before her.

Mel snapped his teeth together, trapping the unspoken words even though his mind screamed to speak aloud what was in his heart.

But being a demon slayer was to be alone because of the danger it posed to anyone they loved. And because of the danger, seldom did they form strong emotional ties. They married and had children, doing so mainly to keep the species going. But marriages were usually not a love match. They were arranged for both the male and female. For the safety of their families, slayers oftentimes lived at the base where they served from.

The bottom line was a slayer couldn't afford the weakness love brought. It was a handicap the demons could and would use against them. And the way he felt about Breeana, she would be one huge weakness, a massive crack in his emotional armor. His love for her was a liability. One that could bring him to his knees.

But what was worse, he doubted she had really thought through what it truly meant to leave her former life. She could never go back, even if things didn't work out between them. She'd be stuck in his world for the rest of her days and she'd eventually come to despise him for it. That, he couldn't live with. The pain of a broken heart, sure, but her hatred, never.

Sighing, Mel dropped his face into her hair, breathing deep. "I don't want to let you go either, but there's no way around it."

She rubbed her face against his chest, her sobs now just sporadic hiccups. "We're quite a pair, aren't we? We love each other, but we can't do anything about it."

She stepped back from him and made her way down the beach. A few meters away, she stopped and turned to face him. A breeze blew her hair back. The pain and sadness he saw in her eyes shattered his heart.

When she spoke her voice was hoarse, but strong and free of any doubt. "I would leave it all for you—for us. I would miss Carol terribly, but my heart is going to wither up and die without you. And as for my job, I would chuck that without a second thought. I love you more than I ever thought it possible to love another living soul." She bent her head and then faced the ocean. "I would leave it all but for one thing."

He didn't answer, mainly because he couldn't. She glanced over her shoulder. "The only thing that's stopping me is I'll grow old and you won't. I couldn't put either one of us through that."

The words *there is a way* screamed through his mind so loud he was sure she would hear them.

"What did you just say?" she asked.

Startled, he wondered if she did hear his thoughts. "Nothing."

"Bullshit! I heard you say, *there is a way.*"

Jesus Christ. He had spoken aloud.

He turned away and shook his head. "Well, you heard wrong."

She stormed over to him and balled the front of his jacket up in her fists, pulling herself onto her toes. "Tell me!"

"I said nothing, now just drop it." Mel jerked away and walked toward his car.

She caught up to him and grabbed his arm. When he didn't stop, she ran around and stood in his path. His gut and heart cramped from the look of hope on her face.

She grasped his arms. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

Mel shook his head. She backed away from him. “You bastard! How dare you say you love me when you know of a way we could be together and you won't tell me.”

Strained beyond the point of snapping, he advanced toward her. “It's because I love you. That's why I won't tell you. Believe me, that way is not the answer. The fucking price for you to pay is too high.”

He clenched his fists, breathing hard. How dare *she* act like this wasn't killing him when in truth his whole world was crashing down around him.

Breeana spun away. “Take me home.”

He sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. “All right.” He gently clasped her arm, but she ripped it away.

“No. Not to your place. I want to go home. To my house.”

“Breeana,” he whispered, raking a hand through his hair again. “Forget it. Not until it's safe.”

“I don't care,” she shouted back. “I...I...can't—I won't stay with you any longer. If I have to leave, then I want to leave now.” Covering a sob with her hand, she took off running.

Mel watched as she ran back to his car. He hated himself for hurting her. Hated himself for speaking out loud, giving her false hope. With a savage curse, he stalked after her.

He pulled open the car door and sank behind the wheel. He glanced at her stiff profile. With another curse, he shoved the key into the ignition. When the engine roared to life, he turned to her once more. “I'm sorry, but I'm not taking you to your place. Not until it's safe.”

Neither one spoke during the ride back to the base.

For most of the ride, Breeana kept her face pressed against the passenger side window. She saw nothing because her vision was blurred from tears.

She sniffed and swiped her hand under her nose and leaned her head back against the seat.

There is a way. Those four words kept repeating over and over; around and around in her mind, making her nuts.

What did he mean? Was there a way vampires knew to prolong a human's life? Could he turn her into a vampire? No. He'd already informed her vampires can't turn humans. The only way to become a vampire was to be born one.

She glanced at him from under her lashes, but he looked straight ahead. The stubborn set of his jaw and stiff way he held his shoulders told her he wasn't going to spill it.

Sighing, she stared back out the window. The car bumped along the gravel road that led up a mountain to the base.

Once back, Mel parked. Breeana wrenched her door open and pounded up the stairs. Not knowing the code to the double doors, she was forced to wait, looking at anything but him as he punched in the numbers.

After he closed the door, and reset the locks and alarm, he murmured he was heading to the kitchen for a drink.

He disappeared through the upstairs kitchen entrance. Her anger grew until it consumed her.

How the hell could he be so blasé about this when she was dying inside? Curling her hands into fists, she stomped into the kitchen after him.

He turned from filling a glass with ice from the freezer. "Would you like a drink? Maybe a coffee?"

"No— wait, yes. Yes I would." God, she was so full of anger and hurt she couldn't calm down.

She needed to get away from him before she did or said something she'd regret.

Mel extracted a bottle of Jack Daniels from the fridge. He busied himself fixing his drink and filling the coffeemaker like nothing was wrong. Like he really didn't give a crap that her heart was shredded.

Tears of frustration filled her eyes. She spun around and gripped the counter.

A tear dripped off her chin onto a half-eaten lemon meringue pie sitting on the counter. A slow smile curled her lips. She scooped out a large, sticky handful and turned around.

"Mel," she said in a sweet, sultry voice.

"What?"

"Could you please look at me?"

He turned, leaned his hip against the counter, and folded his arms over his chest. "Breeana, please. I don't want to discuss this anymore. I don't

want to waste what time we have left—”

She drew her arm back and let fly what she clutched in her hand. It sailed through the air, spinning like a baseball before it got belted out across a field. But this time the batter missed. Instead, the catcher caught the ball in his glove, and in this instance, the glove was Mel's face.

A look of confusion broke out across his face, just before the sticky glob of lemon filling and whipped egg whites hit him.

Bulls-eye.

The lemony mess slowly slid off his face, onto his chest, and then plop, it hit the floor.

A low menacing growl filled the room.

She smothered her laugh and stepped back. He wiped the sweet desert off with one hand, never taking his eyes off her.

Her smile vanished.

He stepped over the mess on the floor and progressed toward her, his growl becoming louder.

“Mel, I'm sorry. I'm...really...sorry.” She inched closer to the room's doorway.

He continued stalking her. She burst out into the main hall, spun wildly around, looking for a place to run. She glanced over her shoulder. As he came closer the sight of the remaining bits of pie mushed on his face, plastering strands of his hair to his cheek, made her laugh out loud.

She raced across the floor, heading to the outer doors but slid to a stop. She didn't know the code. With another burst of laughter, she dashed toward the door leading down to the underground suites and pounded down the stairs.

When she made it to Mel and Kal's suite, she stopped and waited, listening for the sound of Mel's footsteps. Hearing nothing, she squeezed through the door and leaned her back against it.

A few seconds later, she heard the faint sound of footsteps.

Whirling around, she hurried to his room. Just as she closed and locked his door, the sound of the outer door opening signaled his arrival.

Maybe she should apologize. Although she didn't want to. He deserved it for not telling her how they could make a relationship work between them. And if he loved her like he said, he would do anything to keep them together.

Damn it, she had to know. But how? Mel wouldn't tell her, so who could she ask? Maybe she could find out from Kal? Yeah, she'd ask Kal. He'd tell her.

Now that she had a plan, she decided to apologize. "Mel. I'm sorry I threw pie in your face." Hearing the words spoken made her laugh all over again.

The door handle twisted back and forth.

"Breeana," he called in a neutral voice. "Open the door."

She backed up into the middle of the room. "Not until you tell me you're not mad."

"All right. I'm not mad. Open the door...now."

"See, that *now* doesn't make me feel confident in your answer."

The sound of metal breaking filled the room as the lock snapped. He opened the door and calmly closed it behind him.

She backed away, holding her hands out in front. His expression was hard to decipher. "Mel, I said I was sorry but you pissed me off."

Without breaking his stride, he scooped her up in his arms.

A shiver of panic worked its way along her spine. She squirmed and apologized again, but he remained silent.

He tossed her onto the bed and climbed up beside her. Grabbing a hold of her shirt, he dragged it over her head.

Confused, she gazed at his face but his look gave nothing away. "What are you doing?"

He unhooked her bra, bent his dark head, and gently sucked a nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the hardening peak.

Desire flared as he blew on the moist tip. She moaned and arched up. His hands smoothed over her belly, stopping at the snap of her jeans.

"Mel," she purred. "I thought you were mad."

He stared down at her and smiled. "Do I look mad?"

"No. But I threw pie in your face."

He licked his lips. "I know. I can still taste it."

"Thank God," she sighed. "I thought you were going to flip out or something."

"Oh, I thought about it. I thought about punishing you. Maybe give you a spanking." The smile that curled his lips was so damn sexy, her heart flip-flopped in her chest and her arousal shot so high she felt faint.

Okay. A spanking shouldn't seem so erotic but damn him, it did. And the vision he created in her head played havoc with her.

“Oh,” was all she could think to say.

He whispered against her ear, “I think I still might.”

Aroused to the point of pain, Breeana cupped his face and dragged his lips down to hers for a scorching kiss.

Mel punished her all right. He punished her to heaven and back. A few times.

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Chapter 23

June 17, Tuesday 4:12am

Breeana stretched her legs and yawned. She slid her hand along the sheet, reaching for Mel. When her fingers didn't come in contact with his warm skin, she cracked open one eye.

“Mel?” She glanced in the direction of the bathroom, but it was dark inside. She then looked at the red numbers on the clock radio. 4:13am.

He wouldn't be outside. The sun would be creeping over the horizon.

Snuggling down, she closed her eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but last night's argument with Mel taunted her.

With a sigh, she gave up the pretense of sleep and tossed the comforter back. She scrambled off the bed, snatched Mel's red sweatshirt from the floor and dragged it over her head as she went to the door.

Out in the hallway, she stopped at Kal's room. Loud snores rumbled from behind the closed door. Probably wouldn't be a good idea to grill him about what he knows. No, it would have to wait. An opportunity would present itself. Soon, she hoped.

Breeana continued down the hall. She rounded the corner and glimpsed Mel in the living room, sitting at his desk.

She leaned her hip against the wall, admiring the smooth tanned skin stretched over the muscles of his bare shoulders. They bunched and released with his movements. Damn, even from the back he was a sight that made her body weak with desire.

Abruptly, he slammed an open palm on the desk and drummed his fingers in unmistakable agitation.

“Fucking bullshit,” he muttered under his breath before he resumed typing.

Okaaay. Evidently he wasn't reading the comics. She shoved away from the wall. “Whatcha reading?”

He jumped, knocking a large book off the desk as he whipped his head around. “Jesus.” He closed his eyes and held a hand over his heart. “You

scared the shit outta me. I didn't hear you come in.”

She chuckled. “Obviously.”

He clicked the upper right corner of the computer screen and the monitor went blank. “What are you doing up?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” Breeana picked up the book up and placed it on the desk. She ran a finger over the faded silver lettering written in a strange language. The cover, bound in brown leather, was cracked and worn. She gently flipped it open. A musty odor floated up from the yellowed pages. “Is this a book on vampire history?”

“Did I wake you?” he asked.

Hmm, avoiding my question. Curious. She closed the book. “No—well, in a way. I reached for you but you weren't there.”

“I had a little work to finish up.”

“I can see that. I can also see that it's not going well.”

He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I'll figure it out.”

“What was it you were working on?”

Mel smiled and patted his lap. “Have a seat.”

More avoiding. Must be something big.

Breeana straddled his thighs, facing him. The rough fabric of his jeans scraped against the soft flesh of her inner thighs as he cupped her bottom and scooted her up his legs.

She dragged her nails along his scalp in long strokes. He sighed and closed his eyes.

“So, what was it?” she asked again.

His eyes remained closed. “Nothing important.”

“Liar.” She raked her nails over his scalp once more. “Don't tell me then. I just figured two heads would be better than one.”

“Yeah, you're probably right, but I've had enough for tonight.”

She gazed at his broad chest and twirled her fingers through dark hairs sprinkled across it, then ran her palms up to his wide shoulders, massaging his tense muscles. “I know you lied to me.”

His eyes popped open. “What? When?”

“About my birthmark and that drawing I saw the other day. I know you know what it means.”

He swallowed and glanced away. “Sorry to disappoint, but you're mistaken. And the similarity between the two is just a coinci—”

“A coincidence?” She laughed at his confused expression. “I don't believe that for a second. Come on, Mel. I'm not an idiot. It's more than a *coincidence* that I have a birthmark that looks exactly like that symbol.” She pointed to his computer desk, his eyes followed the movement. “And I know you can read that language.”

His face blanched and he shrugged. “I don't know what to tell you.”

“How about the truth.”

His gaze, which was full of uncertainty, stayed riveted on his computer. “Sorry, but I don't have any answers for you. And even if I did, I don't think it would be in your best interest to know.”

“Mel.” She heaved an exaggerated sigh. “You can't protect me forever. In fact, once I leave here, you won't be able to protect me at all.” It was a cheap shot but if it got him talking, then it was worth it. Besides, there was no doubt in her mind that the poem pertained to her somehow. “Wouldn't it be better for me to obtain all the knowledge I can so I can protect myself?”

He swore under his breath and his shoulders sagged a fraction of an inch. “You're right, I can read that language, but I didn't lie to you when I said I didn't know what it meant.”

“Fair enough. Why don't you tell me what you do know?” She smoothed her hands up his long, muscular arms. “I wouldn't ask or interfere, but I have a strong feeling it has something to do with me.”

His eyes moved around the room, apparently not comfortable with this conversation, which only spiked her suspicions even more.

“You're way too damn observant. And you're correct; it does have something to do with your birthmark.”

He turned her on his lap until she faced the computer and wrapped one arm around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. The fingers of his free hand manipulated the mouse as he scrolled through his files. A few clicks and fourteen lines of words she couldn't read emerged on the screen, along with a symbol she was very familiar with. It was a symbol of a dagger, the exact same as the brown birthmark gracing her lower back. With another click of the mouse, the screen divided. One side contained the document written in what she knew was the language of the vampires, the other in English.

The Vampire Prophecy.

She read the words three times. After the third time through, she gave up and leaned back against his chest. “I hate to admit defeat, but even in

English, it makes no sense.”

He laughed. “Don't feel bad. Even the vampire scholars haven't a clue.”

She pointed to the dagger symbol. “Is this the mark the poem's talking about?”

“We believe so, and it's not a poem, more like a prophecy.”

“Prophecy then.” She leaned closer to the screen. “Why don't you tell me what you know about it?”

“Not much, I'm afraid.” He sat back, pulling her with him. “Remember when I told you about the first king of the first vampire family going missing?”

Recalling the memory, she nodded.

“And I also told you it was mixed up with old legends?”

She nodded again.

“The prophecy was one.” He shifted his legs under her, stretching them out. “Vampier informed the king that a time would come when a new breed of warriors would be needed to end this war with the demons. The prophecy, for obvious reasons, was kept secret. Maybe too secret.

“The belief is the kings and their sons were the only ones to have laid eyes on the prophecy or knew the true meaning behind the words. As the years passed, like most things, it was forgotten, and what little was known turned into fabrications.”

Silence followed.

She turned her head. “That's all you know?”

“Pretty much.”

Breana waved her hand at the screen. “So...how do I fit into this?”

“That, my dear, is the million dollar question.”

“Why don't you tell me what *you* think it means. You must have some thoughts on it.”

“I thought the gods were going to send us giant-sized vampire warriors with the mark tattooed on their foreheads,” he teased.

She rolled her eyes. “Seriously, I want to know what you think.”

“I am being serious.” He laughed. “But you came along and shot that theory all to hell. Thanks, by the way.”

“Glad to have helped.” She glanced back to the computer. “I have to agree with your theory about the vampire warriors because there's no way this is speaking about me. I'm neither the warrior nor the savior type.”

“Oh, I don't know about that,” he whispered against the side of her neck, heating her skin and desire with his warm breath. “Not only did you save me from death, but you saved my soul. So, yeah, I'd have to say you are like a small warrior princess and a savior rolled up in one delicious package.” He punctuated his words with a soft nip.

Squirming in his lap, she moved away from his searching lips and teeth. “Don't start with that or I won't be able to concentrate.”

“That was my plan.”

He licked a trail up her neck, over her jaw, getting dangerously close to her lips. If he didn't stop soon, she'd be lost to his sexual magic. “Mel.” She pushed his face away. “Stop it.”

He sighed, then settled back against the seat. “All right. You win—this time.”

“Thank you.” She moved and sat between his long legs. “Maybe we should try going through this line-by-line. See if we can't figure it out that way.”

“Whatever you like.” He gathered her hair into a ponytail with his hands.

“In the depth of time when all sorrow shall climb. Hmm. Well, that seems pretty straightforward don't you think?”

“Yep. There's no denying all the sorrow in the world, but that's nothing new.”

“True. The gods shall send those to help bring about the end. What end does this mean? The world's end? The end of the war?”

“Let's say the war for now.”

“Okay.” She cocked an elbow on the desk and rested her chin on the palm of her hand. “As hard as I try, I can't fit myself into that line. How am I supposed to fight demons?”

Mel squished both of her biceps. “I'm not too sure, unless you're hiding more muscle somewhere.”

Breeana nudged him in the stomach with her elbow, laughing when she heard his quick expel of air. “Hey, maybe I have super powers.”

He snorted. “Okay, Wonder Woman. And I'm one of the Super Friends.”

She laughed and shook her head, turning her attention back to the prophecy. “From these shall spring the saviors whom all shall cling. Oh, come on. No wonder you were getting so frustrated.”

He nuzzled her neck. “Having trouble?”

Ignoring him, she read the next line out loud. “From light and dark, look for the mark. Okay, this I understand. Look for the ones who possess the mark, but—” Something tickled the back of her mind, trying to swim to the surface. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate.

“From light and dark,” she whispered to herself. And then suddenly, it came to her in a blinding flash. Earlier this evening when she said to Mel that humans had gotten ripped off in the gift department, he had said something about humans having the luxury to move in the light and the dark.

But what would humans have to do with a prophecy about vampires? Unless...

“Mel, listen to this. Maybe the light is a reference to humans and the dark is a reference to vampires?”

He went utterly still, and a deep frown furrowed his brow. She could almost see the wheels turning in his mind. After a lengthy pause, he set her on her feet and proceeded to pace back and forth between the computer and the big-screen television, rubbing his forehead as if it throbbed.

He came to a fast stop behind her, reading the prophecy from over her shoulder. “Jesus, I think you might be on to something. Shit, I don't know why I didn't put two and two together, especially after I saw your birthmark.”

She looked up at him. “Do you think I could be right?”

“It's possible.”

“The time will come when the two shall make one.” She chewed on a fingernail, as her thoughts galloped around and around like a horse in a round pen.

What two? The ones with the mark? A human and a vampire? That had to be it. But how would the two make one? Fusion? Union? Merger? Marriage? Her heart slowed to a crawl. A child!

She whipped her head around. “I don't think the prophecy means the ones with the mark will be the saviors, but—”

Her eyes grew wide, and his turned dull and lifeless. “Their children,” they said at the same time.

“But you don't have the mark,” she murmured.

Silence grew until it hung heavy between them.

“Mel,” she said, her voice dripping with panic. “You don't have the mark!”

He closed his eyes. "I know."

"That would mean I'm supposed to have a...child with some other vampire."

Mel headed toward the couch. He slumped down against the brown leather. "It would seem so."

Breeana ran over to him. "If it's not you, then I don't want any part of this. I'm not going to...breed with some other vampire, even if it means saving the goddamn world."

His eyes shifted to her face, and she took a step back. Fury burned in the silver depth. "You're bloody right, you're not!" He stood up and grabbed her arm, hauling her flush against him. "There's no way I'd ever allow that to happen."

She buried her face against the warm, hard wall of his chest. "Do you think we're even right? Maybe we're wrong?"

"It doesn't matter because you're not going to be involved."

She glanced up. "Are you going to tell Roarik about what we believe the prophecy means?"

"I'm not sure. Like you said, we could be wrong."

"I hope so." She dropped her forehead to his chest. "Have there ever been..." *Half-breeds?* "Half-human, half-vampires before?"

"Pregnancy between the two species is rare, but there have been some recorded cases throughout history. I'm sure you've heard of the legend of Vlad Dracula?"

"Yeah." She stepped away from his body, but they stayed connected by their linked hands. "But I thought he was human?"

"He was—half. The legend says his father was a vampire."

"Wow."

"Wow, indeed. His father was renamed Dracul, the devil. And Vlad was then named Dracula, son of the devil."

"Did Vlad Dracula really drink blood?"

"So the stories said. But it's also documented that it was just a rumor started by political cynics and merchants who were pissed with the new trade laws and regulations started by Vlad. They tried to tarnish his rep with cruel stories of his dark deeds."

"I read that he was so cruel he was nicknamed Vlad T...something or other." She snapped her fingers, waving her hands in a circular motion, trying to come up with the name.

“Vlad Tepes, which means the impaler. His favorite way to kill his enemies was by impaling them on stakes. Hence, the stake through the vampire's heart rumor.”

“You said there were others. What does history say about them?”

“Not much. Humans back in medieval days were very superstitious. Imagine a woman back then giving birth to a baby that grew a set of fangs and needed blood to survive. She'd kill it for sure, believing she'd spawned an offspring of Lucifer's. And even if she didn't and it got out that her child drank blood, she'd be tried as a witch and burned at the stake. So, I'm sure most half-breeds didn't survive long.”

Breeana's hands gripped her throat. “You're right. They'd be considered freaks; evil monsters. But if Vlad, being a mixture of our species was so cruel, why would the prophecy—”

“Why would the Prophecy speak of half-breeds as saviors?”

“Yes.”

“I have no idea. Vampires also considered him an abomination; an abomination to be avoided at all cost in the future.”

She exhaled, drained to the point of collapsing. “None of this seems real. It's like I'm watching a movie.”

Mel slid a cool palm across her cheek and then sifted his fingers through her hair. “You look exhausted. Let's put this discussion to bed for now and get some rest.”

Sleep was the last thing on her mind. “What are we going to do?”

He sighed and pulled her back against his body. “Nothing. We're probably way off base in our theory.”

She wished she could believe that, but deep inside she knew they were right. Also, the look on his face and tone of his voice told her Mel thought so too.

How could she be expected to mate with someone else, let alone another vampire, even if it meant saving the world?

Chapter 24

June 17 Tuesday, 5:06pm

“Hey, dudette. What's going on?” Kal asked.

“Not much,” Breeana muttered while staring at Mel's computer screen. She looked up and caught a quick peek of Kal's broad, bare back before he disappeared through the kitchen entrance. A tattoo identical to Mel's circled his left bicep and a colorful tattoo of a naked woman stretched between his shoulder blades.

That's so Kal, she thought, smiling as her gaze traveled back to the screen, reading the Vampire Prophecy for the hundredth time.

“Whoa, hey. Does Mel know about this?”

She glanced over her shoulder. Kal stared at the words of the prophecy displayed on the screen. His expression showed his confusion and surprise. “Yes. He told me about it last night.”

His eyes flared. “He did?”

“You seem surprised.”

“No...well, actually yeah, I am a little.” He took a drink of his orange juice then headed into the living room.

“Why?”

“No reason.” He set his glass on the coffee table and sank down onto the recliner, kicking out the footrest.

Breeana studied him for a moment, wondering whether or not to tell him what she and Mel believed was the meaning behind the prophecy. She decided against it. Mel could fill him in at their meeting later tonight. It really wasn't her place, or so she kept telling herself.

“Have you tried to find out what the prophecy could mean? Do you have any theories?” she asked.

“Nah. Mel's into all that history crap, not me. I look to the future.” He laughed as he fished out the TV remote jammed between the cushions.

She chuckled at that. “Sometimes the answers to the future are found in our past.”

“Ah, crap. You're starting to sound just like Mel.” He aimed the remote at the TV and clicked it on. “Do you mind if I play a video game?”

“Go ahead.” She turned off the computer, and then sat down on the couch.

Kal leaned over the worn arm of his chair and turned on his gaming system. The words *Fire Emblem* flashed across the television and he began to play.

She pulled her feet up and curled into the corner of the couch, watching Kal play. Though she didn't desire him, she had to admit he was one perfect specimen. His upper body was solid, sculpted muscle. He was Mel's height, but not quite as broad. Relaxed-fit jeans hung low on angular hips, his long legs were stretched out in front with his bare feet crossed at the ankles on the recliner's footrest.

His eyes flicked to her then back to his game. “Where's Mel?”

“He's still in bed,” she said through a yawn, then sat up straight. Yes, she and Kal were alone. Now was the perfect time to pick his brain for answers. She shot a quick glance toward the hallway and Mel's closed bedroom door. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Don't see why not.”

“What do you know about vampires being able to slow down the aging process in humans?”

He choked and lost his grip on the controller. He fumbled, trying to grab it, but it slipped and tumbled to the floor.

He looked over at her, his light blue eyes wide with alarm. Bending forward, he retrieved his controller. “Did Mel mention something about it?”

Well, well, well. What do ya know? She was right; he did know something. Mel might be angry that she went behind his back, but once she knew, there was nothing he could do.

Except refuse her.

She'd cross that rickety bridge when or if she came to it. First, she needed info and hopefully Kal would deliver. But by the guarded look on his face, this wasn't going to be easy. She'd have to play it smart. Cool.

“We were discussing the possibility of me staying with him, but we ran into a snag. I told him I couldn't stay because of the aging difference and he blurted out that there was a way.”

Kal fiddled with the buttons on his controller, then set it aside. “What exactly did he say?”

“Nothing after that. He clammed up, and no matter how much I begged, he wouldn't say another word on the subject.”

“Did he say why?”

Breeana glanced down at her hands balled up on her lap. “He said he cared for me too much.”

He nodded, seemingly unsurprised by her answer. “Well, you'll have to talk to him about it. If I say anything, he'll kick my ass.”

Disappointment, raw and rough, shredded her heart.

“Yeah, I'm sorry I can't help you. He'd never forgive me, and as much as I enjoy running him through the gears, he's my closest friend. Hell, he's like a brother to me.”

Her cheeks burned and she lowered her eyes as guilt and shame wormed through her. “I'm sorry for trying to involve you, and for going behind Mel's back. Maybe I misinterpreted his feelings for me.”

“He cares for you. Don't ever doubt that. Mel's like the bravest guy I know but his actions are governed by his fears. If he thinks he's doing this for you, or should I say your safety, then nothing's going to change his mind.”

A tear dropped onto her leg and she scrubbed at the dark spot on her jeans with her thumb. “Again, I'm sorry. It wasn't fair of me to put you in this position. I did it because I want to stay with Mel. I love him.”

Kal swore under his breath. “I understand.”

Breeana struggled to get her emotions back under control. “I'm glad Mel has you as a friend.” She sniffed, running a fingernail along the seam on the armrest of the couch. “Mel told me about his past and well...it didn't seem to have a lot of laughter in it. It helps me to know that you'll be here making him laugh when I'm gone.”

Kal stayed quiet for awhile before he said, “He's going to be lost when you leave. No amount of jokes or pranks will help. When you leave, his heart and soul will go with you.”

Mel crossed his arms over his chest and settled in a chair. This was going to be one long meeting. He hadn't decided yet what he would or should tell Roarik and the others. He didn't want to get Breeana deeper involved, but

could he just shove aside his loyalty to Roarik? To the warriors who fought and died in this war? Damn it. Though, no matter what he revealed, Breeana would not be a part of it, even if he had to take her and run.

Roarik leaned back in his swivel chair, propped his feet up on the desk, eyeing the clansmen seated in front of him. "This world is heading to hell faster than we can stop it. Goddamn humans keep repeating the same mistakes over and over." He shook his head, ticking off a list on his fingers. "Wars in the Middle East. Terrorists. Countries with nuclear technology and itchy fingers. Christ, even our streets of Vancouver are plagued with gangs killing one another. Shit, if this keeps up, annihilation will be unavoidable."

Mel heard all Roarik said. And hell, he had to agree. Humans were destroying themselves at an alarming rate. Whether from listening to the demons or because that was plain old human nature, he wasn't sure.

Likely both.

Roarik rose and paced in front of his desk, coming to a stop beside the cold fireplace. "I'm sure you all know Mel has found one who carries the mark."

Mel glanced around, catching the inquisitive looks shot his way from the other warriors. Except Kal. His gaze was directed on the floor.

Roarik's eyes settled on Mel. "I received a phone call from the Sacred Order earlier this evening. Seems two more with the mark have been found."

A collective gasp filled the room.

Mel stared back, unflinching. At least on the outside, but inside his guts knotted, twisting so tight he was afraid he'd be sick. He prayed the two were human females because the thought of Breeana swollen with someone else's child was unimaginable.

Suddenly, an image from his dreams flooded not only his mind but his heart with soul-wrenching anguish: Breeana sitting on a red-cushioned swing chair, holding a dark-haired baby.

Was that what he'd been witnessing? The answer to the prophecy?

His captain's deep voice snapped him back. "Both are human females."

Relief washed through him like a raging river. He briefly closed his eyes, sagging against his chair.

Thank Christ, a reprieve. But he knew it was only a matter of time before the inevitable happened.

Sin stubbed out his cigarette. "Where were these two found?"

“One in Scotland, the other in Italy.”

Soren downed a shot of vodka. “Are they in the custody of the vampires?”

“Yes. One is with Thorn from the twelfth family. He serves in a small squadron in the Highlands of Scotland. The other is with Mordecai from the forty-second family. His squadron is located on the southern tip of Italy.”

Mel struggled for each breathe he drew in. “How were they discovered?”

“From what the Sacred Order told me, both vampires came across them accidentally. When they saw the mark, they were stunned. And not knowing what else to do, they took them.”

“As in kidnapping?” Black asked. “Christ, has it come to that?”

Roarik's eyes lifted until he stared directly at Mel. “The Sacred Order is instructing any who come upon one with the mark to take them.”

Mel glared back. His heart picked up speed as Roarik's words sunk in. He would never force Breeana to stay. If Roarik thought for one second he'd sit back and allow the Sacred Order to decide what happened to her, then he was out of his mind.

Ace laughed. “Human females? What gives? What possible use could any human be?”

“Their use?” Roarik laughed sarcastically. “I have no idea.” He slowly walked back to his desk, leaning a hip against the corner. “Unless Mel has found some use for them? Mel, anything to add?”

Mel gripped the armrests of the chair until his knuckles showed white through his skin. He studied the faces of his fellow clansmen, seeing the expectant looks in their eyes, and he wanted to tell them all to shove it up their asses, but miraculously he kept the words trapped.

“Well?” Roarik demanded. “Have you found anything new?”

Ace snorted. “Have you found any use for the bitch other than the obvious?”

Mel's eyes narrowed on Ace. “Shut your fucking mouth, Ace, before I shut it for ya.”

“Whooo, I'm shakin'.”

Roarik pounded a beefy fist on the desk. “That's enough! We have plenty of bullshit to contend with without you two starting a fistfight.” He scowled, his expression daring them to continue. “Ace, unless you have something constructive to say, keep your trap shut. And you.” He glowered at Mel. “Start talking. If I get one more call from those lazy bastards in the

Sacred Order and I have nothing to report, someone's ass is going to be in a sling.”

Mel ignored Roarik's threat and proceeded to glare at Ace, silently begging him to say one more word. That's all he needed. Just one more derogatory remark regarding Breeana and he'd completely lose it and rip the guy to shreds.

Ace stared back with a *just try it, I dare you* smile stretching his lips.

“My patience is wearing dangerously thin,” Roarik stated in a calm voice.

With one last warning glare at Ace, Mel's gaze drifted across the faces of the other males, stopping on Roarik. He had no other choice; they all had a right to know.

Clearing his throat, he eased off his chair and stood beside the fireplace. “Breeana and I have come up with a theory that could, and I stress could, fit with the prophecy. The problems we've been facing in solving the riddle were because we were only looking to the vampires. The prophecy clearly points to both species.”

Deep quiet greeted his announcement.

“Are you serious?” Soren asked with a laugh. “You're out of your mind. There's no way the prophecy speaks of humans.”

Mel narrowed his eyes. “How many hours have you spent pouring over it?” When Soren didn't reply, his lips curled into an unamused grin. “Yeah, I thought so.”

“I agree with Soren,” Ace added. “Humans are weak. If it wasn't for us, they'd be extinct.”

Mel leaned his back against the fireplace mantle and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “If you assholes don't shut up and listen, then I'm outta here.”

“I for one want to hear what you have to say, and I believe the others do as well.” Roarik folded his arms over his chest and glanced around the room. “Am I correct?”

The males murmured their agreement.

Mel started to fill them in on what he and Breeana had figured out, but didn't get far.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Black said. “But humans as saviors? It makes no sense.”

Mel nodded. “True, but it's not just humans or vampires that will be the saviors. It will be both.”

There was a long silence before Black asked. "Both?"

"The two shall make one," Mel said. "Two with the mark; a vampire and a human." He paced behind the seats of the clansmen, hands still shoved deep in his pockets. "They will mate, and their offspring will be the saviors the prophecy is referring to."

"You mean half-breeds?" Sin inquired.

"Yes."

Soren lit a cigarette, blowing out a smoky curse. "No offense man, but your theory sucks."

"I agree, and I'm not saying I believe it myself. But let's just go with it for a moment. What could these half-breeds possibly do that we here cannot?"

"Dick all," Ace said with a snarl. "They're just as weak as humans."

"How do you know?" Mel sat back down.

"Wasn't there a documented case of a human who drank blood in the past?" Kal asked.

"Yes. Vlad Dracula. Even our historians believe he was a half-breed, and from what is written about him, he was no weakling."

Ace laughed. "You're grasping, man."

Roarik cleared his throat. "Continue, Mel. What is it you think these half-breeds can accomplish?"

"Vampires who are capable of withstanding daylight."

Complete silence filled the room.

"We are trapped by our weakness. Demons, since they are housed in human bodies, can move in daylight and darkness. They have free reign between dawn and dusk to work on humans. They can hold down jobs that our race can't, situating themselves deeper into humans' lives. If a new breed of vampire was born that could move in light, we could stop demons in their tracks. We only have a few short hours of darkness to hunt, and even less in the summer months. And look what's happening in the desert countries. They're almost overrun with demons."

Kal leaned forward. "How do we know the children born from a coupling between the species will be vampires? Couldn't they also be born human?"

"Good question. And the answer is we're not sure. There's no way of knowing until such a child is born. But I think that the ones who carry the mark will have extraordinary strengths and talents that no matter the outcome, the end result will be a stronger, more efficient warrior."

Kal rested his forearms along his thighs. “Why have no vampires come forward with the mark?”

“Over time, I think they may be found. Keep in mind, if they're from a lesser branch then they most likely have very little knowledge of the prophecy. Again, this is only a theory. As you can see there are many holes in it.”

Sin fiddled with his cigarette pack before he extracted one. With a smoke dangling from his lips, he asked, “Could it be possible only the humans are required to hold the mark? Maybe the marked humans could breed with any vampire?” With a rasp of his lighter, he inhaled deep before blowing smoke-rings through the air.

Mel watched the rings float gracefully across the room. They melted apart then vanished. He thought about Sin's question. Could he be right? If that were the case, then he could become Breeana's mate.

Elated, he allowed the possibilities to run unchecked through his brain. He imagined her heavy with his child. Both raising their son or daughter in a loving, happy environment. Their young growing up, while they grew older—

Reality slammed back into him. The prophecy clearly stated that both would need the mark to successfully reproduce.

Disappointment ate at his insides like rust corroding metal. “No, Sin. If we're correct, then I believe the mark is required from both.”

“Well, if you're sure.”

“Sure?” Mel shouted. “Fuck. I'm not sure about any of this. I told you, it's all just theory and conjecture!”

Sin narrowed his eyes and exhaled a lungful of smoke. “Fine. I was just asking, for shit's sakes.”

Roarik stood, addressing the group. “I will get word out to the first families to check all family members for the mark. I'll also instruct the Sacred Order to broadcast to the lesser branches for them to do the same. We'll know within the week if any can be found.”

He turned to Mel. “Good work. I appreciate the time and energy you put into this.” He moved around the desk and clasped Mel on the shoulder. “If there are any questions,” he asked of the males, “then ask now because I have work to do.”

Mel cleared his throat. “I would like to add that had it not been for Breeana's help, I'd still be fumbling around for the answers. She was the

one who helped put the pieces of the puzzle together.”

“Noted,” Roarik said. “The human female has been of great value. She will be held in high regard and treated with honor and respect.”

They all concurred.

Roarik cleared his throat. “Oh, one more thing. Celeene and I will be leaving for England tomorrow night. Family business. We’ll be gone two nights, tops, and again in my absence, Soren will be in charge.” All nodded and headed to the door.

As Mel was about to step out into the hallway, Roarik laid a hand on his arm, stopping him. “Can I see you for a moment?”

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Chapter 25

Roarik walked back to his desk. “I need to speak with you about a couple of things.”

Mel studied Roarik's emotionless face. *Now what?* “What's up?” The last thing he wanted to do was talk. His nerves were already strung to the breaking point.

“Have a seat.”

“I have nothing to add that I couldn't have said in front of the others.”

Roarik sat and waved a hand, gesturing to a chair in front of his desk.

Warning signals detonated up and down Mel's spine when he caught the grave look in Roarik's eyes. He snagged a chair leg with his foot and sat on the edge of the seat. “What's on your mind?”

“I'll get right to it. How much do you care for this hu— Breeana?”

What is this? The hair on the back of his neck stood up. “Why do you ask?”

“I ask because the Sacred Order wants us to keep her in our custody.”

Mel remained quiet, but inside his mind screamed the word, NO!

Roarik's faced looked as if fashioned from stone. “If your theory is correct, then she will have to breed with another who possesses the mark. So I ask again, how much do you care for her?”

His heart dropped like a stone sinking to the bottom of the ocean. “Too much to allow that to happen.”

Scrubbing his hands over his face, Roarik sighed. “That's what I thought.” He looked away and straightened a stack of files on his desk. “I think we should send her to the squadron in Alberta.”

Mel exploded off his chair. “She goes nowhere except back to her life! She's been through enough and I will not pass her to another to be bred like a prized mare!” He stalked to the door and stopped. “Believe me, I will take her and disappear and you, the Sacred Order, the gods, and the fucking prophecy can all go to hell. Do I make myself clear?”

Roarik slammed both hands on his desk hard enough to knock a mountain of books to the floor. “Don't threaten me, Mel.”

Mel stood his ground. "Believe me, it's no threat."

A muscle ticked in Roarik's jaw. "What a bloody mess." He rubbed a finger along his brow. "Answer me this. What kind of life would that be for you or Breeana? You'd be constantly on the run, hunted by the vampire authorities, considered AWOL. Plus a kidnapper."

"You're right, but it would be better than Breeana being tossed to some vampire to mate with. Tell me, what will happen to her once she gives birth? How many times will she be impregnated? One, two, ten times? What will be her fate after she is no longer useful?"

Roarik glanced away. "I don't know."

"A life on the run would be far better than what is waiting for her."

"You've placed me in a very precarious position." Roarik drummed his fingers on his desk. "You realize you're asking me to choose between you and my duty as a squad leader?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything," Mel said, his voice devoid of all emotion. "But just know, I'll take down anyone who gets in my way."

After a long moment of silence, Roarik cleared his throat and spread his arms wide. "Fine. When it's safe, Breeana will be free."

Mel took a step closer. "What do you mean, free?"

"Free to go back to her world. Free from the prophecy."

His heart jackknifed. "What about your obligation, your allegiance to the Sacred—"

Roarik stood. "My loyalties are with my men, not a bunch of bureaucratic bastards that sit behind their desks spouting orders. Besides, more with the mark have already been found and I believe more will follow. I doubt one less will change the outcome of this war."

"What will you tell the Sacred Order when they ask about her?"

"I will inform them she met with an unfortunate accident."

Mel stood stone-still in the middle of the room. Would Roarik really do this? More importantly, why would he put his ass on the line like that? He narrowed his gaze on his captain, trying to comprehend the reason for this boon. "Do you want to explain to me why you'd do this?"

Roarik sat down. He smiled, but his eyes were full of sadness. "For you. Your life has been difficult enough and I won't add to your misery. And I feel this would...crush you."

Mel slumped down in the nearest chair. Breeana would be free; free to live out the rest of her life. This was more than he could have hoped for.

He'd be forever indebted to Roarik, but that debt he'd gladly pay, no matter the price.

Overcome with gratitude, he lowered his head and whispered, "Thank you."

"No need my old friend. I could never put you through that." Roarik grabbed a pen from a strawberry jam jar on his desk and twirled it through his fingers. "Would you take Breeana for your mate if she were willing to leave her world and kind behind?"

Mel's head shot up. He needed to end this conversation quick before he disgraced himself in front of his captain. He was tempted to tell him no, but after the risk Roarik was willing to take to see Breeana free from all obligations, he owed him the truth, no matter how painful it would be to speak it. "I'd love nothing more than to take her as my mate, but I won't."

"Isn't she willing?"

"She would stay, but for the aging difference."

Roarik didn't speak for a few minutes. "You know that can be remedied...unless you've asked her and she finds it not to her liking."

Shit. "It's not an option. The price is too high."

"Have you asked her?"

"No."

"Why?"

Mel rose to his feet. "Every night my life is on the line. I won't bind her life-force to mine knowing that." He stared hard into Roarik's eyes, driving his point home. "If you were in my shoes, can you honestly tell me you'd bind Celeene's life to yours, knowing you could be killed at any time, ending her life as well?"

Roarik hung his head and folded his hands on the desk. "I see your point. Would she stay and live her life out naturally?"

"No. And even if she did choose to stay, I would deny her. I don't want her to leave all she has accomplished, for me. Over time, I'd be afraid she'd eventually regret her decision and hate me for it."

"I understand," Roarik said with a nod. "I see now you truly have no choice but to let her go."

Mel paced the room like a caged tiger, looking for a way to escape.

"Take the night off and go be with Breeana while you can."

Shocked, he spun around, shaking his head. "The sooner I kill the demon bitch the sooner Breeana gets back to her world. It's for the best." He tried

without success to believe his own words.

Roarik stood and came around to the front of his desk. "Take this night and enjoy. That's an order."

Breeana jumped up from Mel's bed.

How can I be part of a prophecy? And a vampire prophecy at that?

She wore a path in the carpet as she paced the length of the room. She stopped, gripped her shoulders and dug fingers into her knotted muscles, trying to massage her tension away. Heaving a weary sigh, she dropped her hands and glanced at the clock radio. 10:10p.m.

What was taking so long?

Returning to the bed, she sat on the edge and chewed her thumbnail; her thoughts a swirling mass of confusion, circling around and around.

Why would God choose her? It's not like she was overly religious. She'd never even worshiped in a church. In fact, the only times she had been in a church were for her friends' weddings and her parents' funeral.

Not a whole lot of godliness there, she thought.

Breeana flopped back with her arms spread wide, staring up at the white ceiling. She tried to imagine being pregnant with another vampire's child. Grimacing, she shoved that thought away. But as soon as it vanished, a clear image of Mel holding a black-haired baby snuggled in his large arms, took its place. The look of pride and happiness on his face made her heart soar. She closed her eyes and fell deeper into the vision. Mel grinned as he brushed a finger over the dewy softness of his baby's cheek. He laughed when a tiny hand reached up from the folds of the blue blanket to grasp a hold of his finger.

Unconsciously, she laid her hands over her flat stomach, allowing her wants and desires to wander free.

But after a few moments, she reined them in like a cowboy would his horse and reality once again flowed back in. Mel didn't have the mark.

She sighed and opened her eyes. There was no way. If it couldn't be with Mel then...it wasn't happening. The thought of ever loving another as much as she loved Mel was preposterous, and the thought of sleeping with someone else made her physically sick.

But how do you say no to God?

“I'm sorry...God, umm, my Lord, but if you wanted me to be a part of this, then you should have made Mel a part of it also.”

Feeling like a fool, she cursed and sat up. The door in the outer room opened and closed.

“Breeana?”

She leapt off the bed just as Mel opened the bedroom door, and then hurled herself into his arms.

His arms tightened around her. “I missed you too,” he said with a chuckle.

She eased back, gripping his hard biceps. “What happened? Did they think our theory could be right?”

“Hold on a sec.” He leaned down and kissed her. When he pulled back, he smiled. “Priorities.”

She laughed. “You're absolutely correct.” She stretched, kissing his lips again. “Now, tell me what was said. I've been waiting forever.”

He glanced at the clock radio, cocking an eyebrow. “Forever?”

“Whatever.” She waved her hands with barely contained impatience.

Mel walked into the bathroom and splashed cold water over his face and neck. He slicked his hair back from his face and met her eyes in the mirror. “They all think our hypothesis makes sense. There were some who didn't want to believe at first, but they all came around in the end.” He grabbed a black hand towel off the rack and dried his face. “Roarik will inform the Sacred Order and they'll take it from there. It's now out of my hands.”

Breeana folded her arms over her chest and leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb. “What about me?”

He blinked, then shrugged. “What about you?”

“Be serious. What's going to happen with me?”

He copied her stance. “Nothing. You're free.”

Did she hear him right? “What do you mean, free?”

“From the prophecy.”

“Really?”

“Really,” he replied with a tender smile.

Her shoulders sagged with relief and her knees almost gave out. She gripped the wall for support. “How? Or should I ask, why?”

Mel straightened and brushed a strand of hair over her shoulder. “Considering the feelings you and I share, Roarik agreed it wouldn't be right to put either one of us through that misery.”

“I should thank him.” Her happiness and alleviation were short lived. Thoughts and worries once more flooded her mind. She looked down, examining her nails.

“What's the matter? I thought you'd be happy.”

“I am. It's just...I feel like I'm letting humanity down, or God, or... something—I don't know.” She turned and walked back to the bed, staring down at the brown comforter.

“Letting humanity down?” He grasped her arm. “That's bullshit. And as for the gods, I don't give a shit about those selfish bastards and you shouldn't either.”

“Mel!” She turned. “You shouldn't say things like that.”

“Why the hell not?” He laughed. “What have the gods done for you?”

She thought about that for a moment. But couldn't come up with an answer. “I don't know, but—“

“But nothing, because that's exactly what they've done for you, except drag you from your life and drop you into this war. A war they created, I might add. As far as I'm concerned, all they do is sit on their thrones, or whatever they sit their sacred asses on, and watch us mortals fight their battles. Humans and vampires are nothing but pawns.”

“Still. I don't think it's wise to speak of God or the rest of them like that.”

He laughed, dragging a hand through his damp hair. “Why? Because they'll strike me down? Let 'em.” He spread his arms wide and glanced up at the ceiling. “Oh, lazy bastards, do your worst.”

“Mel.” She grabbed his arms, pulling them to his sides.

He looked at her with amusement shining in his eyes. “See. I'm still here. It's no secret I have no use for them. And hell, outside of me being a soldier in their war, they have no use for me.”

A short nervous laugh escaped her. “Well, don't tempt fate.”

“How about a new topic?” He draped his arms over her shoulders and kissed her nose.

Her head hummed with unanswered concerns. How could Mel and Roarik guarantee her freedom from the prophecy? What about God? What would happen if she didn't fulfill her part?

Guilt added to the mix, making her edgy. “But, what if—“

“No what-ifs. I don't want you worrying about any of this. Once it's safe, you'll return to your life. In time, this will all become just a distant memory.”

Mel would never become just a distant memory. She knew she'd lay awake every night remembering his taste, the feel of his skin pressed against hers. She'd be nothing but a hollowed out shell, reliving over and over every second they had spent together, existing only to see him in her dreams.

Breeana hugged him tight, afraid of what her future held. A future without him.

He wrapped his large body around her like a security blanket.

“What time are you going out tonight?” she whispered against his shirt.

He stepped out of her arms and sat on the edge of the bed. He drew a hand slowly down her arm. His fingers wrapped around her wrist, and with a gentle tug, he pulled her onto his lap. The scent of his spicy aftershave and his irresistible maleness filled her senses. She leaned against his hard chest and smoothed a hand over the sinewy muscles of one of his arms to the corded muscles of his shoulder.

“I'm not. Roarik gave me the night off, so I'm all yours. And I don't want to talk about the past, the future, the prophecy, or endings. Tonight will be all about us. Just two people in love.”

Tears welled in her eyes and slipped down her cheeks. “Mel...I—”

“Hey.” He cupped her cheeks, wiping her tears with the pads of his thumbs. “No sadness either.”

She nodded. He was right. Tonight would be just about them: no heartache, no sadness, and no problems. But tomorrow, that was another story. Her mind was made up. She would be staying, and he'd soon learn there was nothing he could do or say that would make her change her mind. One way or the other, he would tell her what prolonging a human's life entailed and she wouldn't take no for an answer.

Chapter 26

Mel woke to gentle knocking. He glanced over at Breeana, but the sound hadn't disturbed her. She slept beside him, only the top of her dark head visible above the covers. The knocking, a little more urgent, sounded again.

He carefully slid from the bed and retrieved his boxer shorts from off the floor, and pulled them on. When he opened the door, his heart ground to a halt. Kal stood on the other side—blood splattered across his face and leather jacket. A shallow cut, already turning black and blue, was visible on his left temple. “Jesus Christ. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Kal murmured. He looked down at his hands, both encrusted with dried blood. “It's not all mine.”

Mel closed the door behind him, then pushed Kal's hair out of the way and examined the gash. “Do you need me to do a stitch and patch job?”

Kal sucked in a hiss of air as Mel poked at the wound. “Nah, I'm good.”

“Shit, did one of the other warriors—”

“No.” Kal heaved a sigh and fidgeted from side to side. “They're fine.”

A shiver of dread squirmed around Mel's heart. “What the hell is going on?”

“Let's go sit down.”

Fear ripened in Mel's gut like fruit on the vine. “Just spit it out.”

Kal ignored him and headed into the living room. He sat on the couch and blew out a loud breath.

Mel followed. “Out with it. Now!”

Kal's gaze stayed glued to the floor. “I killed her.”

His stomach plummeted to his feet. There was only one *her* Kal would be talking about. The she-demon. “Where?”

“Downtown Burnaby. Black and I were patrolling when we saw her and another demon coming out of a nightclub.”

Mel slumped boneless beside Kal on the couch. “Are you positive it was her?” He heard the calm in his voice and wondered at how he managed it because inside he was screaming: lips peeled back, eyes squeezed shut, heart shattering. He screamed so loud he was afraid he'd never stop.

“Positive.” Kal brought his gaze to Mel's face. “So, what now?”

“I...I'll take Breeana home tonight.” Was it really over? Could he do it? Could he honestly set her free? One thing was certain; when she left, his heart would go with her.

“Welcome back to misery, my son,” his father's voice cackled in his head. “Never fear, I'll keep you company.”

Fear and panic constricted his breathing. His chest tightened and the living room walls seemed to close in around him. Mel bolted up and tore into the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of J.D. out of the cupboard, ripped off the cap, and slugged down a large swallow.

“Are you all right, man?” Kal leaned against the doorjamb, eyeing him with concern.

Mel set the bottle down, placed his palms flat on the counter, and hung his head. “Yeah.” *Keep telling yourself that.*

Kal stepped nearer to him. “I'm going to miss her too. The place won't feel the same without her.”

“Yep.” He could hardly squeeze the word through his constricted throat. He grabbed the bottle and walked back to the living room.

“She wants to stay with you, dude.”

Mel stopped in front of the TV and stared at the blank screen. “It's over. I knew as soon as it was safe, she'd be going back to her life.”

“Yeah, see, that's great and all, but things have changed. I see how much you two care for each other. And believe me, man, that's something you shouldn't lightly toss away.”

Red hot rage burned through him. “Lightly? You think this isn't *torturing* me?”

“Poor choice of words—”

“Screw you.” Mel guzzled another mouthful, the burn from the alcohol brought tears to his eyes. Or was it from the pain of his heart shattering into a billion pieces? “I'm sending her back because I love her so much.”

“She wants to be with you.”

“Now, but later she'll regret it.”

“You don't know that.”

“Yeah.” Mel nodded. “I do.”

Kal sat on the armrest of the couch, resting his forearms on his knees. “Come on, Mel. For once in your life, do something that'll make you happy. Quit analyzing the shit out of everything.”

Mel growled with pure rage. “She goes back and that's final.”

“You're fucked.”

In a flash, he leapt across the room and knocked Kal back against the couch.

Fangs bared, hands tightening around his friend's throat, Mel snarled, “Watch it, Kal. I'm on the edge. One more word and I'll rip your tongue out.”

Fear widened Kal's eyes, but he didn't fight back. Mel squeezed a little more and he grinned as he stared down at the face of his roommate.

The sound of choking and wheezing brought him back to himself. His rage turned to cold dread. He released his hold around Kal's throat and pushed himself away. His ass banged off the coffee table, knocking him to the floor.

He stared, stunned as Kal rubbed his throat. “Jesus Christ. I'm sorry. Shit, man. I'm...Oh, Christ.” Using the couch for support, Mel stood up on shaky legs. “I'm losing my mind.”

“You're going to be losing a helluva lot more than that.” Kal surged to his feet. He jabbed a finger into Mel's chest. “Don't be an idiot. Don't make the same mistake I did.” He turned and disappeared down the hall.

Mel stared after him. Shocked not only by Kal's words, but by the look of sadness in his eyes. What the hell? Was there more to Kal than his endless parade of one-night stands?

Gripping his head, he dropped that thought; his mind and heart were already congested with his own suffering. He sat on the couch and stared across the living room.

On one hand, he was relieved Breeana's life was no longer in danger, yet he couldn't stop wishing for more time with her.

“Shiiiiit.”

Maybe he should ask her to stay? She had said she loved him, that she wanted to be with him.

Hope sparked in his chest but before it turned into a flame, he doused it. No, she deserved much more than he could give her, deserved someone better than himself. From the moment they met, her life had been in danger and she almost became a broodmare for the vampire prophecy. Plus, his terrible track record on keeping those he loved safe showed just how unworthy he was.

He really was cursed. Everyone he'd ever cared about had been ripped from him. But at least Breeana would be alive. The only option was to take her back to her world. It was right. But why did it feel so wrong?

Mel rose on weak legs, and with feet feeling like they were encased in cement, he dragged himself to his room. He stood in the doorway, watching Breeana as she slept. His gaze touched on her belongings—every piece of her—scattered around the room. The clothes he peeled from her body only a few short hours ago lay discarded on the floor. Her purse and cell phone sat on his dresser along with her truck keys. More of her clothes were folded neatly on his chair with her black leather coat hanging off the back. Her guitar case was propped up against the wall beside the closet.

He liked having her things here, mingling with his. It felt...right.

In the bathroom, he found more of her: make-up, curling iron, and hairbrush were arranged on the lid of the toilet tank. The rim of the bathtub held her shampoo, razor and body lotions. He picked up her shampoo bottle and opened it. Sniffing, he closed his eyes as the fresh melon scent wafted over him.

Shit, she was everywhere. She was inside him, the very breath he drew into his lungs.

Stepping back into the bedroom, he stopped beside the bed. How does one take a knife and plunge it into their heart, snuffing out their life? Because that's exactly what he would be doing when he informed her it was over.

Chapter 27

June 18 Wednesday 4:10pm

Breeana glanced at Mel, then Kal. Both sat quietly watching a baseball game on TV with twin scowls marring their brows. “What's the matter with you two? You're both acting like you've lost your best friend.”

She slid her empty plate onto the coffee table, then leaned back beside Mel on the couch. He shoved around the scrambled eggs on his plate with a fork. Kal also did more fork play with his food than eating. “Are the eggs bad?”

Kal shook his head. “Nah, they're good. Just not hungry, I guess.”

“What about you?” she asked Mel.

He shrugged. “Yeah. Just not all that hungry.”

Okay. Something was definitely up. Especially if Kal wasn't eating. The vampire usually ate like a teenage boy, scarfing down food like there was no tomorrow. And Mel was no slouch in that department either. She trailed her fingers through Mel's silky hair. “Did you two have a spat?”

Kal glanced at her and smiled. “Not that I know of. Yo, Mel? Are you pissed at me for something?”

“Give it a minute,” Mel muttered, setting his plate on the table.

The small hairs on her arm rose as a shiver of apprehension worked its way through her. “Will one of you please tell me what's going on? The tension in here is so thick I can hardly breathe.”

“Nothing's going on,” Kal replied, a little too quickly for her liking. “I just haven't had enough sleep lately. Between hunting demons and keeping the ladies in my life happy.” He winked at her.

Mel cursed under his breath and shook his head. “Must be nice to have no other worries except which video game to play and what woman you should bed.” His gray eyes narrowed on Kal, his expression cold. “What? No letters or phone calls from your mother?”

Anger turned Kal's light blue eyes dark. He tossed his plate onto the coffee table, knocking the remote to the floor.

Whoa. Something was seriously wrong. She laid a hand on Mel's shoulder. "Why are you acting like this?"

"He's always like this when he first wakes up," Kal grumbled. "You're just seeing it now."

There was more to Mel's surly mood than just plain ol' waking up on the wrong side of the bed. "Mel?"

He glanced at her and her heart sank. He looked tired and beaten. Dark purple circles under his eyes stood out against pale skin. Deep grooves carved tunnels across his brow and on either side of his lips.

He drew a finger down her cheek. "We'll talk later, okay?"

A fearful chill engulfed her. "All right. Actually, there's something I need to talk to you about as well."

He nodded.

A deathly pall hung heavy in the air. She couldn't take another second of the silence without screaming. "So, Kal. What's up with the letters and phone calls from your mother?"

He glanced at her, and then shot Mel a murderous glare. "Nothing much."

Mel smirked. "Aw, come on. Share. Tell Breeana how your mother is always hounding you to get married and produce an heir."

Kal's body vibrated and a low growl rumbled in his chest. "You son-of-a-bitch."

Breeana whipped her head toward Mel. "Hey, it sounds personal. If he doesn't want to talk about it, don't force him."

Mel's lips tightened. He grabbed the plates off the coffee table and stormed toward the kitchen. "Hear that, Kal? You don't have to talk, but for you that's an impossibility. The guy never knows when to keep his trap shut, always prying into someone else's business, but never wanting to talk about his own."

Kal's lips curled up in a snarl. "Up yours, man. Don't take your bullshit out on me. If you're too stupid to see what's in front of you, that's your problem."

Breeana shot up. "I've had enough. I want to know what the hell's going on and I want to know now!"

Neither Kal nor Mel said a word.

"I'm not kidding around. I want to know why you two are at each other's throats." She glared at Kal, but he kept his eyes down, so she turned and studied Mel's grim face as he walked back into the living room. "Well?"

Kal shut off the TV and rose. “That's my cue. I'm outta here.” He made his way down the hall, then stopped. “Yo, Breeana?”

“Yo, Kal,” she replied.

A small smile tugged at his lips. He shoved his hands in the front pockets of his low-rider jeans, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet. “It's been great havin' you here.” He blushed and dropped his gaze to the floor. “I mean, you've livened this place up and you definitely made Mel easier to live with.”

Her smile faded. That sounded like some kind of...goodbye. Her eyes flew to Mel, but he likewise stared at the floor.

Dread crawled up her legs and her nerves hummed like high voltage wires. “Ummm...thank you. It's been great for me as well.”

“Well, I gotta go.” He looked at Mel. “Call my cell later. See ya, dudette.” He hurried down the hall.

“What was that about?” she asked, her voice hoarse with suppressed fear.

Mel wrapped his arms around her waist from behind. “Let's go to my room so we can talk.”

Oh, God. She didn't want to talk. Didn't want to know what had him so upset. Whatever he had to say was going to lead to heartache. All of the sudden the desire for them to take off—leave everything—filled her with urgency. To start a life far from endings and heartbreak. But she could never ask that of him. He'd never shirk from his duties. That was one of the reasons she loved him.

She moved out of Mel's arms and turned to him. It was now or never. She had to convince him to tell her about increasing her life-span. “Yeah. I guess we should.” She didn't wait for a reply as she headed toward his room.

Once inside, Mel closed the door and she sat on the edge of the bed. He paced in front of the dresser.

“Mel, I need to ask you—”

“Please, let me go first.” His mouth opened, and then closed several times. He cursed and continued pacing.

Breeana's hands gripped the comforter. “Just tell me for Christ sakes. Your silence is scaring me.”

He came to a stop directly in front of her. “I'm taking you home tonight.”

Her heart slowed to a crawl. “What do you mean? Why are you sending me home?”

He crouched and rested his hands on her knees. “Kal killed the she-demon last night so it's safe for you to return home.”

Now it made sense why Mel was so upset and why Kal had sounded like he was saying good-bye to her—because he was.

Tears welled in her eyes and she gripped his forearms. “I don't want to leave. I love you. I...please.” A tight knot formed in her throat. She swallowed, trying to relieve the pressure. “Please, don't end this. I beg you.”

“Breeana.” He sighed, and wiped away her tears with the pads of his thumbs. “You have to go back. We've discussed this before. You know why it has to end.”

“No, it doesn't. You said you love me, and I love you, so please, Mel, please—”

He straightened and raked his hair off his forehead. “I do love you. God, I love you so damn much this is killing me, but I won't have you leave everything for me.”

She jumped up, wrapping her arms around him. “I don't care about all that. I love you more than anything my old life has to offer. Don't you understand?”

“You say that now, but eventually you'll change your mind. You could never go back to your old life. Over time you would come to hate me for it.”

She stepped back so he could see her face and know what she said was the truth. “I would never regret my decision to stay with you. Never.”

He framed her damp face with his calloused palms. “I won't prolong your life.”

A shadow of doubt flashed through her mind but she cut it off, discarding it quicker than she'd drop a poisonous snake. Besides, in time he'd change his mind, she was sure of it. “I don't care. I still want to stay.”

His silver-gray eyes bore deep into hers, then sadness crept across his face. After a few moments, he turned away. “I won't change my mind,” he stated more to himself. “You may not understand, but I do this because I love you so much.”

Anger and pain coiled around her heart. She clenched her fists. Rage and frustration mounted and streamed through her, hot as lava. “You do this because you love me?” She jumped at him, grabbing the front of his shirt, balling it up in her fists. “You break my heart into a million fucking pieces and you have the gall to say you do so because you love me?”

“Yes. Believe it or not, it's the truth.”

Breeana shoved him and stumbled backwards. “Don't...you...dare say it's because you love me!” Tears flowed unchecked down her cheeks, dripping off her chin. “How dare you try to justify your actions by sugar-coating them with words of love.” Her voice rose as hysteria and madness took over her heart and mind.

“I'm doing this for your own good!” he shouted back.

“My own good? No you're not. You're doing this for *your* own good.” Her eyes widened. “Oh...my God. You never loved me.”

“How can you say that—”

“If you did, you wouldn't be able to imagine a second without me, so—go to hell!” She jabbed a finger toward the door, her body vibrating with unrestrained rage and pain. “Get out.”

Mel grabbed her arm, but she jerked it from his grasp. “Breeana, you're better off without me. Please try to understand. This isn't easy for me either.”

Madness completely took over and she spun away, screaming, “Don't touch me! Just...leave so I can pack.” She marched across the room to the closet and grabbed her bag.

“Breeana, please listen to me.” He tried to stop her by stepping in her way, but she stalked around him, grabbing her clothes along the way, shoving them into the bag.

On her way to the bathroom, she stopped and glanced at him over her shoulder. He stood in the middle of the room, his face a mask of hurt and pain. “You're right about one thing, I do hate you. I hate you for breaking my heart. I hate you for deceiving me, but most of all, I hate you because you're a coward.” The last one was low but she really didn't give a shit. She wanted to hurt him. Wanted him to feel as miserable and dead inside as she did.

“If you believe nothing else, believe that I love you and always will.” He took a cautious step toward her but she backed away, holding up one hand.

“Don't.” She sniffed. “I can't—I won't listen to any more of your lies.” She brushed at her damp cheeks. “God, I'm pathetic. I was really sucked in by you, wasn't I? Did you have a good laugh at my expense? This silly little human woman falling for all your bullshit. Well, I see you now for what you really are.”

He launched at her and grabbed her arms, hauling her against his chest. “Don't you dare. I never lied to you.”

She tore from his grip, her breath coming in shallow gasps. “You're right, you didn't lie. I guess I was just a fool and an idiot. I was hoping our love would be enough, but obviously not. Though I maybe be an idiot, but at least I'm not a coward.” She squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out the hurt and anger on his face. “You're so afraid to take a chance on love because of what-ifs. You're so worried that something will go wrong that you opt to throw it away first. And if you think so little of yourself that you feel you don't deserve love, then you are more messed up than I thought.”

Mel backed away from her until the backs of his thighs hit the bed. He sagged down. His eyes were slits of glittering silver riveted on her face. In a barren voice he said, “If you need to hurt me, go ahead, I deserve it, but never question why I'm doing this or that I love you. I do this only to keep you safe.”

“If I hear that excuse one more time, I'm going to scream. You do this to keep yourself safe. You never even gave me a choice. You made the decisions for me. You decided I would come to hate you, not me. You decided I'd be better off without you, not me. So, please, get out and let me pack.”

Breeana slammed and locked the bathroom door. *How am I going to get through this? How can I live without him, loving him as much as I do?*

Her legs gave out and her back slid slowly down the door. Covering her face with her hands, she cried, terrified she'd never be able to stop.

Breeana turned her gaze from Mel's stiff profile as he drove and looked out the passenger side window of her speeding truck. Lights and cars whipped past in a hazy kaleidoscope of motion. She couldn't tell if the blurry scenery was because of the speed or her tears. Either or. And honestly, she couldn't have cared less. She was numb, feeling nothing but the throbbing, agonizing pain of her broken heart.

“Breeana, could we please talk ab—”

“There's nothing left to say.” Her eyes flicked to his large hands gripping the steering wheel. “I've begged, pleaded, and cried until I'm hoarse and you still won't listen.” Her eyes welled up again. “Please, let me leave with a shred of dignity.”

He slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

She turned away from him and resumed staring out the window. The surroundings started to look familiar. The traffic became heavier as they entered the outskirts of Surrey. They were almost to the Green Tree. Where it all began, she thought sullenly.

Oh, God. This was it. She had to stop it. But how? Nothing would change his mind. Her heart banged against her ribs and her mind spun, frantically trying to come up with something that would stop this head-on collision with crippling heartache.

“Bree—”

Panic grew, sucking her down. She needed to get away from him before she completely lost it. “Pull over.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Pull over.”

“We're almost to the Green Tree.”

He accelerated, passing a blue sedan. She glanced at the occupants. A family possibly going out to a movie or whatever happy people did.

“I wish you'd let me drive you all the way home. You're in no shape to drive.”

She glared at him. “Too bad. You don't get to make decisions for me anymore.”

A muscle ticked in his cheek. She sensed he wanted to yell, but apparently he thought better of it. “Be reasonable. You're very upset—”

Everything closed in on her: his voice, her memories, her shattered heart and dreams. She gasped, but couldn't drag in enough oxygen. She was on the verge of a breakdown and she didn't want to fall apart in front of him. “If you don't pull this truck over, I swear to God, I'll jump.” Childish, but she was way past the point of caring.

Swearing out loud, Mel wrenched the truck over to the shoulder of the road.

As soon as it came to a stop, Breeana yanked the passenger side door open and hopped out. She stormed around the front of the truck and jerked the driver's door open. Standing to the side, she waited for him to get out.

He didn't budge, just gripped the steering wheel so tight his knuckles showed white. She was afraid he'd snap it in two. "Breeana, for God sakes. I don't want to leave it like this."

"You don't want to leave it like this? Then don't leave me at all." Fresh tears burned her eyes. "All you have to say is one word, Mel. Just one little word. Stay."

He looked deep into her eyes. Time passed slowly. Her heart pounded with hope.

With a frustrated sigh, he looked down at his hands and shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was gruff with pain. "I can't. I'm sorry."

Her eyes hardened along with her heart. "You can't or you won't? Oh well, both the same. Now get out."

He smashed both fists against the dashboard. It cracked under the force. He climbed out and tried to embrace her but she brushed past and pulled herself into the cab. She reached for the door but he held it, easily stopping her frantic tugs.

Breeana gave up, keeping her eyes on her lap. "Please, if this is good-bye then just let me go."

He gently turned her face, tilting up her chin. When her gaze met his, the pain in her heart exploded, showering the inside of her chest with tiny, bleeding fragments.

His eyes were bright, shining with love. "You have been the only light in my life and when you're gone, all I'll have left is darkness."

Her throat tightened and tears leaked from behind her lashes. She cupped his cheeks with trembling hands. "I love you."

He turned his face and kissed her palm.

She couldn't do it. Couldn't physically put the truck in drive and leave him forever. She gripped the gearshift with a trembling hand. Cold terror seized her. "Mel, please, I'm begging you. Don't do this to me—don't do this to us. We can make it work."

Shutters dropped over his eyes and he took a step back. "I'm sorry." He closed the door.

Breeana stared at him through the window, not believing this was the end; not believing he was actually going to let her go. Sobbing, she slammed the truck into gear and floored it. The tires squealed, spraying dirt and gravel as she pulled onto the highway. She kept her eyes glued to the

road even though she desperately wanted to glance in the rearview mirror to see if he was still where she left him.

She drove half a mile before tears made it impossible to see. Twisting the steering wheel, she pulled to the shoulder and jerked to a halt. Anguish tore her apart, shredding her soul. Her forehead dropped to the steering wheel and she wept like she'd never wept before.

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Chapter 28

June 19 Thursday 3:30am

Breeana drove up her gravel driveway and shut off the truck. The sound of crickets chirping and frogs croaking replaced the roar of the engine. She stared out the windshield, listening to the creatures of the night and the tick, tick of the motor as it cooled.

Home, sweet home.

Everything about the outside of her cottage looked the same: the leaning aluminum shed beside the fence, the cracked brick path, the faded green paint peeling from the siding and patio. Yep. Exactly how it was the last time she'd been home. But what did she expect? She'd only been gone for five days.

Although everything wasn't the same. She had changed. All that once made her happy—what she considered important—now meant much less. Her heart, once alive, was dead. No, not dead, left behind with Mel.

Tears tickled her cheeks and she wiped them away.

“Stop this. It's over, done, finished. You have to carry on. You're strong, you can do it.” Hanging her head, she murmured to the dark, “Who am I kidding? I don't even have the strength to breathe.”

Breeana pushed open the truck door. The grinding squeal of the hinges seemed loud in the dark of early morning. She leaned over to the passenger seat, snagged her bag, and buried her nose against the thin blue fabric. Closing her eyes, she breathed in deep. Mel's spicy scent washed over her, flooding her mind with memories.

Her head dropped back against the seat. “How am I supposed to carry on as if nothing has changed?” The frogs and crickets fell silent as if contemplating that question. A moment later, they resumed their music. “Thanks for nothing.”

Breeana climbed out and dragged her bag behind by one handle. She fished her keys from her purse and let herself in. Nudging the door closed with her foot, she flicked a light switch, illuminating the living room.

Nope, nothing different: couch still placed in front of the TV. Bookshelf crammed with books, her lab coat and coveralls tossed over the back of a chair, even a half empty glass of water sat on the coffee table.

She drew in a ragged breath and hauled her bag into the bedroom. She paused in the middle of the room and gazed out the window at the familiar dark silhouettes of trees in her backyard. They gracefully swayed in the gentle breeze. Behind the large clump of fir, cedar, and maple trees was Carol and Dave's house. During the winter months when the maples lost their leaves, she could just make out their old farmhouse, but now the foliage and darkness obscured her view.

The thought of showering crossed her mind but she was weak with exhaustion, and a dull ache throbbed behind her eyes. Instead, she sat on the edge of her bed feeling like a stranger in her own skin.

Sighing, she unzipped her bag and froze. Folded neatly on top was Mel's red sweatshirt. He must have packed it.

She lifted it out. Her shoulders shook and tears coursed down her face. Gently, she caressed the soft fleece as if it were his warm, smooth skin. "Oh God, Mel. I love you so much." She slumped to her side and crushed his shirt to her chest.

Mel materialized in the middle of his living room. He didn't move. His body and soul were hollow as an empty glass. He was afraid one move would shatter him into a million shards, never to be put back together again.

Finally, he willed his legs to work and walked stiffly across the carpet to the kitchen. He steered straight for the cupboard that held the liquor, planning on getting intimate with his buddy, Jack. No need for a glass since the drinking he'd be doing didn't require one. Didn't want to waste the time pouring.

Back in the living room, he wrenched the cap off the bottle of Jack Daniels and downed half the amber liquid in three large swallows. Gasping, he swiped the back of his hand across his lips, then sagged down on the couch. He hoped the alcohol would hurry and work its magic before he completely lost his mind.

He brought the bottle half way to his lips and stopped. Did he do the right thing by letting her go? He shook his head. No, he'd made the right

decision. He could never risk Breeana's life, not for his own selfishness.

No sense second guessing his decision now. He tossed back another slug. It was too late. She was gone and he had to live with it.

Besides, it was the right thing to do. For her.

But was it the right decision for her? She sure the hell didn't think so. She had pleaded with him to reconsider.

Shit. He didn't know anymore. Right or wrong, it didn't fucking matter.

He polished off the bottle. It slid out of his grasp onto the carpet as his head lolled against the back of the couch. *Oh yeah.* He smiled, closing his eyes. The alcohol was finally doing its thing.

Breeana's lovely face flashed through his mind. She flipped her shiny dark hair over her shoulders as her hazel eyes sparkled with amusement. He saw her sprawled languidly across his bed, beckoning him with her luscious body. He heard her laughter as she placed a white daisy behind his ear, and as she accused Kal of cheating while they played video games. Her crying when he told her he was taking her home. Her pleading with him to hold on to her and never let go. The anger shooting from her eyes when she called him a coward for not having enough guts to take a chance on their love.

His heavy eyelids lifted and he glanced at his empty hands. Where the hell was the bottle? Oh right, he'd finished it. Time for another.

Using the couch and the coffee table for support, Mel rose to his feet. Once up, the room spun and pitched, knocking him off kilter. He staggered back, then clutched his head, concentrating on his breathing. Inhale through the mouth, exhale through the nostrils. Bile rose in his throat and he swallowed. He had to keep the booze where he needed it most. When he had his stomach under control, he lurched toward the kitchen.

Mel grabbed the doorframe and stopped. Images of making love with Breeana on the table after their meeting with Roarik ripped through his mind, leaving him gutted.

He reeled across the room and smashed a hip into a stool. It crashed to the floor with a loud clang. He kicked it and kept moving until he stood in front of the cupboard that held salvation. No, not salvation, temporary pain relief. He left salvation miles away along with his heart.

He gripped the cupboard door and tore it off the hinges. Surprised, he scowled at it as it dangled from his fingers. "Piece of shit. Fucking figures. Everything thing I touch falls apart."

Dropping it, he shoved aside bottles of vodka and scotch until he found what he was searching for.

Aha! His fingers closed around the last bottle of J.D. He gripped it tight, afraid it too would slip and smash to the floor, shattering like his heart.

Dispensing with the cap, he hammered back another shot of liquid Novocain. The bitter fluid burned his throat on its way to his stomach.

His legs buckled and gave out. He tried to stand, but his limbs wouldn't listen to his brain's commands. Instead, he leaned his back against the cupboards and stared across the kitchen at the fridge.

Memories of his past clawed to the surface. He contemplated his cruel childhood, the brief moment of happiness he found with Bethany, then on to the night of his mother's death—the same night he rammed his blade through his father's rotten heart. His mind then drifted on through the cold, empty years spent wandering aimlessly until Roarik found him and took him in. The pictures played over, showing him how dead he had been for most of his life. Until Breeana.

He conjured up her face and a small smile lifted his lips. Her clear smooth skin. Her full ripe lips that begged to be kissed.

The vision faded as the room tilted. He slumped to his side until his head rested on the cold kitchen floor. He closed his eyes and drifted away on a hazy, drunken cloud.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” his father's voice hissed into his ear.

Mel's eyes jerked open and a cold sweat broke out over him. His gaze slid around the kitchen from his sprawled position. A clear image of his father, pacing in front of the fridge, reared up.

“Look at you,” his father said. “Pathetic. Second guessing yourself as usual.”

His father stared directly at him. Eyes, once blue, were coal black and bright with lunacy. “You made the right choice, my son.” His voice seemed almost soothing, but for the madness that tinged the edges. “She's better off, away from you, that is. If you had kept her, she would have ended up dead. Either by the demons or by your foolishness.”

“You don't know that,” Mel snarled back. Deep within his drunken mind, he realized how nuts he was the moment the words were out.

Nodding his blond head, his father laughed. “Oh, son, but I do. You're cursed, remember? You will never,” his eyes narrowed, black slits shooting daggers, “find happiness. Not as long as I'm around, and I'm not going

anywhere.” His lips stretched into an evil snarl. Light gleamed off long, knife-like fangs.

Mel squeezed his eyes shut, hoping the vision would disappear. He opened them and groaned.

His old man laid both hands over his chest. “I’ll be with you forever.”

Even as drunk as Mel was, he knew this vision was just fevered imaginings, but it felt real. “You’re not here. You’re dead.”

“And you’d know, since it was by your hand.” His father pulled pale hands from his chest and showed them to Mel. They were covered in blood. Fat drops of crimson dripped onto the tiled floor. A dark red stain widened on the front of the apparition’s white shirt. The ghost’s face twisted into a terrifying mask and all pretenses of sympathy were gone from its voice. “Now, it’s payback.”

Mel pushed himself up to sitting position with his elbows. His hair, damp with sweat, hung in his eyes. He planted both palms flat on the floor and smiled. “Payback? My payback was when I rammed my dagger through your evil heart. And believe me, I’d not hesitate this time.”

In a flash, his father’s ghost vaporized. He swung his head from side to side. With a weary sigh, he slumped back to the floor and wrapped a hand around the bottle of booze, pulling it close to his chest. He closed his eyes.

The sound of heavy footsteps reached his ear. Mel peeled open one eye, afraid his father was returning for his precious payback. Black hiking boots filled his vision, and then Kal’s face came into focus as he crouched down.

“Aw, shit, Mel.” Kal rested his forearms on the tops of his thighs, hands dangling over his knees. He shook his head. “How much did you drink, huh? By the smell of ya, it must’ve been a whole helluva lot.” He extracted the bottle from between Mel’s limp fingers.

Mel made a half-assed attempt to grab it back, but Kal placed it above him on the counter. Mel’s arm dropped back to the floor. “Not enough.”

Kal hooked his arms under Mel’s armpits and tried to help him to his feet. “Yo, dude. Let me help you to bed.”

“Leave me.” He pushed Kal away. All he wanted was to fall into oblivion where there was hopefully no pain.

Kal tried again.

Mel twisted, falling on his face. With his cheek planted against the tile floor he tried to glare, but that took too much effort. “Piss off.”

Kal sighed and shoved his hands through his hair, then sat back on his haunches. “You've no one to blame but yourself for your misery.”

He lifted his head, ready to tear a strip off Kal, but pain sliced through his skull. It felt as if it would split open like an overripe watermelon. “I don't want to hear it, so do me a favor and keep your trap shut.”

“Too bad, 'cause you're gonna listen.” Kal's knees popped as he stood and righted the stool Mel had toppled earlier. He sat down, drumming his knuckles rapidly against the wood seat.

Mel wished he could sober up just long enough to kick the stool over and knock Kal off his high horse.

Kal quit drumming. “You know what I think? I think you enjoy this shit. I think you actually enjoy being miserable. Any bit of happiness comes your way and you squash it. I'll tell ya, if I'm ever lucky enough to find love again, I sure the hell will hold on to it.” He nodded. “Yeah, I would do everything in my power to hold on to it because love, *real* love, doesn't come around very bloody often. And when it does,” he brought a hand up to his face, inspecting it. He curled his fingers into a tight fist. “Ya grab it, not let it slide through your fingers.” He opened his fist, wiggling his fingers.

Anger brewed inside Mel like a storm. Kal lecturing him on love? He tried to rise but his hands slid out from under him. Trying again, he managed to sit up. The room swirled and rolled so he closed his eyes, waiting for it to stop. When his equilibrium came back, he opened them and laughed sarcastically. “What the hell do you know—”

“I used to think you were a smart guy.” Kal stood and sauntered over to the fridge. “But now, I'm not so sure.” He opened the door and reached in, separating a beer from its plastic holder. “You're always so goddamn worried about what could happen instead of living and enjoying life. I've said it before, you can't tell the future.”

Stunned, Mel remained silent.

Popping the tab on the can, Kal took a sip. He sat on the stool and sighed. “Well, I guess it doesn't matter. You're too afraid to even try. So afraid of being hurt that you won't even give love a chance.”

Mel heard enough. “Shut the hell up. You know nothing of what I'm going through, or the reasons why I sent her home.”

Kal casually polished off his beer, then burped. “Breeana loves you, man, and you broke her heart. She was more than willing to leave everything for you. She was willing to give it all up because she loves you that much. That

makes her one courageous woman. And that makes you nothing but a coward in my eyes.”

Kal tossed his empty into the sink; the aluminum can bounced and rolled around the stainless steel basin. He gazed down at Mel with his hands shoved into the pockets of his leather jacket. “Think about what I said, will ya.” He walked away, leaving Mel on the floor.

Mel followed Kal with his eyes until he disappeared through the kitchen entrance.

Christ, Kal was one lucky bastard. If Mel wasn't so sloshed, he'd rip the guy a new asshole for speaking to him like that.

Like what? Speaking the truth?

Shit. First Breeana called him a coward, now Kal.

They were right. He was afraid, and not only for Breeana, but for himself. Scared the moment he tasted happiness again it would all be taken away.

Reaching above, Mel clasped the lip of the counter and hauled himself up. He swayed and held his head, waiting for the room to stop with its carnival ride. Using the wall, he slowly made his way down the short hall to his room. When he stood in front of his closed door, his heart rate shot up and raw terror stabbed through him.

He couldn't do it. Couldn't enter his room, for the moment he did, her fragrance and the memories would drive away his last shred of sanity.

Mel swallowed his fear, reached out a trembling hand, and grasped the knob. As a precautionary measure, he sealed his eyes shut, and thrust open the door. Once inside, he stared at the bed as her perfume flooded his brain with pictures: them making love, Breeana brushing her hair while she told him amusing stories of her life, the sound of her musical laughter.

Each memory, each inhale of breath, stripped away another layer from his soul.

He dragged himself to his bed and collapsed on the edge, then jammed his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. Something soft caressed the fingertips of his left hand. He grasped it and pulled it out. His heart ground to a halt.

Resting on his open palm was the white daisy she had placed behind his ear. He caressed the crushed petals and withered stem. It was dead, but the sight of the wilted flower brought a spark of life back to his soul.

A rush of love and sorrow, deep and intense, rolled through him.

He hung his head, feeling like someone had kicked him in the gut. He realized this love and regret would be with him forever.

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Chapter 29

June 19 Thursday, 8:02 am

Light pierced Breeana's closed eyelids. She lifted her head from her pillow and squinted against the hot glare. Sun streamed through the bedroom window. Her stomach knotted as reality crashed back. She was home. Wincing, she hid her face beneath the blankets and pulled herself into a fetal position as she tried to ward off crushing pain. It rushed in like an enemy, swords drawn, guns blazing, taking her down. Desperate to maintain control, she tried to fight back, but it was no use. Her enemy was smart, pulling out the big guns.

It's over. He's gone for good. I'll live out the rest of my days alone, loving him.

It was useless. She had no weapons to use against such emptiness. With her face buried in the softness of the comforter, she cried.

Nausea overrode her sorrow and bile flooded her mouth, a bitter, hot burn that made her gag. She shot off the bed with a hand pressed over her mouth and dashed to the bathroom. Her back hunched as her stomach muscles contracted. She retched and coughed, more miserable than she'd ever been in her life.

When it was over, she dragged herself back to bed. Once again stretched out on the mattress, she tried to talk herself out of her depression by listing all she had in life: her career, friends, and her health. She was no worse off than before Mel.

No worse except for a broken heart.

She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. Outside her window, the sun dappled the grass with patches of light, while the shadows of trees swayed across the yard. The sound of birds singing filled the quiet morning. The chattering of Stellar Jays mixed with the musical lilt of wild canaries usually filled her with joy, but now...nothing.

Breeana glanced at her clock and sighed. She better get herself in gear. Wouldn't be long before Carol noticed her truck in the driveway. And

knowing Carol, she would be bombarding her with a thousand questions. Questions she was in no mood to answer.

Just tell her things didn't work out. No biggie. We had a good time and went our separate ways. No harm, no foul.

Yeah, no fricking biggie.

Back in the bathroom, she flicked on the light and cringed at her reflection in the mirror above the sink. With a shaky hand, she pushed tangled, limp hair off her forehead. Crap, she looked like the living dead. Her face was drawn and pale, eyes red and swollen with puffy purple bags under them.

The moment Carol saw her she'd know something was up.

She braced her hands on the sink and scrutinized her horrid reflection. *Make-up.* That's what she needed. Maybe that would help restore some semblance of order to her blotchy face.

She twisted her face to the side, tilted it back, and then tried on a smile. The corners of her lips trembled. Maybe she'd paint on a smile? There was no way she'd be able to face the day with one of her own.

Sighing, she stepped into the shower hoping that would help her feel more...human? Vampire? Alive? Whatever.

After she showered and dressed, Breeana called Carol to let her know she was home. Squealing with joy, Carol said she'd be right over.

Breeana hung up the phone and sagged against the blue cushions on her couch. Any minute now Carol would burst through the front door, hug her, and start firing off the questions.

All you have to do is smile and lie.

The door flew open and Carol rushed across the small living room like a whirlwind with her arms spread wide.

Breeana met her half way, instantly glad to see her.

Carol enveloped her in her arms. "I missed you so much."

Breeana clung back, needing this from her best friend. Carol's familiar perfume, a comforting mixture of roses and vanilla, brought tears to her eyes.

Pushing back and holding her at arm's length, Carol ran sparkling blue eyes over her from head to toe. The smile on her lips faded. "You look... tired."

Breeana tried her best to smile—one she hoped looked real. "I am. I've been busy. Staying up late." She shrugged. "You know."

“Why didn't you phone and let me know you were coming home?” Carol asked, narrowing her blue eyes. “The last time we spoke, you said you were going to be gone awhile.”

Breeana's cheeks were about to crack from the pressure of her forced grin. “Umm, change of plans, and I wanted to surprise you.”

Carol folded thin arms over her chest. “Okay, what's the matter?”

“Nothing. Does it look like something is wrong?”

Carol clasped Breeana's hands and tugged her down onto the couch. “Honestly? You look like someone died. I remember that look from when your parents passed.”

“I'm just tired.”

“Don't even bother lying. I know you better than you know yourself. So come on, spill.”

Breeana gazed at her best friend. Carol's curly blond hair was pulled up in its usual ponytail. She wore a red checkered shirt and tan riding breeches. Her pretty face was bronzed from the sun with freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks.

In the company of her friend, Breeana's defenses started to crumble, but she couldn't allow that to happen. Once the floodgates opened, there would be no way to close them. And Carol had a little annoying habit of seeing everything in black and white. To her there were no shades of gray, no in-betweens.

Carol tightened her ponytail and leaned back against the couch. “You know you can't hide anything from me. And I can clearly see something is wrong.”

Breeana kept her eyes glued to her lap. She wanted so much to confide all to Carol but she stopped herself. “I miss M—” Wait! What did she tell Carol his name was? Paul? John? Peter? Peter. That was it. Peter who supposedly lived in Scotland. She had told Carol he was here on business. “I miss Peter. That's about it.”

“You didn't fall in love with him did you?”

Breeana didn't reply. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

Carol shook her head. “You did, didn't you?”

Tears gathered in her eyes and she brushed them away.

“You said it was just a fling, that you were just having fun.”

The accusatory tone in Carol's voice sent a wave of annoyance through her. “So what if I did? And I know what I said, but shit, feelings have a

funny way of blind-siding you sometimes. Believe me, I didn't plan on falling in love.”

“Does he love you?”

She closed her eyes and a vision of Mel's tortured face as he told her how much he loved her overloaded her mind. She might question his reasons for ending things between them, but not his love. She looked at Carol. “Yes.”

“Does he want to continue seeing you?”

“He lives in Scotland, and neither of us wants to do the long distance thing.” *Yeah right.*

Carol nodded. “Neither of you? Or is it more like he who doesn't?”

Red-hot rage bubbled up from Breeana's gut. She stamped it down. “Neither one of us.”

“First off, I don't believe you. Second, if he loved you he would do anything to be with you.” Carol spread her arms wide. “But that's just my opinion.”

Breeana shot up and walked over to the sliding glass door and gazed out at the sunny, weed-filled back garden. “The only way it could work would be for me to move to Scotland. And he doesn't want me to leave everything for him.”

“Did he even ask you?”

“Yes.” Liar, liar, pants on fire, her inner voice sang.

“Why can't he move here?”

She rubbed her pounding temples, close to losing her cool. If Carol kept up with her prodding, she'd wind up becoming the recipient of Breeana's pent up anger and frustration. “Let's just drop this, all right?”

“I know you may not want to hear this, but it sounds to me like neither one of you love each other all that much. If you did, you would do anything to be together. So my advice to you is to forget about him. Obviously, you weren't meant for each other.”

Breeana's hands balled into fists so tight, her nails stung her palms. And like a star burst exploding inside her chest, fury so raw it burned, radiated through her. Carol had no idea the feelings—the connection—she and Mel shared. They belonged together; there was no doubt in her mind.

She counted to five before she turned to Carol who gazed back with eyes brimming with worry. Her resentment evaporated. Carol didn't deserve her anger, she was only trying to help.

She moved back to the couch and sat. “You're right. The subject of Peter is closed.”

Carol pulled her into her arms and gently rubbed her back. “I'm sorry you're hurting, and you know talking always helps.”

Breeana laid her head on Carol's shoulder and sighed. “I know and thanks, but I really just want to forget about him.”

Carol chuckled. “Yeah, if only it was that easy. Just know I'm here for you whenever you feel the need to vent.”

She leaned back from Carol's embrace, wiped her eyes, and sniffed. “Thanks, and I love you for that. Maybe when it's not so fresh, then maybe I'll be able to talk about it. Just not right now, ‘kay?”

“Sure,” Carol said, squeezing her hands. “How about we go check out Candy?”

“Who's Candy?”

“That's what I named Star's foal.”

A small smile flitted across Breeana's lips and she pulled Carol up off the couch by her hands. “Well, what are we waiting for? A playful little filly is exactly what I need to get my mind off my man troubles.”

A voice inside her laughed hysterically. *Yeah, right!*

Mel rolled over on his bed and opened his eyes cautiously. Pain slammed into his skull. He grimaced and glanced at the time. 5:10p.m.

He flopped onto his back, splaying his arms wide. Sweat, stinking of alcohol, leaked out of his pores and his mouth felt like he'd been eating cotton balls. He licked his cracked lips with a tongue that was equally as dry.

Shit, he felt like absolute hell. He wiped a hand across his forehead and his stomach rolled and lurched.

Just great. In the grips of one mother of a hangover, coupled with a broken heart. This was shaping up to be a wonderful evening.

He brought his other hand up to his face and unclenched his fist. Crumpled like a piece of tissue paper against his palm was the daisy.

Kal's words haunted his mind the moment he saw the wilted flower. He hated to admit it, but Kal was right. Love, real love, didn't come around

very often. And like the coward he was, Mel had allowed his fears and past to dictate, ruining his one chance at happiness. Yes, but his ruined happiness was nothing compared to Breeana's safety from all the dangers a life with him posed. Plus, what could he offer her?

Love. That one word flashed through his mind over and over.

With a thumb and forefinger, he pinched the dry stem and brought the bloom to his nose. A faint hint of the flower's perfume remained. As he gazed at the white petals, his mind recalled the evening when he confessed all to Breeana. Her love and understanding helped heal his old wounds and ease some of his guilt. She brought him out of the darkness, into the light, and every part of him rebelled against falling back into that blackness again.

A dam burst inside his chest, releasing a flood of yearning and need so strong the torrent smashed through the walls of his willpower, fears, and good intentions. This love he had for her was a force greater than him. He couldn't stay away from her no matter how hard he fought. The knowledge scared him to some degree.

He would go to her tonight. Get down on his knees and beg her forgiveness. Plead with her to take his sorry, undeserving ass back. If it wasn't too late.

Mel carefully set the flower on his nightstand, then forced himself out of bed and into the shower.

Twenty minutes later, he made his way through the living room to the kitchen. He passed Kal seated on his recliner, playing a video game.

More of last night's piss-up surfaced in his throbbing brain. Kal had been only trying to help and Mel had treated him horribly. Just wonderful. It looked like he owed him an apology.

He guzzled a glass of water and crunched a couple of Tums before heading back to the living room. He stared at Kal's stiff profile for a few seconds, and then cleared his throat.

Kal didn't acknowledge him, just continued with the mock battle on the screen.

Mel watched the game, drumming up nerve. "I'm sorry for what I said and how I acted. I was pretty out of it and I can't remember much."

Kal shrugged, but kept his gaze on the TV. "No need. You didn't say much."

Minutes ticked by. "Do you mind telling me why you're so pissed?"

"Wasn't aware I was."

Exhaling an agitated breath, Mel drove his hands through his wet hair. “Look, I'm hung to the nuts and I'm not in the mood for games.”

Kal's blue eyes flicked over to him. “Could've fooled me. Seems that's all you're doin'.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You figure it out.”

Anger pulsed through Mel's veins, making his head pound. “I don't have time for this.”

Kal set his controller on his knee. “One day you just might figure it out and let's hope it's not too late, but knowing you for the procrastinator that you are, it will be.” He picked up his controller and resumed the game.

“For your information, I'm going to see Breeana tonight and beg her to take me back.”

A big grin broke out across Kal's face. “No frickin' kidding, hey? Wow. I didn't think you had it in ya. I thought you'd just wallow in your self-pity and self-righteous crap until someone put you outta your misery.”

Mel hid his smile. “I'm that bad, huh?”

“Nope. Just that stubborn. Once you make up your mind about something it's pretty much a done deal.”

Mel sat on the leather couch, stretched his arms along the back and propped his feet up on the coffee table. “Yeah well, I really have no choice this time. The only way I could stay away from her is if I were six feet under.”

Kal laughed and pointed a finger at him like a gun. “Gottcha, man.”

“So, if she says yes, I'll ask Roarik if we can move into one of the empty suites.”

Kal raised his fists in the air. “Yeah!

“Thanks, dipshit. I didn't think I was that hard to live with.”

“Hey, man. Sometimes you act like an old lady, always nagging me about keeping the place clean. It's enough to wear a guy down after awhile.”

“That's because you're such a pig.” Mel chuckled. “I can just imagine what this place will look like after I move out.”

Kal's smile vanished and his eyes grew serious. “Let's hope we get the opportunity to see, eh?”

The thought Breeana wouldn't be coming back was something Mel couldn't even entertain. He hoped she hadn't come to her senses and decided she was better off without him.

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Chapter 30

June 19 Thursday 10:15pm

Breeana aimed her remote at the TV and shut it off. She tossed back the green fleece blanket and sat up on her couch.

Day one down. Night number two coming up.

And what a day it had been. A day straight from hell. She deserved an Oscar for her performance. She had hid her grief and heartache from Carol fairly well. Or so she hoped.

Her vision shimmered. *Dammit. No more crying!*

She rose and walked over to the sliding glass door. Leaning her forehead against the cool glass, she peered out. The sky, just starting to darken, was streaked with bright red and orange. The darker shapes of the towering trees stood out against the multicolored sky like a painting.

A smile lifted one side of her lips as an old rhyme came to her. *Red skies at night are a sailor's delight. Red skies in the morning are a sailor's warning.*

Breeana exhaled, her breath clouded the glass. She wrote *Mel* in the small patch of moisture and encased his name inside a heart. *He would be awake by now. Probably getting ready to go hunting.*

Her stomach clenched as if a giant fist had closed around it, squeezing.

She sniffed, catching her faint reflection in the glass. When she saw the sparkle of tears and the dead look in her eyes, her hands curled into tight fists as anger blazed through her.

"I hope you're as miserable as me you rotten son-of-a-bitch! I hope you feel as dead inside—as destroyed—as I do."

Her face crumpled and she hugged her middle, trying to hold herself together, but it didn't work. Great wracking sobs tore from her throat.

Rage edged around the pain. Abruptly, her sobs turned to screams. She pounded her fists against the glass, then furiously smeared his name. "You bastard! How could you do this to me? How could you—"

Her legs trembled and she sank to the floor. She sat with her back against the glass door and relived every moment she had spent with him.

This had to stop. She had to get herself together and move on. Besides, locking herself in her house, wallowing in self-pity and hiding from the world would get her nowhere. Maybe she'd call the clinic tomorrow and inform her boss that she'd be back to work on Monday instead of next week. *Yeah, jump right back into my life.*

Breeana uncoiled her stiff legs and stood. She pushed back long strands of hair and made her way to the bathroom. On autopilot, she stripped and stepped into the shower. After she finished, she pulled on Mel's red shirt, and climbed into bed.

She drifted off, hoping he would come to her in her dreams.

Mel appeared in Breeana's bedroom. The instant he solidified, her flowery scent assaulted him. It filtered through to his brain, then straight to his heart.

He stepped closer to the bed. Moonlight shone bright through the window, landing in a white strip across the red comforter. She lay on her side, facing away from him.

Was he really going to do this?

Yes.

He reached out a trembling hand, suddenly nervous.

What if now that she was home, she decided loving him, and everything that came with it, wasn't worth it? The demon war. The danger. The prophecy.

She mumbled something he couldn't quite catch, stretched her legs under the covers, and then rolled unto her back. The moonlight illuminated her face. A deep scowl scrunched her brow and light sparkled off her wet lashes. Shifting uneasily, she kicked off the blankets. His lips twitched. She wore his shirt. His heart soared, taking that as a sign he wasn't too late.

Mel caressed her brow, then down her tear ravished cheek to her parted lips.

Her eyes flew open. Suspicion clouded the hazel orbs as she stared up at him. A second later, she jerked back from his touch. "Mel? Is that really you or am I still dreaming?"

Nodding, he whispered, "It's really me."

She scrambled to her knees with her hands splayed flat on the blanket. "If this is a dream, I never want to wake up."

"Sweetheart, it's me. I couldn't stay away."

She sprang to her feet, and then launched herself straight at him.

He caught her mid-leap, wrapping her in his arms. With her face pressed in the crook of his neck, her warm tears dampened his skin. She held on so tight she almost strangled him, but he welcomed it.

"Oh God, Mel. This better be real—you feel real, smell real—but if this is a dream—"

He closed his eyes, rubbing his cheek against her silky hair. The feel of her slight body against his was absolute heaven. "It's me, baby. I'm here. And I'm not going anywhere. If you'll have me, that is." He carried her back to the bed and sat down.

She leaned back in his embrace. "If I'll have you? How can you ask that? When you told me it was over, I died. I tried to imagine the rest of my life without you...I couldn't." Her voice choked up. "The thought of never seeing you again made me insane."

He pulled her roughly back to his chest and whispered hoarsely, "Breeana, I love you so much. I know I don't deserve you, but I...need you."

Her hands pushed against his chest as she tried to lean back.

A wave of fierce love crashed through him. The sensation was the most overpowering he'd ever experienced. A band of tightness constricted his chest as panic seized him. Fear that she would somehow be taken from him. Terrified because at this very moment, he had all—more—than he'd ever hoped for.

The tightness intensified, cutting off his air. He struggled to get himself under control. "Don't let go," he said in a breathless rush. "Please, don't ever let me go."

He heard a sob escape her before she said, "I won't. I promise. I'll never let you go. Never."

The feel of her arms around him and the sound of her heart beating was so clear. This moment was perfect, the most vivid of his life. Finally, he loosened his embrace just enough for her to lean back.

She took a watery breath and brushed at her tears. "I still can't believe you're really here. But I'm curious about something."

He smiled, tempted to pull her back against his body, needing the contact. “What?”

“What made you change your mind?”

He nuzzled her throat, breathing in her essence. His blood and groin thickened with lust while his heart raced with a mixture of love and fear. “I couldn't imagine life without you.”

She pulled his face back up to hers. A bright smile lit her eyes. “I'm just glad you finally came to your senses.”

“I realized that no matter how hard I'd try, I could never stay away. My love for you is too strong.”

Her smile melted and her face grew serious. She slid backwards off his legs and clicked on a small table lamp. The soft glow showed her unyielding expression. “As happy as I am, I think now would be a good time to clear a few things up.”

His nerves hummed and sizzled. “Okay. Like what?”

“I don't want, or need you to make decisions for me.”

Mel opened his mouth, but she held up a hand.

“I know you thought you were doing the right thing by sending me home to keep me safe, but let me tell you, it wasn't. From now on, will you have a little faith in me? I know the dangers, and I know what I have to give up for us to be together, but for me it's not giving up. I'm gaining more than I could have ever hoped for: Love.”

Her words warmed his soul. She was right. “It's not that I didn't—don't—have faith in you, more like I don't in myself. You know my past has been a...mess and well, when it came to those I love...” He glanced away. “I couldn't protect them.”

“Mel.” She sighed and straddled his thighs again. “We've been over this. You have to let your guilt go. Your father was a monster. None of that was your fault.”

“I hear what you're saying but...” Her scathing look dried up the rest of his words.

She kissed his eyes, his nose, and both cheeks. “Well, I have faith enough in you for the both of us.”

Shaking his head, he combed his fingers through her hair. He forced a smile, which felt more like a grimace. “Thanks. I can't promise you that at times I won't be bullheaded when it comes to your safety.”

“How about this? We'll work on the details together as things come up?”

Mel grinned, loving the sound of that. Together. “Sounds like a plan.” He knew full well she would be pissed with him more times than not. He was going to make damn sure nothing happened to her. If he had to lock her in a room to keep her safe, well then so be it.

Inside he chuckled, picturing how angry she'd be if or when he did.

Breeana cleared her throat and glanced at her hands. “There's one more issue that we need to discuss.”

His heart dropped. She seemed nervous which set off his warning signals. “All right.”

Once again, she slid off his legs and paced in front of him. She took a crisp inhale before she turned her eyes to him.

Sweat beaded his upper lip when he saw the determined look on her face.

“I want to know the secret for prolonging a human's life.”

His blood froze in his veins. He knew this subject would eventually come up, but he had hoped not this soon. He closed his eyes briefly, then looked at her. “Let's talk—”

“Remember what we just talked about?” She knelt down, placing a hand on his arm. “Hey, just tell me what it is and I'll decide for myself. No more deciding what's best for me, okay?”

Dammit, she was right again. If things were going to work out between them, he had to let her make her own decisions.

He rubbed his forehead, studying her. She arched an eyebrow in a silent question. The words stuck in his throat. He was afraid of her agreeing and also afraid she'd be so disgusted she would ask him to leave.

Finally, he dropped his hand and sighed. “You have to drink my blood.” He searched her face, watching for the inevitable reaction of repulsion.

She remained quiet for a moment before she chuckled. “Okay. I'll do it. But, I don't have the choppers to get the job done.”

He was too stunned to reply.

“Mel? You okay?”

He jerked to his feet, moved a few steps away, and then glanced over his shoulder at her. “There's more to it than that.”

She nodded. “All right. Tell me.”

“It's complicated.”

She stepped closer and shook him playfully back and forth by his shoulders. “Just tell me.”

God, he wanted to. On the deepest level, he wanted them to be bound together for all eternity; bound in the here and after. But he didn't want to be responsible for her death.

He moved away from her and stood in front of the window gazing out at the moonlight shimmering through the bows of the trees. "If you drink the blood from my veins three times, your life will be bound to mine."

"I'm not following you."

Inhaling deep, he turned and glanced at her. "If your life force is bound to mine, that means when I die, you die. Poof. Gone." He snapped his fingers. "Over."

A dazzling smile brightened her face and eyes. "Is that it?"

Mel's eyes widened and his jaw dropped open. "What do you mean, is that it? Don't you get it? If you're bound to me that means when I kick it, you kick it."

She shrugged. "So?"

"Jesus Christ." He dragged a hand through his hair. "You want me to prolong your life, but in actuality I'll most likely shorten it!"

Breana shook her head as if she were dealing with a child. She reached up, pulling his lips down to hers for a scorching kiss. Her tongue invaded his mouth as she pressed her breasts against his chest. His fangs lengthened and his cock stiffened. He tried to deepen the contact, but she pulled back.

"Mel," she said her voice and eyes sincere, "we're already bound together. Don't you get it? It's too late. If you die before me, my life will be over anyway. I may not go like this," she snapped her fingers. "But nonetheless, I would be dead. I would linger in my pain and misery until my heart finally gave up. And as far as I'm concerned, that would be far worse."

Either she was crazy or she had a death wish. Or maybe she loved him that much.

He cupped her chin, staring into her eyes. "Are you sure? Think about it for awhile. We've got lots of time."

She shook her head. "No. We do this now or forget it."

He frowned and gripped her shoulders. "At the very least, take a couple days to let the significance sink in."

Anger flashed in her eyes. "No. You keep saying you could be shortening my life, blah, blah. I don't care. We could also have hundreds of years

together. That's what I'm betting on. Think about our love for each other and trust in that. Trust in us.”

Awestruck, he wrapped his arms around her; happiness and love overflowing his heart and soul. “Goddamn, Breeana. I love you so much it...it scares me.”

“Mel,” she said with a laugh. “You're crushing me.”

“Sorry.” He loosened his embrace, but didn't let her go. He would never let her go.

“So, do I only need to drink from you the three times to stay,” she flipped her hair over her shoulders and batted her eyes at him. “Young looking?”

He kissed her lips, then moved across her jaw, down to her ear. Smiling against her skin, he said, “After the initial three, your life force will be bound to mine, but since your cells are always renewing themselves, you'll have to drink from me once a month to stay young looking. You will then age at the same rate as me.” He pulled back to gage her reaction. “Think you can handle that?”

She laughed a loud, happy burst. “Can you?”

His lips slowly widened into a big grin. “Oh, yeah.”

Swallowing, she eyed his neck nervously. “So, how do we do this? Remember, I don't have the teeth.”

He slowly brought his wrist to his mouth, never taking his eyes off her. Love and amazement vibrated through him. This point in time—this shining moment—would forever be etched in his memory.

His fangs lengthened even more. “I'll help you there.”

She brushed a hand across his forehead. “I don't get to drink from your neck? Somehow that seems so unfair.”

“I'd bleed to death because I wouldn't be able to seal it up fast enough, smartass.”

Breeana framed his face and whispered, “I love you, Mel. Do it.”

Without hesitating, he bit into his wrist and held it up for her.

She gently grasped it and licked off the blood running down his forearm before she closed her mouth over the twin puncture wounds. The soft tugs at his wrist shot straight to his heart. Swallowing the first mouthful, she closed her eyes and moaned. Her grip tightened and the suction on his skin intensified as she drank greedily.

A smile curled his lips as he watched with satisfaction his woman take from him, knowing that before long they would forever be inseparable.

Suddenly, his animal instincts swam to the surface, pushing aside everything that made him civilized. The need to mate and take her blood tackled him like a four hundred pound linebacker. He wanted to bend her over the bed and take her hard from behind. He needed to close his teeth around the back of her neck, sink his fangs deep, feel and taste her warm potent blood spurt into his mouth. And he couldn't have denied the impulses even if he tried. He wanted to mark her as his for all eternity.

Her head moved as her mouth worked on his wrist.

His arousal roared to life, his blood pounded in his ears. When he was just about to burst and push her to the bed, she released his wrist. He stared at her as he licked his wrist, sealing the wounds. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes, dark with desire, gazed back at him with wild intensity. Her tongue darted out, licking a drop of blood off her lips. She jumped at him, grabbed him by his hair, and hauled his lips to hers while her fingers clawed at his shirt.

Mel laughed a deep, satisfied sound. He plunged his tongue into her mouth. She bit his lip. He pulled back and hissed.

Her eyes were feral with lust. "Mel, I need you." She pulled his head back down to hers.

His own need skyrocketed. He picked her up and set her on the bed. As their lips once more fused, he moaned and pushed her shirt up to her chin.

He stopped long enough to appreciate her beauty bared before him. Her breasts rose and fell with her rapid breath, her nipples stood high and hard. He opened her legs wide and the scent of her arousal pushed the last shred of his control off the cliff. He worked his zipper with frantic fingers, shoving his pants to his knees. This was his woman. His love. His mate. And eventually, even death could not part them.

Breeana grabbed his shirt and pulled him down.

Mel laughed at her impatience as he positioned himself between her legs. He rubbed the head of his shaft against her soft folds, enjoying the silky heat. The sight of her glistening sex had him trembling with anticipation. In one smooth, swift stroke, he entered her, burying himself to the hilt. He roared with pleasure as her wet heat closed around him. His release was a stroke away so he stopped, trying to hold it off.

She worked her hands under his shirt and clawed at his back, raking her nails down to his ass. "Mel, oh God, that feels so good." A high-pitched cry tore from her as her inner muscles convulsed around his length.

He pumped slowly at first, then quickened the pace until the sound of their skin slapping together filled the room. She gripped his arms and her hips bowed off the bed, meeting his thrusts with her own. Her whimpers of pleasure mixed with his snarls of ecstasy.

Her breasts bounced rhythmically with the force of his movements. Bloodlust took over. He cupped her breasts and tongued one of the tight peaks, then opened his mouth and pierced the soft skin beside her nipple. She jerked and cried out, her nails dug deeper into his arms. He sucked at his bite, alternating between her blood and her rosy bud. The taste of her sweet, rich blood flowing down his throat and the exquisite friction of her tight slick sheath as he drove into her was more than he could take. His orgasm exploded from him and poured into her. He heard her cry out before her body once more contracted around him, drawing out his ecstasy.

Hours later, Mel lay flat on his back. Breeana sighed and snuggled tight to his side. Her cheek rested on his broad chest with a leg flung over both of his. He held her close with one arm around her back, tracing lazy circles on her hip, while his other arm was bent under his head.

Happiness filled her to the point of bursting. She wanted to jump up and shout it to the world. Well, okay, maybe not jump up. She was exhausted and sore.

Her hand smoothed over the hard muscles of his chest, down over the tight ridges of his abdomen, then back up to the corded muscles of his shoulder. She shifted and glanced up at his face. Damn, he was exquisite. Dark brows arched over his closed eyes. His black silky hair spilled across her red flowered pillow. He had been clean shaven when he arrived, but now his strong jaw was shadowed with stubble.

Breeana leaned up on an elbow. Merely looking at him sent her heart racing with love. She brushed a finger over his firm lips.

His white teeth flashed and his arm tightened around her. “Where do you think you're going?”

She smiled. “Nowhere.”

“That's what I thought.”

She laid her head against his shoulder, feeling more happy, more content, more in love, than she ever thought conceivable.

Mel stirred under her and cleared his throat. "So, how are you feeling? I'm sorry I was so rough."

The slight catch in his voice told her he wasn't really talking about their rough sex. He was wondering how she felt after taking his blood.

Playing with the dark hairs on his chest, she smiled. "I feel fine. Strong, but tired." She peeked at him. His smile had disappeared and his eyes held a look of concern. "I have to say, I was a little shocked and surprised at how good your blood tasted. It was sweet, like wine, only thicker." She laughed and he grinned. "And the rush was intense, like I could lift a house. Sounds, smells, and colors were sharper, and..." Her cheeks grew hot. "When I looked at you, all I could think about was jumping you."

His expression softened with relief. "That's the initial rush. Happens to vampires when we drink." His grin widened and his irises changed from silver to dark gray. "As for jumping me, well, I can't help it if I'm so irresistible."

Laughing, she dug her fingers into his side, making him squirm. He grabbed her hands and held them easily in one of his.

"You know," she said. "As much as I'd like to say you aren't that irresistible, I can't."

He slowly let her hands go, but he jerked when she made a move like she was going to tickle him again. She chuckled.

He arched a brow. "You done?"

"Yes."

"Besides my being irresistible, drinking blood heightens whatever you're feeling beforehand."

She pressed her cheek back to his chest. "Whatever it was, I should be apologizing to you. I wasn't too gentle myself."

A deep laugh shook his body, vibrating against her ear. "I noticed. You were like a cat with her claws unsheathed. Every time I move, I can feel the burn from where your nails dug into my skin."

"Sorry about that." Breeana fanned her face and pretended to swoon. "I was overcome with desire."

"Believe me, sweetheart. I felt the same." He leaned up, kissed the top of her head, then dropped back against the pillow. "When can you move in with me?"

The thought of living with him, sharing their lives, made her heart swell with delight. “A couple of weeks.”

His head shot up. “A couple of weeks? No way. Forget it. I want you at my place sooner than that.”

“Mel, I need time to get my affairs in order. I need to put in my two weeks’ notice at work. My clients need time to find another vet. I have to close my bank accounts, tie up loose ends.”

“Yeah, but two weeks?”

“Two weeks is probably not even enough. And if we're going to do this, then it needs to be done properly.”

His head flopped down and he rubbed his eyes. “I know. I just need you at my place so I know you're safe.” He gazed at her with a frown. “I'll phone the manager of my bank and have your name put on my account. I'll leave you my account number so you can transfer your money into it.”

She leaned up over his chest. “Like, as in a joint account?”

“Exactly. Joint as in together.”

“I love the way that sounds.”

Smiling, he kissed her. “Yeah, so do I.”

“I use to fantasize about meeting a vampire and falling in love.” She kissed his whiskered jaw. “Now, not only do I find out they exist, but I've fallen in love with a big, handsome, vampire warrior, and he's all mine.”

Mel crossed his arms under his head. “That's right, sweetheart. I'm all yours to do with what you will.”

“Hmm, to do with what I want, eh?”

“Yep. I'm open to anything.”

“Well, in that case, I think I'll feed you...”

His eyes darkened and he gave her a wicked smile. “Yeah, go on. Feed me, what?”

Breeana walked her fingers up his chest, his neck, stopping when she reached his lips. “A...sweet... hot...fudge brownie delight.”

A deep scowl crossed his brow.

Laughter tore from her. “You are so easy to tease. I'm going to love living with you.”

He rolled on top of her and pressed his erection between her thighs. Nuzzling her throat, he entered her in one swift motion. “Let me show you just how easy I am.”

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Chapter 31

July 3 Friday 10:53pm

Breeana placed the last item from under her bathroom sink into a cardboard box, closed the flaps, and sealed the top with a strip of duct tape. She pushed it out into the living room with the other boxes, filled with what she would be taking to Mel's. Her couch and other furnishing would stay behind for Carol's niece Lisa—a starving college student—who would be moving in next weekend.

She dusted off her hands and then collapsed onto the couch. This was her last night in the cottage—in her old life. Tomorrow, and all her tomorrows, would be spent with Mel. The last two weeks had been the longest yet shortest of her life. Most of her time had been spent getting things organized for her move. She closed her bank accounts, changed her mailing address, quit the band, and introduced her clients to Dr. Kirk Dalton—who would be taking her place at the veterinarian clinic. Yep, she had everything taken care of. And it all came together without a hitch, like it was fate.

Breeana curled her feet under her and relaxed back. Her thoughts turned to Carol. Leaving her was the only part of this move she regretted. When she told Carol she was moving to Scotland with Peter—Mel—the lie stuck in her throat, almost strangling her. She hated lying to Carol, but it had to be this way. She now understood what Mel went through when he thought he was keeping her safe by ending their relationship.

Mel materialized in front of her. She jumped to her feet, her heart beating double time against her ribs. She pressed a hand to her chest. “Will you quit doing that? You're going to give me a heart attack. Can't you use the front door like a normal person?”

He laughed and drew her into his arms. “What would be the fun in that? I like keeping you on your toes.”

She smiled and slid her hands under the flaps of his leather jacket. The leather creaked as his embrace tightened. She smoothed her palms up his

hard muscular back and kissed the underside of his clean shaven jaw. The scent of his cologne and his warm skin heated her blood and her desire.

“You like keeping me on my toes, huh?” she asked.

He tilted her chin up until their gazes met. “Among other positions.” His voice was low, husky, and his irises darkened.

Her hands rubbed up and down his sides before she quickly placed them under his armpits and wiggled her fingers. He jerked and squirmed out of her arms.

“You little minx. I better watch myself around you,” he said with a laugh.

“That's right. Never underestimate tickle power.”

Mel glanced around her living room. “You've been busy I see.”

“I just finished packing the last box.”

“So, are you ready to move in with me, or do you need a few more days?”

“Nope. I'm all set.” She watched his shoulders relax and the furrow lines on his forehead smooth out as the tension drained from his body.

“Good. Kal and I will be here with his truck as soon as we can tomorrow night.”

Her arms wrapped around his waist and she rested her chin on his chest. “I can hardly wait.”

His lips split in a warm grin. “Me too.”

Breeana laughed and shook her head. “It seems so strange that I'll be living in a house with a bunch of vampires.”

He cocked an eyebrow and his smile grew wider. “Scared?”

“Hardly. But at least I won't be the only woman. I'm excited to finally meet Celeene.”

“Speaking of Celeene, Roarik called me earlier to find out when you're moving in. He told me Celeene is thrilled to have another woman to talk to. Next weekend, when they get back from Bulgaria, she wants to throw a party and formally welcome you to the family.”

Warmth spread through her. “That's so sweet of her.”

He sat on her couch and pulled her onto his lap. “Did you talk to Carol today?”

Breeana's heart slowed to a crawl. “Yes. I wish I could tell her the truth, but...”

“I'm sorry, sweetheart.” His brows drew low over his eyes. “I wish things could be different, but it's safer for Carol if she believes you're out of the

country.”

She nodded. He was right of course. The less Carol knew, the better for her. “I understand.”

Mel stared at her for a moment, then glanced at his wrist watch. “Shit. I should get going. I've gotta meet Kal and Soren. Are you going to be okay? Would you like me to stay a little longer?”

A shadow passed over her, dulling her happiness. The thought of him fighting demons left her cold. What if something happened to him? She needed to drink from him for the third time to seal the life-bond. Four nights ago, she drank his blood for the second time, but since the third time was the charm, she wouldn't be able to relax until it was done. Until even death couldn't part them. Tomorrow night she would remedy that. She'd celebrate her new life with a tall, warm glass of Mel.

She stood and rubbed her arms against a chill. Inside, she chided herself for being silly. Nothing would happen to him. Besides, it was his job and she'd better get used to it. Yet, she couldn't stop this sudden feeling of dread that loomed over her like a dark cloud.

Not wanting him to know how worried she was, Breeana hid her trembling hands behind her back. “Go. I'll be fine.”

He leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees. “You sure?”

“Positive. But can you do me a favor?”

“Anything.”

“Please be careful.”

He rose and pulled her to his chest and kissed her gently, just a light brushing of his lips, but it chased away her fears and made her ache with longing. Her lips parted and his tongue slipped inside, stroking over hers. She moaned and gripped his leather covered shoulders.

His lips left hers and made their way to her ear. “I love you. And I promise I'll be very careful.” He kissed her again and then vanished.

Breeana shook her fist in the air and laughed. “You jerk. Get me all worked up and then disappear. You'll pay for that.” She flopped on the couch and sighed, thinking of all the sensuous ways she'd make him suffer.

A soft knock at the door pulled her out of her fantasy. Her lips twitched into a smile. Must be Mel. She jumped to her feet and ran up the two steps to the door. As her hand closed around the knob, a shiver worked its way up her arm and curled like smoke around her heart. She ignored it, pulling the door wide. “Decided to finish what—”

Oh, my God! No, it can't be. Her smile vanished and her mouth dropped open. Joy turned to terror. She shoved the door closed, but it flew back open with such force it sent her flying back, knocking her to the floor.

The black-haired she-demon sauntered in, her high heels clicking on the hardwood. “Well, well. Sorry to drop in...unannounced.” She placed her hands on her black, leather clad hips and laughed. “Hello, human. Did you miss me?”

Two hulking male demons wearing black trench coats, stepped in behind her, slamming the door closed with a finality akin to death.

Breeana scrambled backwards, trying to get to her feet, but they slipped out from under her. Finally, they gained traction and she bolted toward the kitchen. She didn't get far. A sharp, stinging pain exploded along the base of her skull as she was jerked off her feet by her hair. She crashed to the floor, landing hard on her back. Her breath rushed out on a loud whoosh. Panting, she stared up at the female demon. “This can't be happening. You're dead! Oh, God, please say this isn't happening.”

“Oh, it's happening, bitch,” the demon hissed down at her with an evil, dead smile. “You're mine, and with you as my bait, that handsome, blood-sucking lover of yours will be mine as well.” She laughed, then paced around the sparsely furnished room; her cold black stare never wavered from Breeana's face.

With trembling fingers, Breeana grabbed hold of a box and pulled herself up. She tried to calm herself enough to think, but her fear was too great. “He's not my lover. We're nothing to each other. I haven't seen him since that night at the club. Honestly.”

“We're nothing to each other,” the demon mimicked in a high-pitched, sing-song voice before her soulless eyes hardened. “Save your breath.”

She walked up and leaned in close. Breeana shrank back as the putrid stench of death oozed from the demon's core, making her gag.

The she-demon inhaled a deep breath. “His scent is all over you. Haven't you heard, human? Lying is a sin.” She glared at the two males. “Find the bitch's cell phone.”

I can't let her get a hold of Mel, Breeana thought. But what can I do?

She had to get a message to him; warn him before it was too late.

She seized the moment as the demons searched for her cell phone and took off toward the front door. Wild relief buzzed along her nerves when her hand touched the knob. Just as she yanked the door open, strong arms

pulled her off her feet, tossing her back against the couch. She hit and rolled over the back of it, her shoulder crashed hard on the floor. Pain spread down her arm and back. Adrenaline shot to her muscles, lending her strength and speed. She sprang up, jumped over the boxes, and ran toward the kitchen entrance.

The she-demon grabbed her as she sprinted past and backhanded her hard across the face.

Intense pain erupted along Breeana's jaw, radiating out across her cheek. Her knees buckled. She tottered, and then collapsed to the floor. Blackness slowly crept around her as she fought to stay conscious. "Mel—"

The smile on Mel's lips died the moment he took form in Breeana's living room. The odor of demons was ripe, assaulting him with the reek of decay and death.

"Breeana!" He charged through her small house, checking each room, though he knew she was gone. He grabbed the back of the couch just before he lost his strength to stand.

How the hell did this happen? Unless the she-demon told others about Breeana? Fuck. I should have forced her to move in with me the first night I came back for her.

Fear clutched his limbs in a freezing grip. Old doubts surfaced in his mind. He sagged onto her couch, gripped his head in his hands, trying to shut-up his futile, destructive thoughts so he could decide his next step.

In the deep recesses of his brain, his father's cold laugh—starting out faint—grew until his head throbbed.

"Oh son," his father's mirth-filled voice sneered. "I couldn't have hoped for a better outcome. Didn't I warn you to stay away from her? Again, you should have listened, but you didn't. Isn't payback a bitch?"

His sire's arrogant laughter mixed with his own uncertainties and hatred. Glaring pain ripped through his heart. "Shut the fuck up, you worthless piece of shit. Go back to hell where you belong!"

He lunged to his feet, his breath rushing in and out so fast the room spun. He waited for his father to reply, but nothing.

With a roar, he grabbed the coffee table, lifted it, and sent it crashing against the empty bookshelf. He spun around and faced an old desk pushed flush against the wall. He forced away his pain, trying to regain control. Gripping the edge of the small desk, he squeezed so hard, it trembled. The wood cracked and splintered in his hands. Loose papers stacked neatly, floated and dance around him, caught in the turbulence of his dark emotions.

In the midst of the chaos, his gaze locked onto a yellow sticky note stuck to the top of the desk beside her telephone. He peeled it off, reading the words written in Breeana's flowing script.

Phone my cell phone...lover.

He picked up her cordless and dialed the number. Sweat trickled down his back as he waited for someone to answer. Someone, because he knew it wouldn't be Breeana.

“What took you so long, lover? I've been waiting for you.”

Mel closed his eyes and swallowed. The sickly-sweet voice on the other end was unforgettable.

With composure he didn't feel, he asked the question he already knew the answer to. “I thought you were dead.”

The she-demon's girlish laugh filled his ear. “That's the second time this evening someone has asked me that very question.”

“How?”

“Funny thing about life is sometimes nature likes to play...games. This beautiful body of mine came in duplicate.” When he didn't answer, she continued. “Twins, my dear slayer. And like most twins, they did *everything* together. I mean, *everything*. Even selling their souls.” She roared with laughter.

Mel slammed his fist on the desk, the wood splintered, cracking in half. “Where is she? Tell me where the fuck you are. You want me, then quit screwing around and tell me, now!”

“Impatient to die, are you? Never fear, my dear. All in due time. But before I tell you where your precious little blood donor is, I have a little something to get this party started.”

He heard rustling and then his ear was flooded with Breeana's hysterical voice. “Mel, don't come. It's a trap. Please don't. They'll kill y—”

“Breeana,” he bellowed, pressing the phone tight to his ear. “Listen to me. I'm coming for you. Just hold—”

“No! It's a trap. Leave me—”

The sound of her screams dissolved the last shred of his control, cranking his rage higher. “Breeana?” Fury blasted out of him like a truckload of lit dynamite. “I'm coming. Just hold on— Breeana?”

“Shut the bitch up,” the female demon demanded. “Still there, slayer? Sorry about that. She has quite the lungs on her, but I guess you already know that.”

“I'm warning you,” Mel growled. “If you hurt her, I'll—”

“You'll do what? You're in no position to be threatening me. I call the shots here. Are we clear?”

He ground his molars together. “Quit with the shit and tell me where you are.”

“All right. No need to get angry. But before I do, we need to get a couple of things straight.”

Fuck! The bitch was right; she was holding all the cards. He had no choice but to listen to her demands.

“Are you still there, slayer?”

“Get to the point,” he snarled back.

“Aw, vampire, you're no fun.”

Mel ignored her jab, listening for Breeana in the background, but he couldn't detect her or anything else. “You're wasting time. Tell me where you are.”

“You can bring all the backup you want since I will have more than enough of my own. Hell, maybe we will wipe out all you blood-suckers from this area.”

The bottom dropped out of his stomach. What chance did he have of getting Breeana out of there alive? None by the sounds of it. But if he used himself as the prize, maybe, just maybe....

A plan took shape in his mind. It might work—it had to work—the alternative was unthinkable.

“When you arrive,” the demon continued, “you come in and hand yourself over. When you are restrained, then and only then, will I release the human. Are we clear?”

Bullshit. The lying witch would never release her. Breeana was the tool she'd use to bring him to his knees.

Clearing his throat and swallowing his pride, he said, “We're clear.”

“So reasonable we are tonight,” she taunted. “See? That wasn't so hard.”

“Nothing's easy when dealing with demons.”

“And you think your kind is a picnic?”

Mel ignored her, not wanting to get dragged down into a cat and mouse game, exchanging insults. “I will ask again, where the fuck are you?”

“Since you're so eager to see me again, I will tell you. Do you know where Larry's Canyon is?”

“Yes.”

“Up in the hills, way up in the timber, there's an old abandoned coal mine. Hopefully, you won't miss it.” She laughed, but the sound held no amusement. “If you happen to get lost, phone the human's cell phone.”

The phone went dead before he could reply.

Mel pulled his cell from his jacket pocket, flipped it open, and punched in Kal's number. As he waited for him to pick up, he ran his plan over in his mind. He really didn't want to involve any of the clansmen, but what choice did he have? He needed someone to make sure Breeana got out safe. And since he would be otherwise occupied, that left Kal. He was the only one he trusted to get her out.

“Yo, dude. What's up?”

“The black-haired demon has Breeana.”

Silence filled the line.

“Did you hear me?”

“I killed her,” Kal said. “I know it was her.”

“You killed her body's twin.”

Kal didn't reply. Mel shouted louder, “There were two. Twins. You killed one, but not the right one.”

“Jesus Christ,” Kal whispered. “Are you at Breeana's? I'll be right there.”

The line went quiet and then Kal appeared before him. Mel glared at him with barely concealed anger. “I need your help.”

Deep lines of worry were etched across Kal's forehead and his lips were drawn in a grim line. “You've got it. Do you know where she has her?”

He dragged his hands through his hair and pulled. “Yeah. They're up in the high timber somewhere in Larry's Canyon.”

Kal grabbed Mel's shoulders. “We'll get her back man. That's a promise.”

He flung off his hold, stormed across the room, then stopped in front of the sliding glass door. He gazed out into the night. What if he couldn't save her? His temples pounded and his mind shied quickly away from that thought. He wheeled around and smashed a fist into the drywall, leaving a

gaping hole. Plaster and dust floated around him. “Fuck. I should have protected her better.”

“Hey, don't do this. Shit, if anyone's to blame, it's me.”

He glared at Kal. Rage erupted in him like a volcano spewing ash. His hand went to the hilt of his dagger as he took a step toward Kal. He stopped and dropped his hand back to his side. Kal was innocent. He had done nothing but try to help. “It's not your fault.”

“We'll get her back,” Kal said. “Alive and unharmed.”

“You're right. Breeana will make it out of this alive.” He on the other hand, wouldn't. For once he knew she was safe, he would give the demon bitch what she wanted: his death. But he wouldn't be going alone. No, he would take her and her minions with him.

Kal ran a hand over his face. “Do you have a plan?”

“Not much of one. What I need from you is to get Breeana out of there while I hold them back.”

Kal's face paled. “I'm not leaving you there.” He reached into his coat and pulled out his cell phone.

Moving fast, Mel snagged the phone from his hands. “I don't want anyone else involved.”

Kal jumped forward and tried to grab back his phone. “I'm not leaving ya, so don't even ask me to. There has to be another way. We'll phone—”

“There's no other way. The demon wants us all to show, hell she's planning on it. She means to destroy all of us.” Breathing heavily, he stared into Kal's eyes. “Promise me you'll only think of getting Breeana and yourself to safety.”

“Come on, Mel—”

“Promise me.”

Kal's gaze descended to the floor and he kicked at a box with the toe of his boot. “Yeah, shit. I promise.”

“Thank you.” He tossed Kal back his phone. “Meet you at the base.” He dematerialized.

Chapter 32

July 4 Saturday 12:59pm

Back in his bedroom, Mel raced to his closet and forced open the bi-fold doors, ripping them off their tracks. He shoved through clothes to the hidden panel behind and surveyed the vast array of weapons on the shelves: guns, daggers, and swords. His gaze stopped on a metal box.

He gripped the box and yanked a black trench coat off a hanger, then carried the items over to his bed. He flipped the lid open. Hand grenades filled the container like a child's rock collection. Lumpy, deadly, explosive rocks. He placed six in the deep pockets of the trench coat and three in a secret pouch, hidden inside the lining. He ran back to the closet and stuffed a handgun down the back of his jeans, then another down the front. Two daggers he strapped to his thighs and one around his waist. Next, he secured two small throwing knives to his forearms.

His mind remained curiously blank, which was good thing. If he allowed himself to think of the danger Breeana was in, his fear would take over and he'd rush in, only succeeding in getting her killed.

You'll never save her. He froze as the voice of his father filled his head—no, the words weren't spoken in his old man's tone, it was his own. Quickly, before he got sucked down by doubts, he shoved the thought away, pulled the trench coat over his shoulders, and raced out into the living room. "Kal? Where the f—"

Kal charged out of his room. "Yo dude, I'm right here." After checking his gun, he slammed the chamber back into place and shoved it into a holster hidden under the flaps of his leather coat. "I'm ready."

Mel nodded and disappeared.

Taking form in the driveway, Mel sprinted over to Kal's truck, only to come to an abrupt halt. Sin, Black, Soren, and Ace, all armed and ready for battle, waited patiently.

Kal materialized beside them. Mel stormed up to him and fisted the front of his leather, hauling him forward so they stood nose to nose. "You son-of-

a-bitch. I told you not to involve them.”

Spreading his arms wide, Kal shrugged. “What can I say? Your plan sucked.”

Mel cursed and shoved him away. He glared at the warriors. “She *wants* us all to show. The place will be crawling with demons.”

“All the more reason for us to back you,” Soren said.

“We don't have a hope in hell of fighting our way out.” Mel paced the length of the truck. “It's a trap.”

Black walked over to him, his brown eyes were filled with worry. “Look —”

“This is my problem,” Mel said with a snarl. “I'm only involving Kal to make sure Breeana makes it out.”

Soren widened his stance and crossed his arms over his chest. “We go in as a team.”

Ace sauntered over, rubbing his hands together. “You're wasting time arguing with us. We're going in together, and those filthy mongrels are going down.”

“You'd be the first to put your ass on the line if it was one of us,” Black stated. “We're family. And where I come from, family sticks together and that now includes Breeana.”

Mel couldn't believe what he was hearing. They were all willing to put their lives on the line for Breeana—for him. Emotions he couldn't name welled up inside, but he pushed them down. He didn't have time to analyze them. Each second Breeana was with the demons was a second too long.

Sin took a deep inhale off a cigarette; the glow lit up the harsh planes of his face. His dark brown eyes glittered as he narrowed them. He dropped the butt and crushed it under his boot. “Like Ace said, we're wasting time, ladies.” His eyes bore into Mel's. “She has a better chance of surviving if we all go.”

Shit. Sin was right. Her chances were slim as is, but they were improved with the help from these strong, battle savvy warriors.

Mel glanced up at the sky. Dawn was only a few hours off. He turned his attention back to the squad and stared at the five mismatched males. These warriors were more than just fellow soldiers. They were his friends—his family. Hell, they were closer to him than his blood family, and he trusted them with his life. With Breeana's life.

Soren squeezed Mel's shoulder. “So, where are we headed?”

Mel rubbed a hand over his face. “Larry's Canyon. Kal will take his truck as far as he can, and from there, well, we'll figure it out when we see what we're up against.”

Soren opened the passenger door. “I'll ride with Kal.”

Sin checked his Glock before he holstered it at his hip. “Let's get this show on the road, ladies.”

Kal glanced at Mel. “Holy, hell. You weren't kidding when you said this place was going to be crawling with demons.”

Mel looked out past the dense trees, across a clearing to the gaping mouth-like opening of the abandoned coal mine.

All six warriors crouched at the edge of the timberline, watching demons mill around the dark entrance. The opening to the mine was a black maw carved in the bare hillside of rock, fifty feet from where they stood. Trees surrounded the naked stone in a circle, like leftover hair on the head of a balding man.

“How many do you see?” Soren asked.

Mel quickly counted. “Thirty at least. And that's just what's on the outside. God knows how many are inside.”

Christ, six against thirty was an impossible fight, but four was just suicide.

Panic rushed to the surface, but again he tramped it down. Now was not the time to lose his cool. He needed all his faculties. He inhaled deep. The sweet scent of sap and rotting pine needles mixed with the cloying stench of the demons. His ears strained, trying to catch what they were saying, but all he heard was their low mumbling voices and small creatures scurrying in the thick underbrush.

He pulled the hand grenades out of his pocket and handed one to each of the warriors. “As soon as you see Kal come out with Breeana, you blow this mother sky-fucking-high.”

Black's eyes jerked to Mel's face. “What about you?”

Mel patted the side of his trench coat. “I'm covered. Kal, hide yours inside the lining of your coat. No doubt we'll be stripped of our weapons. Hopefully they'll miss the grenades.”

“I don't want any heroics,” Soren said. “Go in and stall them. Give us a chance to deal with these bastards.”

“I'll do what I have to in order to save Breeana,” Mel hissed so close to Soren's face his breath blew his hair back. “As soon as you see Kal with Breeana, don't hesitate.”

A low growl escaped Soren's throat and his eyes turned deadly. “You stall them, Mel, and that's an order.”

Ace straightened. “Well, I don't know about you guys, but I'm going in. I haven't made a kill in a week and I'm just itching to.” He stepped out from behind the trees, into the clearing. The demons paused and gaped at the lone vampire.

“Ace, you crazy-assed bastard! What the hell do you think you're doing?” Mel ran out into the clearing and grabbed Ace's arm. “You'll get yourself killed.”

“You just worry about getting your woman out. Let us worry about these assholes.”

The rest of the warriors came and stood beside them. They waited for a sign that the demons would attack. When none came, they moved as one, slowly making their way up the rocky slope.

Twenty feet away, Mel stopped and shouted, “Where's the female demon? Get her ass out here. Now!”

From the black entrance, her syrupy voice floated out. “Did you miss me as much as I missed you?” She walked out, flipping her long ebony hair over her shoulder. With her hands on her hips, she surveyed the small group of vampires and laughed. “I see you brought back-up.”

Anger burned as hot as a bonfire in Mel's chest. He surged forward, but Kal locked his arms around his waist and dragged him back.

Mel struggled. He had to wrap his hands around her filthy, scrawny neck and snap it like a twig.

“Mellow out, man,” Kal whispered. “You need to think clear. We'll get our chance.”

Fuck, Kal was right. He needed to stay focused. He glared at the she-demon's smug face and demanded, “Bring out the human.”

“That's not how it works, vampire. You come in, give yourself up, and then your human garbage can go free.”

“Do you honestly think I believe you? Not a chance. You bring her out, then you can have me.”

She leaned her back against the rock. “We do this my way or no way. Your choice.”

“Fuck me.” Mel glanced sideways at Kal. “Are you ready?”

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of Kal's face and his shoulders shook, but he nodded.

He turned to the others. “Remember what I said. No hesitation.”

Heart hammering, muscles tense, Mel walked the remaining thirty feet with Kal so close, their leather coats squeaked as they brushed together.

They stopped in front of the she-demon. Her gaze roamed over Kal, looking him up and down. Mel inclined his head in his direction. “He comes with me to make sure the human leaves alive.”

She flashed them a dazzling smile. “Fine by me, slayer. But the weapons stay.”

He unloaded his pockets, dropping his guns, daggers, and knives in a pile at his feet. Kal did the same. When they were through, both held the flaps of their coats to the side as a young, skinny demon patted them down.

“Clean,” the demon said as he moved aside.

“Very good.” She chuckled. “Oh, and don't even think of poofing yourselves out. The rock inside is too thick. Now then, there's someone inside who's just dying to see you.” She beamed at them both before she proceeded down the dark shaft.

Mel and Kal followed behind her. They traveled along an old coal cart track, pursued by three large demons as they descended deeper into the dank tunnel. Cool musty air blew against Mel's face, and the regular drip of water sounded loud in the cramped passage. Blackness completely surrounded them. Even with his night vision, he found it hard to see. His eyes strained against the oppressive dark, searching for any sign of light, and the only sounds his ears detected was the steady tinkle of water, their harsh breathing, and the occasional rock skittering across the stone floor.

After many twists and turns, they finally entered a crude chamber cut from the rock. It was eerily beautiful. Lantern and candle light reflected off the rock walls causing them to shimmer and sparkle as if they were covered with stars. Mel scanned the room and counted ten demons—fourteen including their escorts and the female. Two stood beside the entrance with their arms crossed over their meaty chests like bouncers guarding a club. Six sat around a white plastic patio table, playing cards. They rose to their feet and glared, snickering and nudging one another as Mel and Kal walked

in. At the back of the room, two more demons flanked a set of blood-red, velvet curtains. The closed drapes hung to the floor from a metal rod bolted in the rock ceiling.

Breeana was nowhere to be seen, but Mel felt her strong presence coming from behind the drapes.

He rushed forward. Shouts erupted. A demon obstructed his path and drove a beefy fist into his gut. An explosion of pain and nausea burst inside him. He doubled over just as the bastard threw another punch. Mel blocked it, grabbed the demon's fist, then jerked the wrist to the side. The sharp snap of bones and the demon's screams bounced off the walls. Squeezing the fist, he applied more pressure, driving the demon to his knees. He snaked his arm around the creature's neck and yanked back.

Another demon pulled out a blade, his face red with rage and his lips twisted into an ominous grin. He advanced toward Mel. Kal flashed himself in the demon's path, kicked the knife out of his grip, and wrapped his forearm around the dense throat, headlock-style.

A chaotic mix of pounding boots, chairs scrapping, and shouted commands echoed all around. Above the din, the she-demon yelled, "If you can't control yourself, slayer, then your human bitch dies!"

Mel glowered back at her. "Tell your dogs to back off."

With a wave of one elegant hand, she snarled at her comrades, "Step back. But be wary." Her eyes moved to Mel's face and she smiled. "You know how unpredictable vampires can be."

He glanced about. They were surrounded. Fuck! He had no choice but to listen to her. Glaring a warning at the she-demon, he slowly released his grip and stepped back, bringing his hands up in surrender. The demon fell to his knees, coughed and spat, then crawled away. Kal relinquished his hold and pushed the demon from him.

"Show me the human," Mel growled. The menacing sound reverberated through the chamber.

The she-demon nodded in the direction of the curtains. One of her slaves pulled a gold braided cord and the curtains parted.

Chapter 33

The curtains parted. Breeana lay in the center of a stained mattress. Her wrists and ankles were bound with gray rope and a gag was tied across her mouth. Tears streaked down her red cheeks. The left side of her face, from her eye to jaw, was swollen and discolored black and blue.

Oh, God. Violence erupted in Mel, spewing red-hot hatred from the center of his chest to radiate throughout his body.

“Breeana!” He jumped forward but stopped when a stocky demon with a bulbous gut stepped closer to the bed and withdrew a sword. The ominous sound of the blade sliding out of its scabbard filled the silence.

Mel's gaze flew to the she-demon. “Release her!”

“Momentarily,” she said.

He looked back at Breeana's battered face. Her red-rimmed eyes were wide with fright. She shook her head as she tried to speak through the gag that was stretched tight between her teeth.

He made a move toward her, but again came to a halt when the fat blade-wielding demon grabbed a handful of Breeana's hair. He jerked her head back, exposing the long curve of her neck. With a malicious smile, the bastard dragged the cold steel up her throat.

Fear moved through Mel like a living entity.

The she-demon laughed, a smug, satisfied sound that turned his fear to madness.

Insanity crazed him, and instead of resisting, he welcomed it, allowing it free rein. His fangs punched down into his mouth, cutting his lips; the tangy taste of blood heightened his rage. As his control disintegrated, a cold wind swirled around him. A low growl issued from his curled lips. It rose in volume, filling the chamber with its threatening sound.

The female's eyes grew round and she jumped back.

Her display of dread was all the provocation he needed. He stalked toward her, prepared to rip out her heart with his bare hands.

In a voice ripe with fear, she shouted, “Stop, or your human bitch dies.”

Everything ceased to exist around him. His whole being focused on killing the evil that stood in the way of his happiness—his love. His fingers locked into fists as he advanced. He was outside himself, a stranger. But the sound of Breeana's moans trickled into his brain and shoved aside his dementia. His attention snapped back to her. The creature held the tip of his blade pressed under her jaw. The point slowly pierced her skin. A muffled cry came from behind the gag. A thin trail of blood tracked down her throat to disappear under the collar of her black shirt.

Mel's muscles convulsed with his need to go to her. "I'm warning you, let her go!"

The she-demon locked stares with him, all traces of fear now vanished. "Maybe I'll keep her tied for awhile." She walked over and stood beside Breeana's head. Six of her puppets followed close behind. With a long, red fingernail, she ran it over Breeana's swollen eye, down her jaw, and then dragged it through her blood. "Or better yet, maybe I won't release her at all."

Mel lunged toward her. Kal shouted for him to stop, but he ignored it.

The she-demon yelped. "Get him, you fools."

Like attacking dogs, four demons came at him—two on both sides—and quickly restrained him. One circled his neck with a thick arm, closing off his air. Black spots swam before his eyes.

Panting and struggling for oxygen, Mel croaked out a hoarse demand. "Let her go and take me instead."

"Oh, slayer, I have you regardless. Look around. You don't have a hope of getting out of here with or without your human."

Mel thrashed against the hold until blackness edged around his vision. Distantly, he heard Kal yell, but he couldn't make out the words. His body went limp and he bowed his head in shame. The she-demon was right. It was hopeless. Again, someone foolish enough to love him would lose their life.

No! Like a bomb detonating in his chest, anger and hatred blasted back, lending him strength. Twisting and turning, he tore himself from the demon's grip. He snarled and gnashed his canines. The hellions leapt back, just out of his reach.

Kal rushed up and grabbed him by the shoulders. As he hauled him back, he whispered, "Try and stay calm and use your head."

Mel's breath wheezed out of his swollen throat. He scrutinized the room. The demons circled around them like sharks. Shit, there was no chance they could fight their way out. It was time to put his plan into action.

He reached into the secret pocket hidden in the lining of his leather coat and withdrew a hand grenade. He held it up for the she-bitch. "See," he said, pacing back and forth. Her slaves all took a step back. "I knew you would go back on your word. Never trust a demon. Isn't that how the saying goes?"

Fear spread across her face. "Do you take me for a fool? If you pull the pin your precious human dies too. And I know you don't want that."

"Well, you see, demon. The funny thing about death, or should I say *our* death, is when most humans and vampires die, we go back to our Creators. And our afterlife is full of peace, happiness, and light. Free to spend eternity in tranquility." He stepped toward her. "Can you say the same? I think not. You will return to hell, and I can't imagine what goes on there, but I'm sure you can."

She spat, doubt making her voice sharp, "You're bluffing. You wouldn't dare. You wouldn't kill your human; I see how much you care for her."

"You're right, I do care very deeply for her. More than my own life, but I would rather her death be quick and not a drawn out, painful affair."

Mel glanced at Breeana. She gazed back at him with eyes full of love. He returned her stare, letting all his love for her flow out. Warmth spread from his heart to the tips of his fingers and toes.

She was his savior. She had brought him back to the light. Their short time together had been the only time he had ever felt whole. Loved.

Muffled sounds came from behind the rag tied across Breeana's mouth as she laid her bound hands over her heart.

Mel wrenched his eyes from her, back to the female demon. He fit his pinkie through the loop of the hand grenade's pin. "So, what's it going to be? The human goes free and you live another day, content with my death or we all go...boom!"

The evil bitch grinned, a nervous unsure smile that trembled around the edges. "I don't believe you would kill your human—"

Mel spoke, his voice quiet, venomous. "You don't believe me? Just try me. I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. You plan on killing us anyway. I'll just get us there faster."

He lifted the grenade higher. “Breeana, I love you. I'll see you on the other side. And Kal, you crazy mother. Hope the gods like practical jokes.”

Laughing, Kal replied, “Who gives a shit if they don't. That's what makes them worth pulling.”

Mel slowly pulled on the pin, hoping and praying the bitch would—

“Stop!” Her eyes flashed red and her glare dripped with rage and hate. Her body resonated as she hissed through clenched teeth, “Let the human go!”

A violent string of curses fell from her lips as she charged back and forth between Mel and the bed. Finally, she stopped in front of him, hands balled into fists so tight her long red nails cut into her palms. Blood dripped onto the stone floor. “You filthy, disease-ridden bastard! You will pay for this in pain so intense you will be begging me to put an end to your miserable life.”

He ignored her threats. His attention was focused on Breeana as her bonds were cut and the gag yanked out of her mouth. She shrank back as the demon, dagger still in hand, gripped one of her arms and dragged her off the bed. She struggled, but the fiend prevented her flight easily.

His heart pounded. His plan better work. This was it. No other options left. “Let her go or it's lights out...permanently.”

Helplessness devoured him like a large fish swallowing a smaller one as the she-beast grabbed Breeana by her arms and pulled her closer. Breeana tugged against the hold as she leaned away from the demon's cruel gaze.

Awe and confusion clouded the hellion's red eyes. “What makes you so special that he'd trade his life for yours?” She turned to Mel and then back to Breeana. Eventually, she cursed and shoved Breeana in Kal's direction. “Take this garbage before I change my mind.”

Kal caught her. Breeana jerked in his grasp. She clawed at his arms, trying to break free.

“Take her and leave, quickly,” Mel said.

“Noooo,” Breeana shrieked. “Don't—” Kal scooped her up and held her against his chest. She punched and kicked. “Mel, please, I won't leave without you.”

“Go—hurry,” he shouted. He caught Breeana's pleading stare and whispered, “I love you.”

Kal bolted toward the entrance as Mel stared after them. Breeana reached an arm around Kal's back, her eyes wild with terror, then they were gone.

Her screams and prayers echoed back. “Oh God, please help us! Don't let them take him from me—Nooo—”

Mel faced the demons and crouched. He slipped his finger out of the pin and curled the grenade in his fist for later use. He had no hope of winning; he just needed to buy some time for Kal and Breeana to make it out. “You want me, come and get me.”

Demons rushed him.

He spread his arms wide and charged, using his weight and momentum to mow through the line. He took three down with him. Landing face down on top of one, he sank his fangs into its throat. Vile blood that tasted like rotten meat filled his mouth. The demon roared. Jerking his head, Mel tore a chunk of flesh free and spat it out. The creature's screams turned to gurgles and hisses, as air and blood escaped from the gaping hole.

“Get the bastard,” the she-demon screamed. “But don't kill him, I want him alive. I want him to suffer in ways he never thought possible.”

A hand gripped Mel by the back of his coat and hoisted him up. Without pausing, he spun and swung his fist at the sneering face. It connected with a solid thunk, dislocating the jaw, which dangled off to one side. Garbled sounds belched from its open mouth. The demon faltered, its arms pinwheeling before it fell.

Above the chaos, the she-demon shouted, “You useless fuck-ups. Get him.”

Mel dove and locked his arms around the nearest demon's legs. He flipped the beast onto its back. The demon slashed wildly with its blade, the tip catching Mel's cheek. White-hot pain erupted along his face as the silver knife carved open his cheek. He fell on the thing's chest, peeled the dagger from its hand, and plunged the serrated weapon through the breastbone to its heart. The body burst into a cloud of dust.

The demon bitch commanded, “Get the chain around him.”

Mel leapt to his feet as the others closed in. He sliced the blade in a wide arc, trying desperately to hold them back just a little longer.

Searing agony burned through his lower back. Pressure built in his abdomen, then gave way. He glanced down. *Oh, Jesus.* The tip of a dagger, covered in his blood, poked through his shirt just below his belly button. Strange, instead of pain, he felt...cold.

His thoughts swirled into a whirlpool like water speeding down a drain. Before he blacked out, he focused on breathing and staying conscious.

A foot landed on the middle of his back and fingers tangled in his hair. The blade was tugged out; the force knocked him to his knees. Remnants of silver from the dagger burned as if a flaming torch had been shoved into the open gash.

The grenade dropped out of his grip. He scrambled toward the small bomb, and just before his fingers closed around it, a heavy foot stamped down on his wrist. With a roar, Mel embedded the knife into the thigh muscle of the demon's leg.

A primal scream tore from the creature's mouth. The demon wrapped stumpy fingers around the knife's handle and pulled it free,

No, I need more time. He snagged its wrist and fought for the blade, but the demon booted him in the face. The blow sent him skittering across the floor. Lights flashed and his vision winked in and out. Blood stung his eyes, and the salty taste filled his mouth and throat. He tried to rise, but a wave of nausea and dizziness scrambled his equilibrium. He flopped back.

“Don't kill him. She wants him a live,” a gruff voice shouted.

Mel's strength dwindled as silver contaminated his bloodstream. Time to end this game of torture. He prayed Kal and Breeana had made it out. Again, his hand slipped inside the secret pocket. A grenade touched his palm, but before he could grasp it, his head was hefted up by his hair and a thick chain wrapped around his neck. The metal scorched his flesh as if the rings were made of fire.

The fuckers coated it in silver.

The steel rings tightened. Mel's head banged against the floor as they dragged him toward the back wall. He clawed at the noose, but it wouldn't budge. His awareness took a nose dive.

The she-demon stepped up beside him. She landed a sharp kick to his ribs. “Bind his arms and legs, then string him up.”

Fuck, if they strung him up, he was a goner.

I can't let the bitch win.

With his last bit of energy, Mel reached above his head, twined his fingers through the links, and flipped himself onto his stomach. His teeth clenched and muscles strained as he pulled his knees up to his chest and planted his feet under him. With a forceful yank, he jerked on the chain.

The end whipped out of the demon's clutches.

The crushing pressure on his windpipe eased. He surged up and twirled the heavy rings in a wide arc above his head. The end smashed the side of a

demon's head, tearing off a large chunk of flesh and bone. Blood and bits of gray matter sprayed the ceiling and back wall. The son-of-a-bitch went down with a satisfying thud.

He gathered the length for another swing, but a solid mass collided into him from behind, knocking him face-down on the floor. Pain from his fractured face, pressed against the stone, almost made him pass out as demons dog-piled him. Their suffocating weight made it impossible to move.

The chain squeezed once more and he was dragged out from under the bodies.

“Hold up. I want to make sure this fucker stays down.” A large booted foot stomped on Mel's chest, then a blood-spattered face drew closer. A sinister smile stretched the fiend's thick lips, hatred and victory shone in its red eyes. “Game over, maggot.” The hilt of a dagger was brought down with bone-shattering force against his forehead.

Blackness sucked him down. He tried to claw his way out, but his strength was gone. He floated weightless for a second, and as he descended, he heard the she-demon laugh, then command, “Fetch me back the human.”

Chapter 34

From a deep well of blackness, Mel's mind swam to the surface. As his awareness emerged, a sense of urgency beat at his brain like a drum. The moment he came to, the burning, crushing pain encircling his throat and wrists warned him he should have remained adrift.

Muffled sounds penetrated his fog. He lifted one heavy eyelid; the other was swollen shut. Intense suffering slammed through him, feeling as if his body was on fire. His mouth opened and closed as he tried to swallow, but something compressed his throat.

Mel glanced down. He was naked to the waist and suspended on the wall like a living piece of art. His arms, stretched wide, were secured to O-rings bolted into the stone wall by chains wrapped around his wrists. His legs were likewise spread and bound at the ankles.

Dark bruises covered his chest and ribs. The gash on his abdomen where the dagger pierced through had been cauterized. He assumed the entry wound on his back had also been sealed to stop him from bleeding out. The evil bitch wanted to keep him alive as long as possible. Couldn't have him croak before her game of torture truly began.

The she-demon's last words rushed back to him. "*Fetch me the human.*"

His blood froze and the sweat coating his body turned to ice. Had Breeana been recaptured?

Mel lifted his head and his blurry gaze scanned the rocky chamber. The she-demon stood to his left beside a patio table, whispering to a small group of her slaves. Otherwise, the room was empty.

His head slumped back against the wall and he breathed a sigh of relief. She was still free. For now. He was positive the demon-hag would waste no time in torturing him with Breeana's recapture.

Unanswered questions made his brain throb. How long had he been unconscious? Had Kal and Breeana escaped, or did they make it out only to be ambushed? What about the other warriors? Were they all dead?

He clenched his hands and strained against the chains. Sweat popped out across his naked chest and torso. His muscles bunched and flexed while he

tried to pull the bolts out of the wall. *Fuck*. They wouldn't budge. Blood loss and the silver coursing through his veins had sapped his force.

Christ, he had one foot through death's door. His limbs felt as if they were stuck with a million needles as numbness began to set in, and his heart beat at a slow, shallow pace. Full paralysis was next.

Despair wrapped around him like a cloak of razor blades. His plan had failed—he'd failed. Even if Kal got Breeana to safety, the she-demon would go after her again. She would never be safe. He should have fought harder—held them off a little longer—then blown them all back to hell, himself included.

The bitch's voice filtered through his anguish. “Well, look who's awake. Good. I was getting worried.” As she sauntered over, she grabbed a length of chain, and tugged.

The pressure about Mel's neck increased, cutting off his air. He fought to stay conscious, but his vision faded and his oxygen-starved body started to shut down.

“You're mine now, slayer. In a few minutes your human will be back, and then the fun will begin.”

She eased up on her hold. His chest heaved as he filled his lungs.

“Better?” she asked with a sinister smile.

“Fuck...you.” His voice was raw, hoarse and his throat was on fire. He ground his teeth and once more strained against the shackles. It was useless. He grew weaker by the second.

She yanked the chain again. “Save your strength, vampire. Soon you'll know what it feels like to lose the only one you care about.” She took a step closer as Mel sputtered and coughed. “Do you have any clue what our lives are like? The miseries we suffer? Lucifer rules all with an iron fist. We have no joy—nothing. You, slayer, took all I had with a flick of your dagger. I know the tortures my lover suffers because he failed.” Her eyes narrowed. “But as much as I miss him, I value my life here more, so I will have to content myself with your pain—”

Chilling screams and snarls came from down the tunnel and resounded through the chamber.

Mel's head jerked toward the entrance.

A faint light shone through the opening. More high-pitched screams filled the air.

Oh, God, Breeana.

He thrashed against the chains in a futile attempt to escape.

The she-demon's face paled. She pointed to the others. "Go see what the hell is going on out there."

The males stood beside the table in a tight group. The largest one turned to her. "No fucking way. You want to know what's going on, then go check it out yourself."

She stalked over to him, her hands balled at her sides. With a degrading laugh, she asked, "Don't tell me you're afraid?"

He glanced toward the light and swallowed. "Something strange is out there." He turned to her. "Can't you feel it?"

The others backed away from the entrance, their bodies trembled.

She wound her arms around the big one's neck and leaned her body flush with his. "Do it for me. If you do, I'll reward you." Her mouth slanted over his and she cupped him between his legs.

The male grunted and grabbed her leather-covered ass, then pulled their lower bodies together. He lifted his mouth from hers and gripped her chin, jerking her head. "You got yourself a deal. But I'm warning you, if you try and renege, I'll kill you myself." He stepped back, his gaze traveled over her form in a silent promise. He inclined his head at two demons wearing black trench coats. "Let's go." The trio charged through the opening.

The female swiped a hand across her lips and glared at the others. "You're all useless cowards."

Mel pulled against the chains. The heavy links bit into his flesh but he ignored the pain. He had to break free. He thrashed and tugged. The tendons in his arms stretched, threatening to snap, and his muscles ripped from the exertion. His sweat-slicked chest heaved with each painful breath until his movements became sluggish. Blackness edged his vision and his heart rate slowed to a crawl. The intervals between beats lengthened, and his breathing turned to gasps. His movements stopped. He was fading fast.

At that moment, he did something he hadn't done since he was a child: he prayed. Not for his life to be spared, but for The Creator to spare Breeana's.

Mel's head sagged forward and darkness once more enveloped him.

His thoughts scattered like smoke from a chimney, dissipating out into nothingness. He drifted aimlessly in comforting blackness.

Finally, after what felt like forever, he came to and opened his eyes. A green field dotted with colorful wildflowers surrounded him as far as the

eye could see. The sun shone bright, warm upon his naked skin. He tilted his face up and closed his eyes. All pain melted away.

From a small corner of his mind, he heard someone call him, but he turned from it. He wanted to stay here where there was no hurt, no self-loathing. Only peace.

The unfamiliar voice was insistent. It nagged him to come back.

Yeah, right, he thought. *Why bother? Breeana was gone. Forever.*

Again, the voice called, demanded he listen. It kept up, buzzing through his brain until that was all he heard.

He continued walking through the sunny meadow, then stopped and cocked his head. There was nothing familiar about the voice, it sounded neither male nor female, but it called to him like nothing he had ever heard before. Curious, he walked toward it.

Mel opened his eyes and jerked as he was jolted back to reality and pain, still hung up on the wall inside the coal mine. He blinked and focused his thoughts. Something seemed different. The first thing he noticed was the quiet, then a strange impression caught his attention. He glanced toward his bound feet. Breeana stood below him, glowing with a heavenly light. She was beautiful, like an angel.

He smiled, his dry, swollen lips stung as the skin split. Swallowing several times, he tried to speak. "Breeana," he managed in a gruff whisper.

Then a thought struck him and his body went stiff.

Oh no. Oh, God, no. She had been captured. The demons... his mind shattered like glass and his grasp on reality slid down the slippery slope toward madness.

"Mel. Come back. Thou hath a destiny to fulfill."

The voice that stroked his ears wasn't Breeana's but it held all he'd ever craved: peace, love, and happiness.

"Time is of the essence. Hear my voice and come forth!"

Mel closed his eyes, still resisting. "No. Leave me to die. I have nothing left to live for."

"I command you to release your doubts and come forth."

Annoyance swelled in his chest. All he wanted was to go back to the meadow, away from the pain and heartache. Away from his guilt. He sighed and opened his eyes again. Peace once more wrapped around him, through him, pulling him back.

He frowned and studied Breeana. Her skin was iridescent, glowing from within. Her face, neck and hands were back-lit; the creases beside her nose, and around her eyes, were darker—reddish—like a hand placed over a flash light. Though this was her physical body, he sensed she no longer inhabited it.

Christ, he had lost his mind. He shook his head to clear away the fuzz but it didn't help, she still shone bright as if she'd swallowed a lamp.

She lifted a hand, palm up, and spoke in a whisper so low he couldn't catch the words.

With a dull clang, the chains broke and fell to the floor in a heap of twisted metal. Free, he slid slowly, gently, down the wall until his feet reached the smooth stone floor. His knees buckled when his weight settled, but by sheer force of will, he remained standing.

She glided over to him and raised a glowing hand to his face. No fear was in him, only awe and love as her fingers slid over his cheek, his jaw, and across his brow. Uttering a great weary sigh of contentment, his eyes fluttered closed. The warmth from her feather-light touch eased the pain of his wounds, inside and out. And like water gushing from a tap, his mind fully returned. The radiance emitting from her penetrated his flesh, straight to the very essence of his being; cleansing away all traces of hurt.

“You have bore a cold life, my child. But I come to you with a gift. A gift of love, and if you choose to receive it, it shall bring you joy for all eternity.”

He stared into the twin headlights that were her eyes. Wonderment filled him as realization struck. This was no mere mortal. This was the force—the energy—behind all life. This being was akin to the sun, giving life to all on the planet, from the smallest microbe to the tallest tree. Akin, yet more. The Creator even of the sun.

She nodded and smiled. “Yes. I am life itself. I answer to many names in numerous cultures, but The Creator of all, I am. I stand before you of my own free will to smite those who dare try to take what does not belong to them.”

Either he'd fallen off the edge and plunged into the sea of insanity, or this really was The Creator. He bowed his head, feeling wholly unworthy to be in the presence of such greatness.

Her hand hovered over his heart and she frowned. “Such pain and self-doubt you bear, my son. Have I not tried to ease your misery with dreams of

my daughter—of a love that would comfort your weary soul?”

The dreams he'd had of Breeana invaded his thoughts. The love and contentment that came with them had been like a double-edged sword. They had taunted him with snapshots of what he truly craved yet figured he'd never have. The guilt he carried from his past never allowed him to hope for more. Until Breeana.

She tilted his chin up until their gazes merged. “Let your father's cruelty and venom fall away and haunt you no longer. Embrace your destiny.”

As Mel stood in the illumination, he felt his flesh open like a zipper had been tugged down, exposing his soul. The light rushed in, cleansing away his shame, doubts, sealing up old wounds and scars, leaving him complete for the first time, healed mind, body and soul.

She stepped back and the inherent brilliance intensified as she grew in height. “Take my daughter's hand and fulfill the prophecy. Help bring forth those whom will bring about the downfall of he who we shall not name!”

His gaze dropped to the floor as indignity filled him. He cleared his throat, surprised there was no pain. “I don't carry the mark of the prophecy...my Lord.”

“My son, the power of the prophecy does not reside in the mark. It is in love.” A gentle hand wrapped around his wrist, bringing it to rest against her abdomen. “It is only my daughters who carry the mark, to help guide the ones chosen to find each other. Only with love can the prophecy be consummated.” She cupped his cheek. “The seed is already planted and grows here as we speak. You have chosen one another with your own free will.”

His eyes snapped back to her face. Could it be? Did she carry his child? He smoothed his hand across her flat stomach, daring to dream.

“Your child will be one of many destined to come forth. They shall be the new warriors, a mixture of both children.”

A tear slipped past his lashes and he quickly swiped it away. Happiness, the likes of which he had never felt, filled him until he thought his heart would burst.

A child. His and Breeana's child, created out of love.

She let go of his hand and glanced around the room. “Hurry, Mel. Destroy these abominations for I can restrain them no longer. Their bodies are of my own, but their spirits are controlled by one I do not know any longer.”

For the first time since he came back to himself, he looked around. The demons stood frozen in place. Yet behind the human masks they wore, their eyes spun like red marbles.

He picked up a dagger from off the floor and walked over to the she-demon. Her eyes stopped with the slot machine routine and focused on him. The hatred coming off her was like ice water tossed in his face. The body that housed her black soul vibrated and her hand moved a fraction of an inch.

The memory of the pain she inflicted assaulted him. He smiled, twirled the dagger, and dragged the blade across the flesh under her nose. "Looks like you're heading home after all. Say hi to your lover for me." He gripped the hilt and rammed the blade through her chest, into her heart. Her mouth stretched wide as a black mass rose out of it and floated to the rock ceiling, circled the room, then disappeared. The human shell crumbled into dust. He made short work of the others, littering the floor with a thin film of gray debris.

"Mel?"

He glanced up.

A secret smile curved the corner of Breeana's full lips, and the glow coming from within her intensified. "Think you the gods sit idle on their golden thrones?"

His face burned, remembering when he told Breeana he had no faith in them.

"Know we fight alongside and bleed with the children of the Earth."

Mel bowed and whispered, "I apologize."

She nodded. The voice when she spoke again sounded distant, as if it came from far down a tunnel. The light shining from her eyes, once so bright, was diminishing. "I grow weak, for I do not belong here. This is not my home. It is intended for the Earth's children, no others. Take my daughter and leave quickly."

The light winked out and Breeana's body sagged forward. He caught her just before she slipped to the floor.

He sunk to his knees. "Breeana? Speak to me, please."

She moaned and shifted in his arms. Her eyes flicked open. She gazed up at him and blinked. "Mel? Are we...dead?"

He pulled her to his chest and buried his face in her hair. "Breeana... thank God. I was so afraid I'd lost you."

She clung to him. Her body trembled against his. "What happened?"

Wheels turned in his mind, but he couldn't remember a damn thing past waking, strung up on the wall. "I...don't remember."

But that wasn't entirely true. Two things he was certain of: Breeana was pregnant and their child would one day become a warrior. One of the elite the prophecy spoke of.

Was it true? Like a ghostly whisper, words floated through his mind: *The power of the prophecy does not reside in the mark. It is in love.*

Shouts and pounding feet, amplified by the rock tunnels, invaded the enclosure. They both turned their attention to the entrance.

Kal called out, his voice frantic. "Mel?"

"We're in here," he shouted back.

The clansmen burst through the entrance and stopped. All five were covered in blood, but alive.

Mel sent a silent prayer of thanks to the gods. He gathered Breeana tight and rose to his feet. "Are you guys okay?"

Soren stared at Mel, confusion scrunched his brow. "Yeah, though I have no clue as to why or how. Some pretty weird shit happened out there." He looked around at the bed of ashes strewn on the floor. "What the hell happened in here?"

Mel surveyed the room and again tried to recall. Blurry images danced on the outskirts of his mind, just out of reach. And when he tried to focus, his thoughts dispersed like clouds in a windstorm. But he had to agree with Soren's analogy: some pretty strange shit must have gone down.

"I'm not really sure," he finally said.

Kal stood beside the entryway, his expression a mix of disgrace and confusion.

With Breeana cradled in his arms, Mel walked over and laid a gentle hand on Kal's shoulder.

Kal looked at the floor. "I'm sorry, man."

"For what?"

"I don't remember dropping Breeana." Kal shoved a hand through his tangled hair. "I let you down."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. She is safe because of you. I owe you everything."

Breeana leaned forward and kissed Kal's cheek. "Thank you."

Kal blushed and his gaze slid around the room, stopping again on the floor. "I can't remember what happened. It's all a blur."

In a quiet voice, Mel asked, "Can you tell us what you do remember?"

"Uh...I remember running down the tunnel, holding Breeana." He glanced at her. "She was crying, begging to go back to you. I heard you scream—I wanted to go back...but I kept going. We came to a fork in the tunnel, and I couldn't remember which way to take. Then I heard demons behind us...then I was out of the mine, and all I thought about was killing the demons."

"He was like a vampire possessed," Black said. "He came flying out, screaming, and started slashing the bastards. One by one, boom, gone."

Mel turned to Soren. "What about you guys? What do you remember?"

Soren touched a deep, bloody gash on his forehead and cleared his throat. "As soon as you guys went in, the demons attacked. At first we held our own, but then they surrounded us. We flashed ourselves behind them, knocked off a few more, then the weirdest fucking thing happened."

Sin lit a cigarette and blew a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. He held his right arm close to his chest. Blood dripped off his fingers. "They stopped. Went still as goddamn statues, but for their eyes. Then Kal comes running out and starts hacking. We join in the fun and here we are. Alive."

Mel glanced at Ace. A long scratch ran from his temple to jaw. "Did you get your kill fix?"

Ace laughed. "And then some."

Breeana cleared her throat and slid out of Mel's arms. He felt an instant emptiness and wanted to snatch her back. He curbed his impulses and watched her as she gazed at the wounded warriors. Tears sparkled on the ends of her lashes.

She brushed at her eyes. "I can never thank you guys enough for what you did. For risking your lives for me."

Black's cheek grew red and he rubbed the top of his dark head. "No need. You're family."

"And a girl couldn't ask for a better one." She looked at Mel. "I love you."

He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss against her dry lips, then pulled her tight to his side. "How about we discuss this outside. I've about seen enough of this godforsaken hole."

"No arguments there," Sin replied.

As Mel and the others stepped out into the warm night, his eyes instantly raised to the sky. Above the tree line, the edges of the sky were just starting to lighten up. Dawn was approaching, fast.

He turned to the males. “We better talk back at the base, but first, blow up this shit-hole.”

Ace, smiled. “Leave it to me.”

“You three better move it,” Soren said. “Dawn's almost here and it looks like it's going to be explosive.”

The males laughed and disappeared one by one as Kal and Mel, with Breeana clutched tightly to his chest, made their way down the mountainside. They jogged through the thick timber to Kal's truck. When they reached it, a deep rumble shook the earth under their feet. They glanced up in time to see rocks and dust fill the navy blue sky.

Kal chuckled. “Well, that's our cue to vacate. Won't be long before humans are milling around this hill like ants, wondering what the fuck.”

Mel looked into Breeana's warm hazel eyes. She reached up and brushed a strand of hair away from his forehead. He kissed her. She smiled and burrowed deeper against him. Even though he couldn't recall everything that had occurred this evening, he knew it had been a miracle.

His smile grew into a wide grin. “Yeah. Let's go home.”

Chapter 35

Saturday July 4 9:25pm

Breeana puffed her cheeks and blew out a large breath. “Mel, I told you for the hundredth time, I’m fine.”

He eased down beside her on his bed and cupped her chin. “I just want the doctor to check you out.” He leaned in and placed a quick kiss on her lips.

She sighed and flopped back against the mountain of pillows. She folded her arms over her chest, agitated with the whole situation. “I’m telling you there’s nothing wrong with me. I feel great.”

And she did. She’d never felt better. After they arrived back at the base just before dawn, she’d fallen into a deep sleep and slept most of the day. She awoke refreshed and happy beyond words.

The only thing that marred this glorious evening was she couldn’t remember a damn thing past Kal running down the mine shaft while she screamed hysterically. After that, nothing.

Since waking, she’d tried to recall how they all made it out alive. How had Mel survived?

She peeked up at him through her lashes. There wasn’t a scratch on him. He seemed healthy, but he was acting strange, as if she would break if he touched her.

Clearing her throat, she plucked at his brown comforter. Tears stung her eyes. “What do you think happened last night? I can’t remember anything after Kal—”

Mel pulled her against his chest, wrapping his strong arms around her.

“Shhh, sweetheart. We’re safe. Nothing is going to hurt you again.”

“How did you—we—make it?”

He smoothed his hands over her shoulders. “I’m not sure. Disjointed thoughts and images come to me. If I focus too hard, they disappear. But whatever happened, I’m thankful. And instead of asking why and how, maybe we should just accept it for the miracle it is?”

“You're absolutely right,” she said.

His gray eyes lit up. “Have I told you in the last five minutes how much I love you?”

“If you love me so much, let me out of bed.”

He wagged a finger in her face. “Good try, but no deal. Doctor Johanson will be here in an hour. Once he gives you a clean bill of health, then maybe we'll talk about it.”

She flicked back the comforter and patted the sheets. “How about you climb in here with me and help pass the time?”

Desire clouded his eyes, turning them from gray to black. He stood and paced beside the bed. “Don't tempt me...please. Not until the doctor checks you out.”

She exhaled a loud frustrated huff. “Isn't he a vampire doctor? Last I checked I was still a human.” She touched her small canine teeth. “Nope. Still not a vampire.”

He laughed. “Smartass. Doctor Johanson knows as much about human health as a human doctor, so again, nice try.”

“Oh, well then,” she murmured and pulled the comforter back over her legs. “Isn't that just fanntastic.”

Mel moved around the room, picking up discarded clothes. He folded and neatly set them on top of the dresser.

Her eyes dropped to his butt, molded by his jeans, and desire coiled through her. She watched his big muscular body with appreciation as he continued tidying the room. A pleasurable ache built between her legs.

Damn, she wanted him, but knew his misguided need to make sure she was fine would get in the way. She needed to trick him.

She rubbed the side of her throat. “Mel? Is there something on my neck? It sort of hurts.”

He dropped his jacket and turned to her. “Why?” He rushed over and inspected her skin. “I don't see anything. Where exactly does it hurt?”

She rubbed the other side and moaned. “Now it's on this side.”

As he leaned over, she flung her arms around his neck and rolled him under her. She sat on his chest, trapping his arms above his head. Laughing at his wide-eyed expression, she said, “Gotcha.”

“You scared the shit outta me.”

Breeana kissed her way across his jaw and down his neck.

He groaned deep in his throat and rocked his hips off the bed.

She released his hands and he gripped her waist, sitting her flush on the stiff ridge of his cock. “Breeana.” He moaned again, closing his eyes. “Not until I know for certain you're all right.”

She punctuated each word with a kiss. “Nobody...knows...better...then I...how I feel.” Her tongue swept inside, exploring every inch of his mouth. His fingers clenched and unclenched against her hips. She nipped his lower lip before she straightened.

With a tug, she pulled her borrowed T-shirt over her head and smoothed her hands up her sides and cupped her breasts. Her thumbs flicked her nipples until they hardened.

His burning gaze was riveted on her breasts.

Drunk with sexual power, she ran her palm over her stomach, then touched herself between her thighs.

Mel growled, low and throaty, and his fangs slipped into view. His grip tightened. He pushed his erection against her bottom as his eyes, completely black now, narrowed. His breath wheezed in and out while his hips continued pumping up and down in a steady rhythm.

Perfect. He was good and trapped. She scooted down his body and pushed his T-shirt up around his neck. Her hungry gaze devoured the sight of his large pecs and broad shoulders.

Damn, he is well put together.

She grazed his flat nipples with her teeth. He hissed and arched off the bed.

Breeana kissed a path down his hard, rippled stomach. “Do you want me to stop?” She unbuttoned the button of his jeans and eased down the zipper. “If you do, then tell me now.”

If she wasn't so turned on, she would have laughed at the intense expression on his face. Wild desire flashed in his eyes, matching hers. His muscles contracted and he fisted the comforter. His only reply was deep ragged breathing. She tugged his pants down to his knees and peeled his boxers over his huge shaft. The head of his penis reached his navel, thick and hard, and it twitched with each harsh breath he took.

With both hands, she gripped him. A clear drop of moisture glazed the tip. She rubbed her thumb over it and his breath caught in his throat. Slowly, she bent forward and took him into her mouth. The exotic taste and scent of him made her dizzy.

His head kicked back against the pillows and he closed his eyes, a deep moan hissed past his clamped teeth.

She quickly found a rhythm that had him begging her not to stop. Licking and sucking, she brought him to the edge numerous times before he grabbed her shoulders and hauled her up his body. He gripped the back of her head, his fingers tangled in her hair, as his mouth plundered hers with wild, savage abandon.

He broke the kiss, stood, and tried to yank his jeans off. Breeana covered her mouth to hold back her laugh. In his frantic attempt to strip, he hopped around on one foot, his socks, pants, and boxers were a tangled mess around his ankles.

Finally naked, he knelt at the foot of the bed.

Her heart thrummed with excitement. “Did you like that?”

He ran his hands up her calves and parted her thighs. He lifted her foot, kissed the sole, and rested it on his shoulder. “I liked it too much.” He circled her swollen, wet flesh with a finger. “Now it's your turn.”

He leaned down and stroked his tongue up her center. The warm, velvety caress melted her body. She spread her legs wider, allowing him better access. His swirling tongue flicked and danced, driving her closer to ecstasy. She writhed, arching her back, getting lost in the overwhelming sensation. Intense arousal built as he sucked her clitoris into his mouth. Pleasure zinged through her like an electric shock, until she flew over the edge. His name tore from her lips as her body contracted with wave after wave of rapture. He continued flicking her sensitive nub, drawing out her release.

After a few more moments of tantalizing torture, he kissed her belly and knelt on the bed between her legs. He angled her hips upward and guided himself to her threshold. He pressed into her, inch by exquisite inch, until he was fully sheathed. His guttural moan filled the room.

Breeana grasped the comfort and groaned at the beautiful feeling of him buried deep within her. Giving herself over to the glorious sensation, she flung her arms over her head and closed her eyes. As he rode her, her arousal once more mounted to a fevered pitch. With each powerful thrust, the heat burned hotter, and the friction shot her higher.

She climaxed, yelling out his name.

Mel followed right behind her, his jaw clenched and his muscles strained as he coated her inner walls with hot liquid.

He collapsed on the bed, rolling to his side, taking her with him. She snuggled against his chest and listened to his racing heart. The tranquility of the moment brought tears to her eyes.

When her breathing returned to normal, she leaned her chin on his damp chest and stared at his handsome face. "See. I told you I was fine."

He cracked open one eye, his white teeth flashed in a wide grin. "Yeah, I could tell. The way you held me down, Christ, I think you're stronger than me."

She flexed her bicep. "And don't you forget it."

"Yes, Ma'am," he said with a laugh.

She laid her head back on his chest and closed her eyes. This was sheer heaven. There was only one thing that would make this moment even better. She needed to drink from him one more time to seal the deal, so no matter what the future held, they would always be together.

She leaned up on one elbow. "Mel, I would—"

A soft knock at the door stopped her.

He winked and rose from the bed. "Hold that thought." On his way to the door, he tugged on a pair of jeans.

"Yo, Mel? You awake?" Kal called.

She pulled the covers up to her chin as Mel opened the door.

"What's up?" Mel asked.

"Doc Johanson's here," Kal said. "Should I send him to your room?"

"Ah..." Mel glanced at her. "Just give us a minute would ya?"

Kal waved and smiled at her. "Sure. He can have a look at Sin's arm while he's waiting. Oh, Roarik and rest of the guys are here. Roarik wants to talk about last night."

"Tell them I'll be out in a minute." Mel closed the door and faced her.

Nerves started to hum in her gut. She wasn't one for visiting her own doctor, let alone a vampire doctor.

Mel walked over to his closet and pulled a shirt off the hanger. "Doctor Johanson is waiting outside."

"I heard."

"Nervous?"

Her voice dripped with sarcasm. "Uh...yeah."

"Seriously?"

"Wouldn't you be if you were me?" She slid from the bed and picked up her red robe. "How would you like to be examined by a *human* doctor?"

“You mean to tell me after everything you've just been through, being examined by a doctor makes you nervous?”

She thought about it and laughed. “Well, when you put it like that, it does seem silly; but I've never been one for doctors. But at least *my* doctor is a woman, and more importantly, she's a human.”

Another knock at the door made her jump. “Oh shit. That's probably him.” She yanked the robe on, belted it tight, and jumped back under the covers, pulling them over her head. When Mel laughed, she peeked out and scowled at him.

Still shaking his head, he moved toward the door. “Oh,” he said, stopping and turning to face her. “Doctor Johanson is a little...how shall I put this?”

“How about you just put it.”

“He's a little strange looking.”

She sat up straight. “What do you mean by, *strange looking?*”

“You'll see.” He grasped the knob, ready to open the door.

“Mel,” she hissed. “Don't you even think about leaving me alone with—”

He opened the door. “Good evening, Doc. Thanks for coming.” He stepped to the side and held the door wide.

“Good evening. I couldn't pass up an opportunity to examine a human,” Doctor Johanson said in a nasally voice. Pale blue eyes sparkled from behind black-framed glasses. She saw the tips of his fangs as he smiled.

Oh, my God! He looked more like a mad scientist than a doctor. Her eyes flew to Mel and she arched her brows in a silent question.

His soft chuckle floated across the room. “I'll be right outside if you need me.”

She shot forward, imploring him with her gaze. “Mel. Don't you dare leave—”

He chuckled again as he closed the door, leaving her alone with a vampire who looked like a young Einstein minus the stash.

Breeana eyed Doctor Johanson warily. His crumpled tan suit hung off his tall, lanky frame as if it was a size too big, and an orange tie was knotted loosely around his throat. White-blond hair stuck up around his head. All that was missing was a piece of tape in the center of his thick-framed glasses.

That and a pocket protector.

He placed his medical bag on the bedside table as he continued to stare at her like she was a bug under a microscope. “So, you are in need of a check-

up?”

“I guess so,” she muttered, clutching the blankets tighter.

Doctor Johanson took out a pair of latex gloves from his pocket and pulled them on with a loud snap. He then pulled out a perfectly normal-looking blood pressure cuff from his bag.

He reached for her hand. “We'll start with your blood pressure, shall we?”

Uncurling her fingers from their tight grip on the comforter, she raised her arm. He clasped it within his soft, gentle hands, shoved up her sleeve, and strapped the cuff around her bicep. He squeezed the pump until she felt the cuff constrict her blood flow. He pressed his stethoscope against the crease of her arm.

Huh. So far, normal.

She looked at his pale head bent to his task. His hair was so fine and pallid she could see his pink scalp underneath.

He glanced up and smiled when he caught her staring. She swallowed.

“Your blood pressure is a little high, but that's likely because you're nervous.”

“I am,” she whispered.

“Ah, most are.” He patted her arm, then tore the cuff off with a loud rip and set it aside. “I hear you are a veterinarian?”

“Yes.”

“We are kindred spirits, you and I. We both repair the sick and injured.”

She laughed. “I guess we are.”

Throughout the examination, he continued making small talk, asking her questions about her practice, her life, and before long, she relaxed.

As he drew blood, she asked, “What made you become interested in studying humans?”

He slipped the needle from her vein and placed a piece of gauze on her arm. “Hold this please.” He turned to his medical bag and shrugged. “I find humans fascinating.”

“You do?”

“Does that surprise you?”

“A little.”

“Vampires, medically speaking, are boring. We rarely become sick, and if we do, it is usually treatable with little effort. Humans on the other hand, can and do become sick so easily, and most illnesses take detective work to diagnose.”

He wrote her name on a white label and stuck it to the vial of her blood. A crazy urge to laugh welled up as she wondered if he would take a sip. “Yeah, I guess. From what Mel told me, vampires' immune systems are very strong.”

He nodded. “With all that can go wrong with humans, it's a wonder your species has survived. And not only has it survived, it has flourished.”

His face lit up as he spoke. She wondered if his expression of joy was the same look a human scientist might get when he or she studied a subject they found captivating.

“What I find most amazing about your species,” he continued. “Is how easily you adapt to most situations. And your brains are truly a marvel of nature.”

“You really think so? Why?”

“Look at all the wonderful inventions your kind has created throughout history. No vampire I've read about has ever invented anything that's changed the world as we know it.”

Breana leaned back. “Wow. It sounds like you really like and respect humans.”

“I could study your kind for the rest of my natural life and still never learn all there is to know. Like I said, your species is quite remarkable. I would have loved nothing more than to have studied alongside your human doctors and scientists.”

A look of sadness crossed his face and he heaved a weary sigh. “But alas, that shall never be. What a shame it is our species are so distant.”

She placed a hand on his forearm. “You're right. It is a shame. Both our species would be better off if we worked together as friends—as equals.”

He covered her hand and squeezed gently. “You're right, my dear. The world might not be such a mess, eh? Now then. When was your last period?”

Her face filled with blood and she glanced away, even though his question was a legitimate question a doctor would ask.

She chewed her bottom lip, trying to recall when it was.

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Her last period had been about three weeks before she met Mel. And if her calculations were correct, she should have had her period during the first week she was with him. So, if that was the case, she was two weeks late.

Her mouth snapped closed and her heart sped up. Could she be pregnant? Her cycles were always on schedule, but she had been under a tremendous amount of stress and that could delay it.

Panic lurked in the background, waiting to pounce.

Her eyes flicked to Doctor Johanson waiting patiently for her to reply. She swallowed hard and rubbed her forehead, which suddenly throbbed. “Uh, maybe about...six or seven weeks ago.”

“Six or seven weeks? I know that is not a normal human female cycle—unless you could be pregnant?”

The look of hope in his eye was almost comical.

“But I thought a pregnancy between the two was rare?” she asked.

“Rare, but not unheard of.” He rummaged through his bag, then faced her once more. He held a blue and pink box out to her. “I have heard these are quite accurate.”

She read the words *Home Pregnancy Test* and almost fainted.

What if she was? How would Mel feel about becoming a father?

All of this was happening too fast.

Doctor Johanson lifted his glasses and squinted at the instruction on the side of the box. “I believe you urinate on the stick, and whalla. We will know within a few minutes. I will of course check our findings at my lab, but for now, this will give us a good indication if you are or not.”

Breeana wrapped numb fingers around the box, slid off the bed, and walked into the bathroom. She closed the door and leaned against it, looking at her reflection. Her skin was pale except for a dark bruise on her jaw. Tears shimmered on her lashes.

The words of the prophecy filled her mind. *The two shall make one.*

If she was pregnant, was her and Mel's child destined to be one of the saviors spoken of in the prophecy?

Couldn't be, since he didn't have the mark. But something told her vampires didn't need it, only the humans. She didn't know how she could be so certain, she just was.

Sighing, she opened the box and read the instructions. She wanted to laugh for it seemed so easy for such a complicated matter.

When she finished, she walked back into the bedroom, laid the stick on the bedside table, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Her eyes kept moving to the red numbers on the clock radio, but they seemed to have stuck in place.

Her mind churned; thoughts coming to her from all angles like a swarm of angry bees. Thoughts of Mel and how he would react—how she felt about becoming a mother to a vampire—to a future warrior.

She buried her face in her hands, trying to come to grips with the real possibility she was pregnant. All the signs were there. She just hadn't put two and four together before now: missed period, nauseous in the mornings, tired, and swollen, sensitive breasts.

Her heart slowed to a steady crawl. She was pregnant. She didn't need the stick to confirm it.

“Congratulations, my dear,” Doctor Johanson said. “You're pregnant.”

Breeana looked at the doctor's smiling face. Of course he was happy. He'd soon have a half-breed to study.

With a shaky hand, she took the stick he offered. A blue plus sign glared back at her.

Groaning, she handed it to him. Her vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. She swiped them away but it was no use, they just keep coming.

Doctor Johanson knelt in front of her, placing a hand on her knee. When she glanced at his face, her tears flowed faster.

“Are you all right, my dear?” The concern she heard in his voice choked her up even more. “Are you not happy with this news?”

She thought about that and realized she *was* happy. Shocked, yes, but thrilled. Elated. What concerned her was if Mel would be upset.

Clearing her clogged throat, she whispered, “I'm happy. It's just...I'm nervous about the father's reaction.”

He patted her knee and stood. “Don't worry. Mel is going to be thrilled. Would you like me to call him in for you?”

“Ah...could you give me a moment please? I just need to let this sink in.”

“Of course. Take all the time you need.” He busied himself placing his medical supplies back into his bag.

Maybe Doctor Johanson was right? Maybe Mel would be thrilled.

A giddy, warm feeling starting from her heart, spread throughout her body. She closed her eyes, recalling the vision she had a few weeks ago of Mel holding his baby. If it's a boy, she hoped he looked exactly like him. Black hair. Silver gray eyes—

A soft knock sounded at the door, pulling her back to reality.

Her eyes jumped to Doctor Johanson's.

“That will be Mel,” he said. “Shall I let him in?”

She nodded, keeping her eyes glued to the floor.

“So, how is she,” she heard Mel ask as he walked in. She glanced up. His stare devoured her. A stare full of questions, and love. He smiled, but stayed standing just inside the doorway with his hands inside the front pockets of his jeans.

“She's doing wonderfully.” Doctor Johanson picked up his bag and went to stand beside Mel. He turned to her. “Mel knows my number so if you need anything, don't hesitate to call. Also, I would like to see you in about two weeks. Just phone the office to set up an appointment.”

Her gaze flicked nervously to Mel, then back to the floor. Nodding, she murmured, “I will, and thank you.”

“I'll let myself out.” Doctor Johanson closed the door behind him.

The bed dipped as Mel sat beside her. His arms circled her waist, gathering her close. She clung to him as she buried her face against his chest.

He lifted her chin, searching her eyes with his. “I'm glad to hear you're fine, but you seem upset.”

She brushed a strand of black hair off his forehead. “I told you I was fine.”

He flashed her a warm, but shaky grin. “Yeah, you did. Now, are you going to tell me what's wrong?”

Her heart flipped flopped and she glanced away. “Well, there is something, but I don't think you can say it's something...wrong.”

She moved out of his embrace and stood, making her way over to the dresser. She stared down at the objects discarded on top: jumble of keys, loose coins, a pair of folded socks, and one of his daggers. Placing her hands over her middle, she whispered, “I'm pregnant.”

His silence wasn't a huge surprise. She let a few more moments pass, then gathered her courage to glance over her shoulder.

He grinned, ear to ear.

Hope bloomed in her chest. “Are you happy?”

“Am I happy?” He laughed out loud. “Happy doesn't even begin to cover how I feel. Ecstatic maybe, or blown away. Or how about this, I'm so goddamn happy I want to shout it out to the world!” He sobered and stared hard into her eyes. “Maybe a better question would be, are you happy?”

“Oh, Mel.” She ran to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. She planted kisses all over his face. “I love you so much, and yes, I'm happy. I

was just afraid you weren't going to be.”

“How could you think for one second I wouldn't be happy?” He framed her face and kissed her tenderly. “I love you, Breeana. You are my everything.”

She cried, tears of joy and love.

He dried her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs, then laid her back on the bed and kissed her flat abdomen. He glanced up at her with a loving smile. “I'm going to be a dad.”

“Yep. And I'm going to be mom.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “I love the sound of that. Mom.”

He rubbed her belly and kissed her neck. “We need to celebrate this happy occasion. How about for starters, we take a walk around the gardens?”

She crossed her arms behind her head. Joy and contentment filled her until she thought she'd bust. To think a few short weeks ago she was lonely, believing she'd never find the man of her dreams except in books. Now, not only did she find him, she was living her own romance.

But there was still one dark cloud hanging over them that needed to be taken care of before the sun shone clear and bright.

She circled his sexy lips with a finger. “I'd love to, but first there is one thing we need to take care of.”

His eyes darkened and he leaned in, nuzzling her throat. “Oh, we'll be taking care of that real soon.”

She giggled and pushed his head back. “Uh, that wasn't what I was referring to.”

He arched a dark brow. “Oh? What then?”

“How soon they forget.” She picked up his hand and brought his wrist to her mouth. She swirled her tongue over his blue vein and gently nipped his skin. “Ring any bells?”

His face closed up. “Maybe you shouldn't drink from me anymore.” He sat up, swinging his long legs over the edge of the bed, sitting with his back to her.

“Why?” She pulled herself up and jumped off the bed and stood in front of him with her hands on her hips. “Well?”

His eyes were once again dull, and desperation and sadness filled his voice. “You're having our baby and someone needs to be around for him or her.”

She knew exactly what he meant and she was sick to death of his gloom and doom talk. “Planning on going somewhere?”

“What? No. It's just that my job is dangerous. And well—”

Breeana jabbed a finger against his chest. “Don't even think of using our baby as an excuse. Don't you get it yet? We belong together. We're soul mates. And nothing is going to happen to either one of us. I don't know how I can be so sure, but I am. Maybe because we are part of something bigger than you and me. Our child is destined for something bigger. And no matter what happens, we're in this together. Forever.”

She gripped his hand again and brought his wrist to his mouth. “You either bite or I'll cut you with a knife. Your choice, but either way, I'm drinking your blood.”

After a brief moment of silence, a wicked smile played across his lips. His fangs slid down, and with his eyes holding hers captive, he pierced his vein. “You're right.” He offered her his wrist. “We are destined to be together, forever. Even in death.”

She licked off his blood that trickled down his arm. The sweet taste tingled on her tongue. She closed her mouth over the punctures and drank greedily.

As the warm liquid flowed down her throat like sweet wine, euphoria filled her. From this moment on, they would forever be together.

He bent close and whispered, “I love you.”

Chapter 36

Mel walked beside Breeana, holding her hand as they wandered slowly through the moonlit gardens. He glanced down at her dark head and smiled, recalling how determined she had been to seal their bond. And he had to admit, knowing they'd follow each other throughout eternity gave him peace.

Mind you, ever since they made it out of the mines, a strange sense of peace had settled over him. The resentment, guilt, and self-doubt were gone. Even when he conjured up painful memories, his usual reactions to them were absent.

When Breeana had interrupted his half-hearted attempt to talk her out of drinking from him—saying they belonged together—he knew without a doubt she spoke the truth. Just like he had somehow known she carried their child.

Earlier this afternoon when he phoned Doctor Johanson to set up an appointment for Breeana, he had asked the Doc to purchase a home pregnancy test. And the test confirmed his hunch.

Mel pulled her against his side and kissed the top of her silky head. She smiled up at him and leaned her head against his shoulder. He smoothed his hand over the indent of her waist, resting it protectively over her belly where their child lay sheltered within the walls of her womb.

A father.

The thought sent his heart soaring. And at this very moment he felt blessed, and more loved and cherished than he could ever have hoped for.

“Oh, hey, good news,” she said, breaking the spell he was under. “I called Carol to tell her we'd be by later to get my things, and I don't think she has been down to the cottage. At least she didn't say anything about the hole in the wall.”

“Ah, sorry about that. I'll bring some drywall mud and patch it up.”

She patted his hand laid over her stomach. “Don't apologize. Under the circumstances, I'm surprised you didn't rip the whole house apart.”

He tucked her closer. Life sure was full of surprises. Last evening, he'd thought his life was over. And now—less than twenty-four hours later—he had everything: the woman he loved and a child on the way. A real family.

Mel shook his head, glad he was nowhere near a mirror. He didn't need to see the big goofy grin he knew was plastered on his face.

“What's with the big grin?” Breeana asked.

He shrugged, smiling down into her lovely hazel eyes. “I'm just happy.” He stopped walking and pulled her body flush against his. “You make me happy; and for the first time in my life, I'm not afraid it will all be taken from me, or that I don't deserve it.”

She reached up and tugged his mouth down to hers. Her tongue slipped past his lips and tangled with his. He groaned and deepened the contact.

Breathing heavily, she pulled back and smoothed his brow with cool fingertips. “You deserve happiness, Mel. You more than anyone I know. And I'm glad I make you happy, because you're stuck with me for all eternity. Think you can handle that?”

He laughed. “Darling, I've been waiting for you all my life.”

“Good, because I'm not going anywhere.” She snuggled back into his embrace.

The moon shone on her hair and the scent of roses filled the night air. Happiness and love overwhelmed him. Tears stung his eyes. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision. “Breeana, will you marry me?”

She stepped back, holding herself at arm's length. Her gaze brimmed with love, making her eyes shine brighter than the stars. “Yes,” she finally whispered before launching herself back into his arms. Hot tears dampened his shirt.

“Yes. A million times, yes!” She leaned up on her toes and frowned. “But I can't believe I agreed to marry you and I don't even know what my new last name is going to be.”

Laughing at that, he declared, “Not to worry. Warriors don't have last names. I'm called Mel, from the twenty-sixth family.”

She scrubbed her forehead, clearly confused. “So, what you're telling me is I'll be Breeana from the twenty-sixth family?”

He shook his head and laughed again. “No. Your name will be Breeana, much loved wife of Mel from the twenty-sixth family.”

“Lucky I like my last name because it looks like I'm stuck with it.”

Mel folded his arms over his chest and frowned, but a smile danced at the corner of his lips. "I can't believe I asked you to marry me and I didn't even know your last name. By the way, what is it?"

"Spencer."

"Ah, nice honorable name."

"I don't know about honorable, but I like it." She ran her hands up his arms, over his shoulders, and through his hair. "I guess our child will be named, *Blank*, from the twenty-sixth family?"

Mel draped an arm around her shoulders and steered her slowly down the path. "Our child will be named *Blank* Spencer from the twenty-sixth family."

She remained quiet, apparently thinking it through. At length, she glanced up. "I like it. Now that sounds honorable."

They walked in silence until they came upon the hidden bench where he had told her about his horrendous past. He gazed at it, and suddenly, his dream of Breeana came back to him with such clarity it stopped his heart.

This was the place. This little grotto hidden amongst tall maple trees, surrounded by a riot of blooming flowers was where his vision had taken place.

He had arrived.

"There's something I need to buy to complete my dream," he said.

"What's that?"

He framed her face. "An outdoor swing chair."

"You know, I've always wanted one." She turned and looked at the bench. "And this will be such a lovely spot to put it."

"It has to have a red cushion."

Breeana laced her fingers with his. "Your favorite color."

The love and happiness on her face took his breath away. As he stared into her eyes, his mind once again drifted back to his dreams of her and what he now knew was their child. It all became clear. All these years he'd been witnessing his happy future, and the fulfillment of love's prophecy.

About the Author

Brenda Dyer lives in the small town of Sooke on Vancouver Island, located off the west coast of beautiful British Columbia with her wonderful husband and two sons.

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