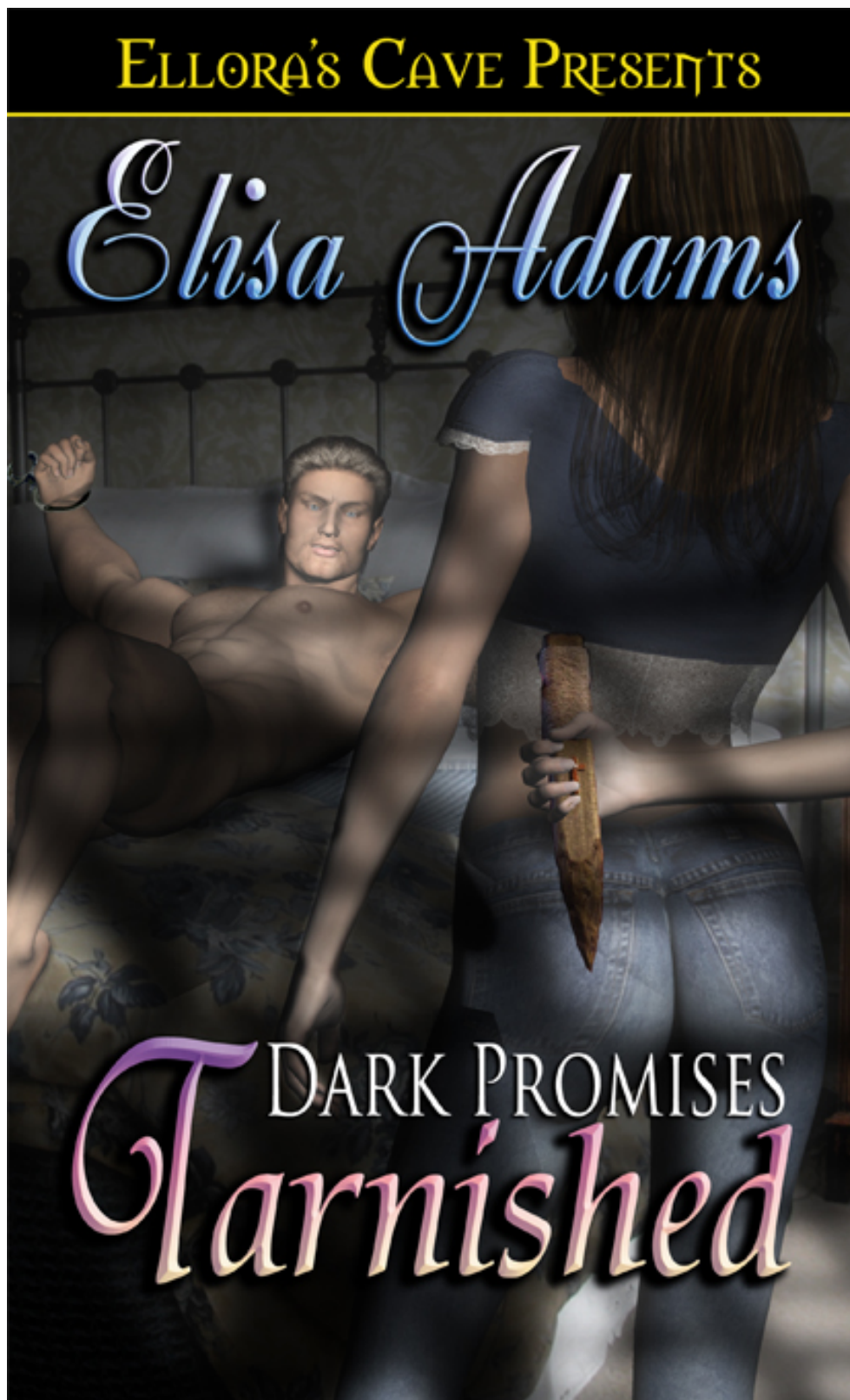


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Elisa Adams

DARK PROMISES
Tarnished



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Tarnished

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TARNISHED

Elisa Adams

Chapter One

"Cash only." Wil slid the check back across the table into the hands of the short, round man who'd tried to play him for a fool. Hadn't Rex learned by now that it was a mistake to mess with him? If not, he'd be learning that hard lesson soon. One of these days Wil was going to lose his patience with the man, and then Rex would be in a lot of trouble. "I believe I made it quite clear over the phone. I don't accept personal checks, especially not for this amount. You're a businessman. I'm sure you understand it's a risk that isn't worth taking. And I also made it quite clear I wanted all of the money. I don't do payment plans. You agreed to my terms, if I'm not mistaken."

"You never told me the terms weren't negotiable. In the past we've never had trouble coming up with a decent compromise."

"That was the past. Things are different now."

Bass-heavy music pounded through the dark-paneled room, the clink of glasses and endless chatter of the bar customers adding to the din. The stale stench of beer and hard liquor permeated the smoke-filled air. It overloaded his senses, made his stomach churn. It was enough to make him want to rip his hair out. How the others could stand it was beyond him.

His gaze scanned the room, an old habit that was hard to break after spending quite a few years as a police detective. Another thing he'd decided to leave in the past. The dim track lighting would make it difficult for humans to see very far in front of them. Luckily Wil didn't have that problem.

He'd chosen a small booth near the back, a seat that gave him a clear view of most of the room. It served two purposes that night. The first, to make sure no one would be able to sneak up on him. He wouldn't put it past Rex to send one of his goons after him when the man couldn't come up with the money. And second, it put the bar in his direct line of sight. He had a few reasons for wanting to keep his eyes on that area.

His gaze fell on the nearly naked woman dancing on the bar a few dozen feet away. His mouth watered at the sight of her dark thighs and the generous swell of her breasts, completely exposed to him—and every other patron. But she wasn't looking at anyone else. She was shooting glances in *his* direction, giving *him* secretive smiles. He'd love nothing more than to take her up on her unspoken offer. A night of wild, rough sex. Exactly what he needed. No attachments, no emotions, because he didn't do either one. But first he had a fee to collect, and a job to do that was so much more important than that.

Now if Rex would just hurry up and produce the cash he'd promised, they could both move on with their lives. Wil had been too long without a woman, and the thought of sinking his teeth into the cocoa skin of the dancer was driving him to distraction.

Fresh night air would do his foggy mind wonders, but he didn't dare leave. Not yet. Not without Ellie's little sister.

His gaze left the woman on the bar for a brief second to spare a glance at the woman standing behind it. One of the five bartenders Rex kept on his staff. With the exception of the bouncers, a staff comprised entirely of women.

Rebecca Louise Holmes—Becca. Age twenty-one. Five feet ten, a hundred and thirty pounds. He knew everything about her, from her shoe size to her blood type—the latter of which he found infinitely more interesting. Ellie had provided him with all the information he'd needed to find her, and after an extensive search, he had. In Pennsylvania, of all places. In the midsize town of Ardon, home to about ten thousand people and at least ten times more trees. Not a place he'd want to stay for any length of time. He preferred the anonymity of a larger city, where people didn't know their neighbors across the hall, and they didn't care.

Seeing Becca had been what caught his attention when he'd first walked into the bar a week ago. She'd been standing in a darkened corner of the room, her body clad in black leather pants and a tight white tank top. She was braless, her dusky areolas clearly visible through the thin material. She looked much the same tonight, though the tank top was red, made of some shiny, stretchy material he'd love to rip from her body. He had yet to see her legs, to see if those fantasy-inspiring pants had made a second appearance. She glanced over at him and his mouth went dry.

A mass of wild, glossy black curls fell to just past her breasts. Skin so fair and delicate every thin blue vein was visible just below the surface. Big blue eyes bore right into him with a strange, cold interest and full lips tipped up in a knowing smile as her gaze raked his body. He had to remind himself to breathe. He'd met her kind before. Indulged in more than a few women like her.

A woman who knew what she wanted, and wasn't afraid to take it. She could take *him* any day. His cock hardened at the thought, pressed tight against the zipper of his jeans. Becca Holmes was every vampire's wet dream, and it hit him like a punch in the gut. Ellie should have warned him that her sister was so damned sexy. And dangerous. There was something about her that warned him to stay away. Some intangible instinct that told him she'd only bring him a world of trouble. Good thing he'd never been one to play by the rules.

He shook his head. He'd have to play it straight this one time. As far as he was concerned, any other single woman in the bar was fair game. But not Becca. Ellie was worried about her little sister being able to take care of herself? She had no reason to be. Everything about this woman screamed *independent*. To the extreme. But he'd promised Ellie he would check up on her sister, make sure she was okay.

She wasn't. She was in over her head, whether she knew it yet or not. Around this place, a woman's independence only lasted so long. Working for Rex ultimately led to any woman's downfall. He wasn't a typical employer. He hired women only, and not just as waitresses and bartenders. A twisted cult, his own personal harem of brainwashed women to dote on him. Wil had suspected something was wrong in the

past when he'd done business with Rex, so this time he'd done his research. His contacts had explained the situation to Wil in very plain terms. It made him sick.

And Ellie's sister was right in the middle of it. It wouldn't be long before Rex had his hooks in Becca like he had with most of his other employees. He added them to his...collection, and once they were in he rarely let them go. Wil had to get Becca out before it was too late. From the looks of things, she wasn't going to make it easy.

Rex cleared his throat, drawing Wil's attention back to the matter at hand. "I might have been able to get cash for you, if you hadn't demanded it a night early. You didn't give me until the deadline we'd agreed to."

Wil's smile widened, but he didn't allow any friendliness to seep into the expression. Rex didn't deserve pleasantries, and he didn't deserve lenience. Once Becca was in a safe place, the whole operation would be shut down. One way or another, Wil would see to it personally.

"I value the element of surprise. Nice place you've got here, Rex. It must bring in a load of money every night."

Money that Wil intended to take a chunk of before he left. He only worked free for friends—which was a policy he might have to change soon. Working for a friend was what had brought him to Pennsylvania to begin with. Most of the people who'd met him would swear he didn't have a conscience at all, but somewhere over the years he'd developed one. It was an annoyance at best, one he couldn't seem to rid himself of no matter how hard he tried.

"Celia has been treating you well as usual, I hope." Rex gestured to the small, redheaded waitress who had brought Wil the drink he had yet to touch.

"Of course. As usual," he murmured.

"I have to say, I'm surprised at your choice of drinks tonight. Wouldn't you prefer something a little more...to your tastes?"

"This is fine." He tipped the glass to his lips and took a small sip for effect. Whiskey would have to do for now, though Rex's offer sounded more palatable. Becca was tending bar, and he'd been warned she had a strong aversion to his kind. No sense alerting her so soon. He'd have plenty of time for that later.

"I told Celia to let you have whatever you wanted, on the house."

He raised his eyebrows. That idea held some interesting possibilities. "Is *she* included?"

Rex followed Wil's gaze to the dancer on the bar. "Monique? No. Sorry. She's one of the few not included. Her husband wouldn't appreciate it."

Damn. It figured. He might not have the highest moral standards, but he drew the line at fucking another man's wife. He'd have to find another way to amuse himself. Once the job was finished. The first thing on his list was to get Becca safely away from Rex, and then collect the money owed to him and disband Rex's little group. After that,

he'd have plenty of time to find a willing woman and play. "Well, then. I suppose we should get down to business."

Rex nodded. "It's ten thousand, right?"

Was ten thousand. Not this time. What a fool the man was. He didn't understand the power that Wil held over him. Did he want to end up dead? "Twenty. And I told you already, no checks. It's cash only."

"I was hoping —"

"Save yourself the trouble. It's cash or nothing. If I don't get what I want, you're going to be out of luck. You hired me on specific terms. If you can't fulfill your part of the bargain, things will get ugly."

Rex snatched up the check, his gaze on the table as he folded the blue watermarked paper and stuffed it into the front pocket of his starched shirt. He leaned forward and met Wil's gaze. A muscle in his jaw ticked. "Maybe we can work out a deal."

Wil let out a frustrated breath. How he hated dealing with moronic humans who couldn't understand the simple terms of an agreement. He'd gotten the vampires off Rex's back. The least the man could do was pay him what they'd agreed upon. He lifted his crystal glass and took another small sip of the whiskey, savoring the pungent flavor as he waited for an answer. By the time he set the glass down, Rex's face was a deathly shade of pale and his lips were pinched.

Wil leaned forward in his chair, one elbow propped on the table, and smiled at Rex. The man seemed to relax. Big mistake. He really had no idea what he was dealing with. He might have thought he knew, but Wil could pretty much guarantee the guy was wrong. A vampire, yes, but a vampire with connections. Connections to beings whose names weren't often spoken out loud. And Wil, in the interest of doing his job to the best of his ability, had a little collection of his own. Not women, though, like Rex. Weapons of the most unusual and deadly kind. He always carried a few when he traveled, if possible, just in case he needed them. This time he most likely would.

"No deals. No checks. No more fooling around. I want my money, Rex, and I want it now. If you don't have it, I'm going to have to hurt you."

Rex scooted back against the booth, abject terror flashing in his eyes. "I don't have it. Yet. But I can get it."

A lie. The man had never planned on paying for services rendered. Wil didn't take kindly to being screwed. Not unless it involved a beautiful woman naked in his bed. Then he was up for anything. But in business, he had a zero tolerance policy.

"You'd better think of a solution fast, Rex." He pulled a small knife out of the pocket of his jacket and flipped the blade out of the ornate sterling silver case, keeping it close to his chest so as not to attract any unwanted attention. "Because you're about two seconds away from losing a body part."

"I mean it, Wil. I'll get the money. It will just take me a day or two, a week at most."

Right. Rex was a sniveling coward and a pathological liar. He'd run away before he made good on his promise.

And that was exactly what Wil had been counting on.

He'd known Rex for years, had been doing jobs for the man whenever he passed through town, so he knew enough about the man to know he wouldn't have the money on time. Wil had doubled his usual fee in hopes Rex would offer him something else. Getting rid of a couple vampires who'd been threatening Rex had been a side job, something to bide his time until he made certain his real quarry was in sight. Now he just had to find a way to get her out without making a scene. Rex was going to help him out with that, but he didn't know it yet.

"What do you want to lose first?"

"Wait. I might have the perfect solution."

Wil raised an eyebrow, but didn't put down the knife. He already knew what Rex would offer. He'd given Wil the same offer after their first business dealing. Wil had turned him down then, but he had a good reason to accept now. "Start talking."

"I'll offer you some collateral until I can get the cash."

"No, thanks. I'm not interested in the deed to your house or your club. They're probably over-mortgaged and not worth anything."

"Not property, Brogan." Rex finally smiled, and it was a scary sight. His teeth were yellowed and crooked, half of them cracked or chipped. "I'm offering you a chance at part of my private collection. Your choice, to do with as you wish until I deliver you the cash."

"Collection? Can you be a little more specific? I'm not interested in antiques."

"Women, Brogan. Women. I'm sure you remember. It hasn't been that long since I showed you around my house. I've seen you in here eyeing the women here every night for the past week. Most of them are available to you. You can have your pick. Whichever one you want."

Wil snorted, feigning indifference when Rex's offer couldn't have been more perfect. Rex had just handed him the way to get Becca out without making a scene, and the idiot hadn't even noticed. "I don't need your help finding a woman, Rex."

Rex's smile grew placating. "I didn't insinuate that you did. But trust me on this. I only keep the finest women. You've sampled one or two. You know what I mean. You're welcome to any one of them."

Too bad the one he wanted wasn't part of that collection. She worked for Rex, tended bar, but was free to go when her shift was over. It was going to take some convincing.

"I want her. The bartender," he told Rex, his gaze drifting back to the bar.

"She's not mine to give."

"I don't care. She's the one I want."

"What about Celia? You've always had fun with her in the past. Why not a week alone with her? She asks about you often. She'd be more than willing."

She'd bore him after a few nights of the same old thing. And she wasn't the one he'd promised to take care of. Tonight, his decision was about more than sex. "No. Not Celia. Not anyone else. *She's* the one I want. Make it happen, Rex."

He flashed Rex another humorless grin and tipped the knife in the other man's direction.

"Okay. Okay. Give me ten minutes and I'll see what I can do."

"Don't disappoint me, Rex."

If he did, Wil would have to think of another plan.

* * * * *

"Can I talk to you for a minute, Becca?"

Becca grabbed a small white towel and wiped down the surface of the bar. "What can I do for you, Rex? Your guest need another drink?" She gestured with her chin to the man sitting in the booth Rex had just left.

Her stomach quivered just looking at him. She'd bring that guy any drink he wanted, all night long. She'd noticed him a week ago, the first night he'd walked into the bar like he owned the place. Cocky and arrogant, and the waitresses all seemed to bow down to everything the guy wanted. She didn't blame them. He was hot, with a capital everything.

Probably just a hair over six feet, his shoulders were broad enough to fill out his black leather jacket very nicely. His hair was short but a little shaggy. Shiny, a little wavy, and nearly raven in color. His eyes were a cool cornflower blue—she'd noticed them one time when their gazes locked as he'd passed the bar. Blue and stunning in a way that made butterflies come to life in her stomach. And then there was that magnetism about him. She was drawn to him, no doubt about it. For a couple different reasons. He'd be a great lay, no doubt about it.

She licked her lips. All in all, he was one hell of a package and she wouldn't mind getting her hands on him. But it wasn't only sex she had in mind.

"We have a problem." Rex's voice dragged her from her wayward thoughts.

She propped her hip against the bar and crossed her arms over her chest. "And what would that be?"

"My guest."

She sighed. She'd figured as much. As appealing as he was, he couldn't be trusted. If Rex had come to her first, this whole mess could have been avoided.

"What's wrong?"

"He wants his money. Tonight."

"And you don't have it."

He leaned over the bar, his eyes flashing fire. "Of course I don't have it. He wasn't supposed to be here until tomorrow."

"Would that have made a difference?" She shot another glance to where Rex's *guest* sat. "Would you really have had the money for him if he'd shown up tomorrow instead of today?"

Rex's downcast eyes and slumped shoulders said it all. She sighed. "Rex, I don't even know him but I could tell you he's not the kind of guy you mess with. Are you trying to get yourself killed? What did you even need him to do for you, anyway?"

He didn't meet her gaze. "I had him get rid of some vampires who were causing trouble around here. I needed it done before someone got hurt."

Her temper flared, but she held it in check. Exploding in rage wouldn't help anyone's cause. Especially her own. "Why did you bring in outside help? You have people on your staff trained to do that sort of thing. Quite a few."

"There were five of them, huge and out-of-control. Bent on taking what belongs to me. There's no way I'd send a human woman to take care of them. Wil is their kind, and he knows what he's doing. I figured he was more suitable for the job."

"He has a reputation in certain circles. I'll give him that. He doesn't take kindly to being screwed over."

"I know that. This is where you come in. I need you to do something for me. Take care of him for me before I lose my business. Or my life."

She glanced in the guest's direction again. He was looking right at her in a way that made her knees want to buckle. She let out a breath filled with pent-up frustration. It had been a few weeks since she'd any fun. Why not now? She sent Wil a slow, heated smile before she turned her attention back to Rex. "Okay. I'm in."

* * * * *

True to his word, Rex came back to the table in less than ten minutes. He slid into the booth across from Wil. "She'll go home with you tonight. That's all she's agreed to. Keeping her there until I get the money together is up to you."

Wil couldn't help the smile that spread over his face. Part one of his task was complete. The rest would be so simple he could have entrusted it to a child. "Thanks, Rex. Don't make me regret giving you a second chance."

"I won't. Believe me, I won't." Rex returned Wil's smile with a bright one of his own. "You take her back to where you're staying. I have your cell phone number. I'll contact you as soon as I get the money. It won't be a problem now."

Now what was that all about? Rex's anxiety seemed to be cut in half. Did he really think this was going to work out in his favor? If he did, the man had another think coming. With a last warning glare to Rex, Wil stood, threw a twenty down on the table to cover his bill and a nice tip for Celia, and headed across the room. He stopped at the bar and slid onto one of the barstools.

She turned to him, her blue eyes sparking both heat and amusement. "Something I can get for you?"

"Rex sent me over."

"So I've been told." Her gaze mocked him, but drew him at the same time. His gut clenched tight, his cock jerked at the thought of what she could do with that smart mouth.

She'd be open to a little casual sex. He saw it in her eyes. Of course, she had no idea who he was. If she was any other woman, he'd jump at the chance to take her to bed. But this particular woman...she was off limits.

In his next breath, he was negating that. Yeah, right. She wanted him. He wanted her. What the hell was the problem again?

Her eyes were bright, enticing and mysterious. Seducing. They captivated him in a way no other's had in centuries. He had to know her, to feel her, to be inside her. Ellie had known he wasn't noble when she hired him. Known she was taking her chances. Then again, she didn't know the woman her sister had grown into.

Becca's smile turned enigmatic. She stepped around the bar and walked his way, stopping inches in front of him. "You've been in here before."

He glanced down at her, noted the pants had *not* made a second appearance. In their place she wore a black leather miniskirt and a pair of thigh-high black leather boots with high heels and laces up the front. His brow broke out in a cold sweat. "Yes."

"What brings you in here tonight?"

"You." It wasn't a lie, though he didn't spell out for her the real reason for his visit.

"I don't go home with strangers." She said the words, but her smile didn't fade and she made no move to walk away.

So she wanted to play hard to get. It irritated him, but there was nothing he could do past lifting her over his shoulder and carrying her out of the bar. Given that such an act would likely get him arrested, he bit back the sudden and decidedly archaic urge. He held out his hand. "I'm Wil."

"Becca."

Her hand slipped into his, her fingers warm. She held on a beat too long—just enough time to make his senses go haywire. It took all his control to keep his voice even.

"Now we're not strangers anymore."

Her deep, husky laugh sent a tremor through him and hardened his cock even more. Another minute of this torture and he'd need a new zipper on his pants. "Wanna dance with me, Wil?"

"I don't dance."

"You do tonight."

Shit. He was supposed to be taking care of her, bringing her home to her family, but there were so many more appealing things he'd rather be doing. Like her. All night long. "Honey, the only dancing I plan to be doing involves getting naked with you."

She said nothing to his comment, but luckily she didn't slap him. Rex must have done a better job convincing her than he'd first thought.

She glanced around the room before bringing her gaze back to him. "I've seen you watching me this week."

"You fascinate me."

"More like I make you horny."

"That too." He put his thumb under her chin, turned her face up to meet his gaze. It startled him to find nothing but heat in her eyes. He usually scared most women away just by looking at them a certain way—something he had yet to learn how to control and probably never would. But she didn't seem scared. She looked more ready and willing than she had minutes earlier. "Rex told me I have you for the night."

Now her gaze darkened, her lips turning up into a sneer. "Not because I'm being paid. I won't take money. Not for that. I want to get that straight right now. I only agreed because I've been watching you too."

"Have you now?" He flashed her a grin, his fascination with her, as well as his cock, growing by the second.

"Um-hmm." She returned the grin with a sexy smile of her own, one that had him sucking in a breath. God, he wanted her with a lust that bordered on pain.

And Ellie would kill him if she ever found out.

He groaned. That damned conscience again. He'd promised Ellie he'd look after her sister, not get her into his bed.

"What's the matter, sexy? You look like you might be changing your mind." She sidled up close to him, pressing her curvy body right against his. Every nerve in his body reacted to her closeness. What had happened to the scared, frail young girl Ellie had told him about? At the moment, it didn't matter. All he knew was that she was gone. The woman who stood in her place was brash, confident, and sexier than any other woman in the bar. And if she didn't move away she risked him ripping her clothes and taking her against a nearby wall, in the full view of everyone in sight.

Her fingers slid down his stomach, stopping when she cupped his throbbing cock in her hand. Even through the layers of his clothes, her palm heated his skin. He mentally counted off all the reasons to push her away, but he was afraid that wouldn't be an option. The more she touched him, the more his resistance slipped. Soon there'd be none left. Not that there'd been a lot to begin with. She was coming on to him in a strong, blatant way that no woman had done in a long time. He was a man. He reacted to that sort of thing. What was he supposed to do, say no?

Yes. That was exactly what he was supposed to do, though doing the right thing was becoming increasingly more difficult by the second. He grabbed her wrist and

pulled her hand away. Gallantry only went so far, and he was about ten seconds from saying to hell with it.

"What's the matter? Shy all of a sudden?" Her husky laugh taunted and aroused him at the same time. She leaned in closer, her breath feathering against the side of his face. "Rex said you wanted me for the night. Has that changed?"

"Hell no."

"Then what's the problem, Wil?"

The job he'd promised Ellie he would do had started to fade from his mind. If he let her continue to rub up against him and touch him, he'd be in deep trouble. "Let's get out of here."

"In a little while. I told you I want to dance first." She grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the center of the room—a makeshift dance floor where a handful of people stood bumping and grinding to the music. It was a heated, sexual rhythm that pulsed through his body, urging him to pull her close.

She beat him to it. Her arms went around his neck, her body sliding against him. Then her fingers were at the back of his head, pulling his lips down to hers. The touch of their lips sent a flash of heat from the top of his head all the way to his toes. Tingles ran down his arms, down his core, and his fangs burned against his gums. He fought the kiss for a second, maybe two, before he gave in. He ran his tongue along the seam of her lips, dipping inside when she parted them for him.

She tasted sweet. Perfect. And if he didn't stop touching her soon he'd lose his mind. He clung to the last shred of rational thought even though he felt it already slipping out of his grasp. He broke the kiss, but didn't move his face more than a few inches from hers.

She pulled back, laughing. "Afraid of me, Wil?"

"No way." He was a little afraid of Ellie, however. She and Becca might have been sisters, but Ellie was the one with the claws.

Though he was starting to wonder if the little sister and the big sister had more in common than he'd been told. Whatever the case, Ellie would have some serious explaining to do. In the meantime, he had to get her away from the bar and get some space between them, so he could concentrate. Once he had her tucked safely away, locked in his hotel room, he could find someone else to assuage the burning need between his legs—and the need that burned even hotter in the fangs he could barely keep from extending. The denials kept flooding his mind, though it was a lost cause. They'd end up in bed tonight, now matter how much he tried to fight it. So what was the point in denying his attraction to her? He didn't see much of one anymore.

He pulled her closer and pressed his face into her hair, more to keep her from seeing how she affected him than anything else. She obviously had no problem with public displays, but he doubted she'd take kindly to him sinking his fangs into her in the middle of the dance floor. Though, come to think of it, that held a lot more appeal than it should.

Several long, hellish minutes later she stepped out of his arms. He was thankful for the dark, so he could keep his fangs hidden from her a little longer.

"I think you're right, Wil. We should leave now."

About damned time. He grabbed her hand and led her out to the parking lot. He unlocked the doors of his SUV and turned to see her smiling at him, her arms crossed over her chest.

"I'll take my car," she told him. "You follow me."

"Where to?"

"My place."

Good. Once they got there, he could convince her to pack her things and leave town with him. She was in deeper than Ellie had even imagined, over her head, and he'd do whatever it took to get her on the right path again.

He ignored the voice in his head screaming that, once at her place, he'd have her naked underneath him in the first five minutes.

* * * * *

Becca unlocked the door, took his hand and led him inside. He was helpless to do anything but follow. After a few centuries, sex had become a little lackluster. It wasn't often anymore a woman could stir him to life as quickly as she had, and he didn't think he could ignore that. Especially with her so blatantly teasing him. Once they got out of their vehicles at her house, she hadn't kept her hands off him. She'd stroked his arm, his chest, leaned up a few times and kissed his jaw while he tried to keep his feet from falling out from under him. And now they stood just inside the door of her house, his sanity hanging by a tenuous thread.

To stall for time, and to keep from attacking her, he walked into the main area of the house. It wasn't huge, but it was spacious. The living room, kitchen and dining area were one big room with high, vaulted ceilings, exposed beams and white walls. Hallways stretched on either side of the room and lanai doors opened to a fenced-in backyard. The furniture looked to be a mix of antique and modern, giving the house an eclectic feel that seemed to suit her perfectly. A house this size didn't come cheaply, especially for a single person Becca's age.

She had money. Apparently plenty of it. Another thing Ellie either hadn't known or had forgotten to mention.

"It's got four bedrooms, three bathrooms," she told him. "Two bedrooms and a bath down each hall, plus a bathroom off the back of the kitchen. In case you were wondering. You seem very interested in my house all of a sudden."

"Do you live here alone?"

"No significant other, no children if that's what you mean. I had a roommate, but he moved out not too long ago." Her eyes darkened as she spoke and she wrung her hands in front of her.

He frowned. "A boyfriend?"

"No. Just a friend. He's going through some...stuff and he needed some alone time. I'm still adjusting to having this place all to myself." She walked to a bookshelf that ran along one side of the room, running her fingers over the tops of the few books sitting there. "It's no big deal."

He noted her tone, her hesitation to talk about it. "I didn't realize working for Rex paid so much."

She laughed, came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I have another job. One that pays much better."

He stiffened and pulled away, earning another laugh from her.

"Not what you're thinking, Wil. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Then what do you do?" He spun around and faced her, shoved his hands into the pockets of his pants. His tone sounded too forced to be conversational, and she must have picked up on it. Her knowing gaze skimmed down the length of his body with a slowness that left him in agony. On the way back up, she paused for a long time on his obvious erection.

She licked her lips. "It's very lucrative. That's all you need to know. This is just one night. Remember? No strings, no emotional connection. I'm not pestering you with questions I don't need answers to, or sharing information we really don't need to know about each other. The only thing I'm interested in right now is how fast you can get that hard cock inside of me, and how many times you can make me come. What you do for a living really doesn't matter to me. Why should what I do be a sticking point for you?"

He nearly laughed. She wouldn't approve of what he did for a living. It was lucrative as well, very much so, but it involved some things that would no doubt scare her away. If she was anything like Ellie and her friends had described, inside she was still just a frightened young woman reeling from the betrayal of her first lover. One trip into his world would send her back to her family for sure.

But she looked anything but scared. Anything but innocent. Three years ago she might have been practically a virgin, but she was far from that now. She moved, kissed, touched like a woman with enough experience to know her way around a man's body. Enough experience to know what she wanted, how she wanted it, and exactly how to demand it.

That would make it even harder to stay away from her. She was the type of woman he wanted, no doubt about that. One who could give as well as she could take in bed, and could take everything he gave her and more. Too bad she was Ellie's sister. Though his body had long since gotten over that little fact, his mind was still having a hard time coming to grips with it.

He cleared his throat. "We need to get a few things straight before this goes any further."

"Oh no. I don't think so." She walked over to him again and put her hands on his chest, stroking lightly. The heat from her palms felt like it would sear right through the cloth into his skin. "I'm not going to let you ruin my fun."

Shit. He might as well accept it now. The next time he saw Ellie, he was a dead man. Yeah, Becca was just his type. If she wanted him that badly, as badly as he wanted her, who was he to turn her down? He might as well enjoy what could very well be his last few nights on earth. Becca would hate him when she found out why he was really there, but he'd deal with that when the time came. In all honesty, it might make things easier. She'd be angry at him, go running home to her sister for comfort, and all would be well in Ellie's world again.

"I have no plans to ruin anyone's fun tonight." *Least of all mine.*

She licked her lips again, fire sparking in her big blue eyes. "Good. When I see something I want, I don't let anything get in my way."

"And what is it you want right now?"

"You. All night long."

It sounded like a perfect idea to him. But he'd have to have her in his car on her way back to her sister well before the sun rose, or else things would get mighty complicated.

Chapter Two

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Becca turned and sauntered across the room, her delectable ass swaying with every step. "Already you can't keep up? We haven't even started yet."

Wil let out a soft growl, rolled his head from side to side and clenched his fists. "I'll keep up, woman. Don't ever doubt that."

"Awfully sure of yourself," she said before she disappeared down the hall to the left, one last glance over her shoulder beckoning him to follow.

He took off after her practically at a run, the beast inside him clamoring to get out of its cage. He'd let it out soon enough. She'd take it, and he had a feeling she'd love every second.

He found her in the bedroom at the end of the hall, her hip propped against the high, dark wood footboard of the huge bed. Light filtered from a single lamp on a bedside table, the shade made with red silk and a beaded fringe. The bedding matched, the walls in the room painted a rich burnt gold. Heavy, deep red velvet curtains covered the windows in place of modern blinds. He swallowed hard. It was bold, unusual, and brought to mind exotic brothels in a time long past. Sensual and inviting. She wasn't the innocent Ellie believed, and he was a fool for falling into this situation. But he wasn't backing down. It was too late for that.

"I *am* sure of myself. With good reason. I think the real question is whether you'll be able to keep up with me."

The look she gave him told him she didn't think that would be a problem.

She didn't know him very well.

He stepped over the threshold and stalked toward her, watching her carefully to gauge her reactions. By this point, most women would be a little nervous, a little afraid of what he might do to them. But not Becca. She didn't move. The sexy, arrogant smile never left her face. She really thought she was a match for him. That she could give as well as she could take. He hadn't met a woman yet who'd been his equal, at least not in the bedroom.

He'd met one who was close, once. A few years ago. But she belonged to someone else. A close friend. And the rule, one of the few he lived by, still applied. No married women. Though they weren't married in the legal sense, Merida was Royce's mate and he wasn't about to get in the middle of that. Not unless they invited him again—which he highly doubted would happen. It was an incredible experience. A once-in-a-lifetime one, and that was how it would be best remembered.

In some ways, Becca reminded him of Merida. Wild, curly hair, though Becca's was nearly black where Merida's was red. Curvy yet slim body, fair skin, an overabundance of attitude. Tonight would be amazing. It would be just one night, since once she found out why he was there she'd most likely never speak to him again. Ellie probably wouldn't, either, if she found out what he'd done with her sister. But stopping was no longer an option. They'd passed that point when he stepped into her bedroom. She wanted him, and he needed her that night.

Her gaze dropped to his pants. "You're still hard."

He nodded, not trusting his voice. Did she expect anything less? She'd been tormenting him relentlessly since he first spoke to her.

"With all that inane conversation you tried to make, all the ways you tried to distract yourself. I'm impressed. But I'm done with playtime now." She grasped the hem of her tank top and yanked it out of her skirt, pulling the shirt over her head and dropping it to the floor. The skirt followed, falling as soon as she unzipped it, and she stepped out of it. She stood in front of him wearing only those incredible leather boots, looking like a dark goddess ready for a night of play with one of her minions.

The visual only increased his arousal. He groaned.

"Why don't you come over here and let me take care of that for you."

She didn't have to ask him twice. He walked over to her and dragged her to him. She didn't protest his rough display, but then again he really didn't expect her to. She'd been as eager all night as he had. Maybe even more so, if that was possible. She didn't know him, shouldn't trust him, and yet she'd allowed him into her home. Into her bedroom. And soon, into her body. Why?

He let her go and crossed his arms over his chest. Before this went any further, before it passed a point where neither of them would be able to stop, he needed that answer. At the moment it was the single thing holding him back. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"What's the matter? Afraid, Wil?"

"No, but maybe you should be."

"Why is that?" She reached her hand between them and unbuttoned his jeans.

"You don't know me."

"I'm not scared of you, if that's what you mean. I've seen a lot in my life, had to learn to take care of myself." The zipper rasped as she slid it down. "Believe me. I can defend myself against any man."

A human man maybe, but not him. He wouldn't hurt her, not in any lifetime, but she didn't know that. He gripped her wrists to keep her from touching him any further. "You should be afraid of me."

Now he was starting to sound like the villain in a bad horror movie. He closed his eyes for a brief moment and tried to shake off the feeling of surrealism that had settled over the night.

She ignored his protests and wriggled her wrists out of his grip. "The only thing I'm afraid of right now is you not being able to perform. Other than that, I think I've got it pretty much covered. Trust me on that, okay?"

She pulled the hem of his T-shirt out of his pants and pushed it up. "Come on, Wil. Help me out here."

A short laugh escaped him as he lifted his arms and let her pull it all the way off. It hit the floor across the room a few seconds later. And then her hands were on his chest, stroking, flickering across his nipples. She leaned in to nip at one with her teeth, her fingernails scraping over the other. Her pelvis ground against his, almost perfectly matched due to her height. He sucked in a sharp breath. *Hell*. She'd be the death of him, not her sister.

"I like this tattoo." Her fingers stroked the thick black snake winding around his upper arm. "Sexy."

"Um, thanks." He'd never thought of it that way. The snake had been an impulse a few decades ago, something he'd done on a whim. The dragon on his hip held a lot more significance. A good friend, an artist he'd known for many years, had designed the intricate scales and wings of the fire-breathing creature. When she died ten years ago, a victim of breast cancer caught too late, he'd had her drawing branded on his skin.

Becca's hand lingered on his arm for a few seconds before trailing down his stomach, back to the waistband of his jeans. This time he didn't try to stop her. She slipped her warm fingers past the waistband, into his boxers, and wrapped them around his cock.

"Very nice, Wil. Very nice."

Her fingers tightened and she stroked, up and down, a rhythm that made his blood pound in his ears. Yes, the woman knew what she was doing. She'd bring him to orgasm in no time if she wasn't careful.

He cupped her breasts, pushed them together and up until he could lean down and run his tongue across the peaked, rosy nipples. She sighed, arched her back and her grip on his cock tightened even more.

Her breasts tasted as sweet as her mouth. As sweet as he knew the blood rushing through her veins would taste. And he *would* taste. He'd taste her when she came, when it would be the best—when she would be too far gone to even realize what he was doing beyond bringing them both extreme pleasure.

She pulled away and stepped back. "Okay, out of the pants."

"Demanding, aren't we?"

She shrugged, winked at him. "Not too much. I just know what I want. I want to see all of you. Now."

Who was he to argue with that kind of logic? He sat on the edge of the bed and unlaced his boots, one by one, the job a lot more tedious than it should have been. Why hadn't he worn something a little easier to get out of? Once the boots hit the floor, he

took off his socks and stood up again. He pushed his pants and boxers out of the way and let them drop to the floor.

"Is that better?"

"Most definitely."

She sauntered back over to him, her hips swaying in a delectable motion with every step she took. Her heels struck the wood floor with a sharp *crack-crack*, seemingly louder now that he stood vulnerable in front of her, each burst of sound sending him further and further into his state of arousal. His nerves snapped, his muscles so bunched he was afraid he might not be able to move. She stopped in front of him and settled her hand over his right hip bone.

"This one's cool," she said, her fingers caressing the intricate dragon he'd gotten to honor a friend. "Do you have any more?"

"No. That's it."

"Did they hurt?"

Like freakin' hell, but he wasn't about to tell her that. "No. It was over in seconds. Didn't feel a thing."

He wouldn't have felt much, had he been human at the time, but being vampire made him much more sensitive to pain. The little needle pricks had felt like thousands of bees attacking his skin.

"Cool."

Not exactly the word he would have chosen, but it was interesting that a woman found him "cool". He hadn't heard that in too long to remember.

She leaned in and ran her tongue down his chest, from his collarbone to just above his navel. "You taste good."

She licked her way back up again, stopping at his chest. Her tongue circled his nipple, around and around but never touching. Never quite close enough to where he needed that hot, wet tongue. He put a hand in her hair to guide her to where he wanted her to be. And then she reached her goal. *His* goal, for the moment. The next place he wanted her mouth was far more important.

Her laugh vibrated against his skin, her lips brushing, teeth nipping, tongue swirling over and over. Then she pulled back, blew a hot breath along the wet skin and raked the sensitive flesh with her fingernail and he nearly came out of his skin.

"You like that?" she asked her eyes glimmering amusement.

"Oh yeah."

"You like a little pain?"

Not a subject he wanted to get into with her. There'd been a time in his life he lived for that sort of thing, but that time had long passed. She might be the one to resurrect such urges inside him, but she might not be happy with the consequences.

"Not usually."

A corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile. "You're such a liar."

Without giving him a chance to answer, she leaned in and bit his shoulder. Hard. His gut clenched tight and his cock hardened even more, pressing up against his abdomen. His fangs came fully down then, aching to sink into her skin, to bite her the way she'd just bitten him. Yes, he liked pain. A lot. But he wouldn't hurt her. If she wanted to hurt him, he might lose control.

"Don't."

"Why not? You liked it so much."

"Don't, unless you want to end up flat on your back on the floor with me ramming my cock into you so deep you'll think I'm in your throat."

The words were meant as a threat, but she didn't take them that way. "Not yet. Later. Definitely."

She reached down and cupped his balls in her hand, squeezing them gently as she moved her mouth over to his other nipple. He let his head drop back, the sensations overwhelming. Strong. Too strong, in a strange sort of way. His mind and body blurred into a ball of nerves and sensation, every touch magnified in its intensity, every word she spoke echoing in his head. It must have been the alcohol, something his system didn't tolerate very well. He couldn't think of any other explanation other than lack of sleep, but sleep was the furthest thing from his mind right now.

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked, her tone anything but concerned. "You look a little woozy."

"I'm fine." More than fine. He had a strong suspicion a man could die of too much more of this, and he had no problem with that outcome.

Her fingers wandered from his balls to grasp his cock again and she sank down on her knees in front of him. He didn't dare protest, didn't dare say a single word. Didn't want her changing her mind. He was aching for her, however he could get her. As long as she did *something* to put him out of his misery.

She smiled up at him, her gaze hot and knowing, her breath fanning across the head of his cock. He shuddered, his hands gripped her hair as she slid her mouth over him and enveloped him. Until he bumped the back of her throat. *Fuck*. Where had she learned a trick like that? It was going to kill him in about five seconds.

"Becca," he protested, but he didn't really mean it. She pulled back and he groaned.

"You don't like my mouth on your dick?"

He could only groan again in answer.

"Then shut up and enjoy it already."

Not one to argue with a beautiful woman holding one of his most important body parts in her hand, he clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes, giving her the freedom to touch him any way she chose.

"No, don't close your eyes," she said. "I want you to watch this. Watch me suck you."

His cock surged in her hand, a drop of pre-cum leaking out the tip. The length of him glistened with her saliva. She leaned in and caught the droplet with her tongue. She closed her eyes and smiled as if savoring the flavor. When her eyelids fluttered open her gaze drifted to his cock.

No more words were needed. She enveloped him with her mouth again, swirling her tongue around the head on each upstroke. Her thumb and forefinger encircled the base, tightening around him and increasing the sensations coursing through his body. The top of his head felt like it would explode, maybe from her ministrations, maybe from the alcohol he should have avoided. He didn't know. Didn't care.

He watched as her mouth took him in, then moved away with an innate grace that stirred something inside him. The circle of her fingers tightened even more and she moved it up and down a few inches in tandem with her mouth. He was close, getting closer by the second. His balls had drawn up tight against his body. And his muscles clenched in anticipation.

She reached her free hand between her legs, stroked a finger in and out of her pussy a few times before she brought it back up again. And then he felt her reach around behind him, prodding at his anus with that slick digit. He tensed against the invasion, earning him a swat on the ass.

Her mouth left his cock long enough for her to laugh. "Relax, Wil. This will only make it better."

He didn't believe it for a second, but she didn't give him a chance to argue. She took advantage of his surprise and pressed against the tight ring of muscles again. The tip of her finger, coated in her slick juices, slipped inside. She pushed further, edging it inside him further until she pressed against a spot that made every nerve in his body scream.

"Yeah, right there."

She ran her tongue down the length of his cock and back up again a few times before taking him back inside, all the while twisting her finger in small rotations. Within seconds she pushed him over the edge and he spurted into her mouth. It felt like the orgasm went on for an eternity, his balls emptying completely of their stores, and still she continued to lave him until his spasming stopped. Then she rocked back on her heels, pulled her mouth away, licked the tip clean, and slowly pulled her finger out of his ass.

"That wasn't so bad, was it?"

It was one of the most incredible things he'd experienced in a long while. His head had started to spin – a phenomenon he'd never experienced before. He only grunted in reply. He dropped to his knees on the hard floor. She'd made a mistake in antagonizing him. Now she'd find that out.

"Come here."

She didn't keep him waiting. She crawled on her hands and knees to where he knelt and leaned into him for a kiss. When her tongue delved into her mouth he tasted

himself mixed with her unique flavor. She raked her nails down his back, bit his lip and pulled back.

"I want you so bad, Wil."

Her voice was breathy, her face flushed and her eyes wild. He smiled. "Wanna give me a second here to recover?"

In truth he was already half hard again. The alcohol. It was the only thing that made sense. She wrapped her hand around his cock, stroked him to full arousal as she teased him with her lips and tongue along his jaw, down his throat and across his collarbone.

"Not really," she whispered against his neck.

She was relentless and he couldn't take it anymore. He grasped her wrist and pulled her hand away from his cock, turning her away from him and pressing the heel of his hand between her shoulder blades. She dropped to the floor, catching herself with her hands so that she knelt before him on all fours. She tossed her hair back and looked at him over her shoulder, that same secretive grin goading him into action.

He ran his hands along the firm globes of her ass, cupping each cheek in his palms. He gave them a squeeze, the flesh around his fingers turning white. When he let go, her skin had pinkened nicely with the outlines of his hands. Becca sighed and wriggled her ass. He slid a palm over her warm skin, from her ass to the center of her back. Pressed lightly so that her back arched, lifting her ass and exposing her drenched pussy to his view.

"Beautiful."

She shivered, let out a small sound laced with need.

His hand continued its exploration, caressing her soft skin, stopping only when he reached her shoulder blades. He brought his hand around her body until he cupped her breast in his palm. He gave the nipple a light pinch before he brought his hand back up and wrapped it in her hair, using it to lift her head up.

"Tell me what you want, Becca."

"You," she rasped, her body heaving with each breath she took.

"How do you want me to take you?"

"Just like this." She wriggled her ass again, pressing herself against his hard cock. He nearly moaned from the feel of her slick juices coating him.

Yeah, like this. With a few modifications. He used his free hand to spread her legs a little further apart before he dipped his fingers into her hot cunt. Her inner muscles tightened around him at the invasion.

She let out a small whimper. "Not your fingers. Your cock. *Fuck me.*"

The blunt words heated his system, made his cock throb. He wanted it as much as she did. Maybe more. He would fuck her. Hard and fast this time. Maybe the second time too. He guided his cock to the entrance of her cunt and rammed inside, all the way to the hilt with the first deep thrust.

"Yes," she hissed, slamming her ass back against him to meet him thrust for thrust. He released her hair and she dropped her elbows to the ground, resting her head on her outstretched forearms.

"You want it hard, like this?" he asked, punctuating the question with another deep thrust.

"Any way. I just want it now."

"Do *you* like pain, Becca?" He raised his palm and gave her asscheek a sharp slap.

"Oh God. Yes. Harder."

He had no problem obliging. He gave her ass another whack, then another, in time with his thrusts inside her cunt. After a few swats her skin had taken on a rosy glow and she was panting and writhing under him. Her cunt muscles tightened, her hips thrusting back in an artless rhythm that told him she was seconds away from losing control. He reached around her and found her clit, pressing his finger hard against the little nub. That was all it took for her to explode around him.

She let out a long, keening moan that shook her whole body. Her inner muscles gripped him tight, milking him, drawing him deeper inside her body. She convulsed, her body dropping closer to the floor.

Now was the time. He leaned over her, supporting his weight on his arms, and sank his fangs into the tender skin on the back of her shoulder. She screamed, but the scream soon turned into another long moan as her warm, salty blood flowed over his tongue. He came like that, leaning over her, his mouth latched to her skin as he lapped up the blood that would give him the strength to fuck her again, later that night.

When he released her and knelt back up, his head spun. He pulled his softening cock out of her cunt and ran a hand over her ass, where the red marks were starting to fade. Becca rolled onto her back and gave him a sleepy smile. "Wow."

He would have agreed with her sentiments had he been able to find his voice. Instead he rubbed a hand down his face and shook his head. She'd really worn him out if he couldn't manage to form words.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he ground out. "Fine."

"Good. Why don't we get into bed, then, and rest a little. Then when I'm up for more fun later, you will be too." She gave his cock a pointed glance.

He nodded. Moving to the bed was the last thing he remembered before the dizziness claimed him and he slept.

* * * * *

Something wasn't right. Wil knew it almost the second he woke, before he'd even had a chance to open his eyes. He was alone in the bed. If Becca had been there, he would have sensed her warmth. A strange tingling sensation ran from his shoulders all

the way up to his fingertips. Fingertips of hands which seemed to be stretched toward the headboard at an unnatural angle.

Shit.

He gave his arms a tug, confirming his suspicions. The minx had cuffed him to the bed. At first it turned him on a little to think she'd be into such kinky games. He didn't usually let a woman be the one to take control, but what the hell. A little change might give his sex life the spice it had been missing for a while. But when he tugged a second time, harder than the first, and the uncomfortable metal cuffs didn't budge, a knot formed in his gut. Only specially engineered cuffs would hold a vampire. Ordinary ones weren't nearly strong enough. In order to obtain such special cuffs, one had to know where to look. And what sort of being one planned to restrain.

A soft smacking sound came to him from across the room. He snapped his eyes open and found Becca leaning against the doorframe, wearing a pair of worn blue jeans, a navy blue sweatshirt, and a knowing smile. The noise came from the wooden stake she was slapping against her palm.

His heart first threatened to stop, and then threatened to pound out of his chest. What the hell was going on? "Please tell me this is a game you like to play."

She raised a single dark brow, no hint of lust or humor on her pixie face. "It's about time you woke up. You slept through a whole day. The sun set a half hour ago. If you'd made me wait another second, I might have gotten angry."

Considering his position, *angry* was the last thing he wanted to make her. He shook his head, hoping to shake off the last remnants of sleep so he had a clear mind to deal with her. It would have been nice if someone had informed him that Becca was crazy. The situation Ellie had warned him about must have pushed Becca off the deep end and now she held his life in her hands. How had he been stupid enough to get into this? He'd been too much in lust with her to see her for what she really was. He'd let his dick lead what had happened and now it might cost him his life. Would she really use that sharp-looking stake? He had an awful feeling she would.

He swallowed, his mouth dry, his tongue thick. The odd sensations he'd felt the night before still lingered, though not quite as strong as they'd been. A dull ache tapped against his temples and his head felt like it had been stuffed with cotton. He tried again to shake it off, knowing this wasn't the time to lose it. Not if he wanted to get out of this with all his body parts intact. If he expected to get out of her house alive, he had to be fully awake and alert. He should have avoided finishing that glass of whiskey the night before. Would have avoided it, had he expected this kind of trouble. Vampires, with their heightened senses and sensitivities, couldn't hold their liquor worth a damn. But he'd been stupid and let down his guard. It was Ellie's sister, for hell's sake. This shouldn't have even happened. She should have been safe.

He took a deep breath and tried to force a smile onto his face. His bunched facial muscles wouldn't allow it. "Believe me, sweetheart. The last thing I want to do is make

you angry. I can't help it if I have an unusual sleep schedule. Why don't you put that thing down and come back to bed?"

"Can the sweetheart crap, Wil. I'm not going to let you go, no matter how nice you act right now." She shook her head, throwing her hair off her shoulders so it fell down her back. A dull bruise ran along one side of her neck, disappearing into the neckline of the sweatshirt.

His stomach clenched at the sight, and he had to forcibly remind himself that the woman was dangerous—possibly even planning to kill him. He glanced away, training his gaze on her hands. He'd bitten her too hard. But he'd been out of control in a way that was new to him, and she'd done nothing but encourage his behavior. "You're bruised. Did I hurt you last night?"

"You don't remember the second time you bit me."

It was a statement, not a question, as if she'd been expecting that reaction. "No."

"In the middle of the night. You woke me and we fucked again. No big deal."

Nausea rolled in his gut. He hadn't wanted to hurt her, but apparently he had. Was that what this was all about? "Did I hurt you?" he repeated.

Something he couldn't quite read flashed in her eyes. "No. You didn't hurt me. My skin is fair. I bruise easily. Like I told you before, I have means of protecting myself, especially against creatures like you."

She said the word "creatures" with as much distaste as if she were talking about cockroaches. Anger spiked inside him, but he pushed it back. He'd have to keep his temper in check. No sense making things worse now, when she had a huge advantage.

But her actions still demanded an explanation. "You wanna tell me what's going on here? You were all over me last night, and now you want me dead? I'm sorry if that doesn't make a lot of sense."

She snorted. "Vampires. You're all a bunch of idiots. I swear I haven't met one yet that I didn't want to stake. And believe me, I've met quite a few. Though I have to admit not many have been as fun as you. But that isn't going to stop me from using this." She brandished the stake in front of her.

His mouth went dry. If she really planned to use that thing, he had no way of defending himself save kicking out at her, but there were no guarantees that it would even work. "Is that what this is about? Some vendetta against vampires?"

She shook her head, walked over to the bed and flopped down on the end of the mattress next to his feet. The sheet covering him from the waist down slipped a little and he had no way of pulling it back up. One of her hands still held the stake, the other raised up in front of her as she studied her nails. "Don't be so melodramatic. It isn't a vendetta. Well, maybe just a little bit. But I have my reasons. If you knew my story, knew what I've been through, maybe you wouldn't be so damned judgmental."

She'd rendered him helpless and threatened to kill him, and he was in the wrong for being judgmental? There was something seriously wrong with this picture. "This is nuts, Becca. Absolutely nuts. Let me out of these cuffs so we can talk about it."

"Talk about it. Yeah right. Do you think I'm stupid or something? The second I let you go, you'll tear me apart. That just isn't going to..."

Her voice trailed off and she shook her head again, this time with more force. Her curls bounced around her face before they settled along her shoulders and down her chest. For just a second a glimpse of sweetness, almost innocence, flickered across her features. But it was gone so quickly he thought he had to have been imagining it.

His cell phone rang, drawing her attention to the floor where he'd dropped his pants. She stood and tossed the stake onto his chest. "Hold that for a second, will you?"

Shit. His body instinctively tried to recoil from the chunk of wood, but cuffed to the bed he couldn't move away. If he'd known she was this crazy, he would have dragged her out of Rex's bar kicking and screaming and tied her up in his hotel room rather than follow instincts that had apparently gone faulty. How was it that he always managed to get involved with the wrong women? It appeared his choices were going to be the death of him, sooner than he thought. Sooner than his close friends had started to warn.

She smirked at him before she grabbed his pants off the floor and fished his small black phone out of the pocket. She glanced at the caller ID screen and her expression darkened. "Why would my sister be calling your cell phone?"

If he lied, she'd most likely kill him. If he told her the truth, he might very well be dead anyway, but at least if she knew someone would come looking for him she might be a little less inclined to ram that piece of wood through his heart. "She's a friend. I'm working on something for her. Something important."

"And what would that be?" She clicked her tongue, her gaze dropping to the stake on his chest before coming back up to his eyes again. The blue of her irises burned almost silver in the dim light coming from the bedside lamp. "Tell me the truth now. It seems you're not in a position to lie or hide things from me."

Wasn't that the truth? He shuddered to think what she might do. Did she have the courage, or the know-how, to do what she'd planned? He wouldn't doubt it if she did. "Why don't you talk to me for a little while first? Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"Of course I'm sure. You aren't the first, and you won't be the last."

Was she talking about sex, or the fact that she planned to murder him? "You've staked a vampire before?"

Her laugh was nothing short of confident. "Do you remember the second job I'd mentioned before? The lucrative one? Well, there's a shitload of money in vampire hunting."

Her words echoed inside his head, making the throb in his temples pound against his skull. *Fuck.* He was so dead. So fucking dead, and there was nothing he could do

about it. A vampire hunter. Ellie and Royce hadn't known, or they would have warned him to be careful. "What was with the sex, then?"

"That's the weird part. I hate vampires, don't get me wrong. And I make more than a decent living killing them. Funny thing is, I found out early on that sex with a vampire is the most incredible sex there is. Better than any human I've ever had. So I like to have a little fun first. Got a problem with that?"

Hell yes he had a problem with it. She was out there making money killing off his kind, but she liked to toy with her prey first. Play with it. Let it believe she was nothing more than a horny woman out looking for a good time. A chill ran down his spine. Ellie hadn't mentioned her sister was a sociopath. "Yeah, I do. It's a little twisted."

"And drinking blood isn't?" She leaned back against the footboard, her gaze raking his body. When she stopped at where the sheet barely covered his cock, his body reacted involuntarily to her scrutiny. His cock twitched, hardening more the longer she stared, and nothing he tried would will it back down. She smiled. "You didn't have any complaints last night."

"That was before I knew you were trying to kill me."

"You don't seem to have any complaints now, either." Her gaze didn't move an inch and he started to squirm. "Didn't your mother ever warn you against picking up strange women in bars?"

"My mother didn't warn me about much." Hadn't cared enough to even acknowledge him past his early childhood, but he doubted that fact would make Becca change her mind.

"Too bad. If she had, she might have saved you." She dropped the phone on the floor and walked into the adjoining bathroom. He heard water running, and when she came back out she had a glass of water in her hand. She took a sip. "How did you get those scars on your back?"

His whole body stiffened, his jaw squared. No sense giving her any more reason to kill him. "It's a long story. A long, boring story. One I'm sure you don't want to hear."

"Long and boring, huh? Whatever." She didn't press for more, though. She accepted his words with a succinct nod. "Now tell me about my sister. Exactly what are you *doing* for her?"

"Not what you're thinking." He'd be stupid to try anything with Ellie, even if he was interested. Her mate would tear him to shreds if Ellie didn't do it herself. He might get himself into trouble on occasion, but he wasn't stupid.

"Then you'd better start explaining."

"She asked me to find you and bring you back home so she would know you're safe."

Becca snorted. "What does she care? She doesn't worry about me. My sister isn't even human anymore."

Ellie had warned him that was a sticking point with Becca. When Becca had unknowingly dated a killer vampire several years ago, she'd set in motion a course of actions that had resulted in Ellie's death and resurrection as a *Panthicenos* demon. Becca, overwhelmed with the situation, had apparently chosen then to move away and cut all ties with her family. But she still cared about them. Despite her bravado, he could see it in her eyes.

"You haven't been home in three years. Don't you want to see your nephew?"

"My nephew's a demon. He's two years old and he can change himself into a cat. That's just wrong." She shivered. "What's your stake in this, anyway? Is she paying you?"

"No. I don't charge friends."

"But you'd charge Rex a shitload of money and not think twice about it. What are you, some kind of mercenary?"

She said the words with such derision he had to hold back a laugh. "Something like that. I prefer to think of it as a jack-of-all-trades. If someone needs something done, I come in and do it. Kinda like what you do, but I get rid of the bad guys rather than just kill indiscriminately."

Anger flashed in her eyes and he braced himself for her attack. Probably best not to antagonize the crazy woman with the stake. She stared at him for a long time, her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed, before she stood and paced the length of the room.

"You don't know anything about what I do."

"Sweetheart, I've met enough vampire hunters to know that what you do is wrong. It's a little too close to genocide."

"Is not." She shook her head but didn't stop her pacing. "You're just being dramatic. Vampires are evil. I've known enough of them to know the truth."

"You're basing this on what happened with one."

"I'm basing it on that and on a few other experiences, coupled with the fact that I get paid very well for this. It's a job. A job I happen to enjoy." Now she stopped and spun toward him, her gaze darkening. "You're the one who killed the vampires who were threatening Rex."

He just stared at her, refusing to confirm or deny.

"Had to go and ruin my fun, didn't you. Why hire a woman when he could hire a man—a vampire—to do the job instead. What makes what you did so different from what I do? You're even worse. You kill your own kind."

"Those vampires weren't the good guys."

"And you are?"

Wasn't that a loaded question? He chose his answer carefully. "I don't hurt people just for the fun of it."

"I take that as a no. I wish my sister would learn to mind her own damned business."

"She's worried about you."

"Worried my ass. She just likes to mother everyone around her. Well, I don't need a mother. Or a sister. Hell, I don't need anyone, but everyone wants to be my family. They all think they know what's best for me."

She turned away and stomped to the window, pushing aside the shade and glancing into the darkening night. At that moment he caught another glimpse of the woman under all the show – soft, vulnerable and alone. She might be good at hiding it, but she was damaged inside. And there was nothing he could do to fix it. Nothing short of somehow getting her to let him loose and take her to her family.

"I don't want to be your family."

She glanced at him, the cool façade slipping back into place. Gone was the innocent girl, replaced with the knowing woman Becca had become. "No, you'd rather just drain my blood."

Drain her, no. But he wouldn't mind another sample or two. His fangs started to elongate and he had to force himself to calm down. Why did he have to keep forgetting that she was trying to kill him? But she hadn't yet. That had to say something. "Come here, Becca."

"Why?"

"Talk to me. I don't want to hurt you. I have no interest in that. And I know you don't really want to kill me."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Bull. You don't know that. Actually, I *do* want to kill you, and I'm going to enjoy every second. But I'm going to give you a reprieve."

His breath left his lungs in a whoosh.

"A temporary one. Don't get me wrong, I still plan to kill you when I'm finished. But you amuse me. I think I'll keep you around for a while longer."

She turned on her heel and stalked out of the room.

* * * * *

Becca stomped down the hall into the kitchen and flopped down in a chair. She folded her arms on the tabletop and dropped her head onto them. Choppy breathing, sweaty palms, and a roiling stomach. What the hell was that all about? She'd done this countless times before, and she'd never been struck with a case of nerves at all, let alone one that had threatened to bring her to her knees.

Her first mistake had been not killing him right away. She'd known what he was almost from the second she saw him. An ordinary human wouldn't have known what to look for, but she'd been trained to watch for certain signs. A vampire was easy to spot if one knew what to look for. They had a certain arrogance about them, a presence she couldn't explain but could feel nonetheless. Coupled with the way he hadn't seemed to need to squint through the darkness to glance around the bar from that

corner table, and she'd had him pegged. She should have taken care of him that first night.

Her usual methods had always worked in the past. Drug them, bring them home, screw their brains out, tie them up and kill them. Why change it now? She was slipping if she let one night of intense sex get to her this much. Now that he was awake, talking to her rather than rubbing himself all over her, she had to face the fact that he was a living, breathing being and not some monster straight out of her nightmares. And he was a friend of Ellie's. Ellie took care of her own, and no doubt she'd skin Becca alive for daring to kill someone she cared about. She'd never be able to take him out now, but she couldn't trust him enough to set him free either. He might not have planned to kill her before she'd tied him up and threatened his life, but he surely would now.

So what was she supposed to do with him? She only had another day, maybe two, before the drugs wore off. At least that's what Kel had told her. Then it was a toss-up as to whether he'd be able to break out of the chains or not. Kel had said that even though they weren't the highest quality models currently available, they'd hold a fairly young vampire for a little while—long enough for her to get the job done. She'd never tested that theory before. She'd never kept any of them around long enough to need to. And how was she supposed to know if he was a young vampire versus an old one? She'd only been at the job for a couple of years, and she had zero paranormal abilities. No inner instinct was going to guide her way on this one. Not even advice from her mentor, since Kel had decided not to answer his phone. Again. She was on her own.

A few years ago, she would have called Ellie to ask her what to do. But that wouldn't be an option now. She was in deep dog-doo, and she had no idea what to do to pull herself out of it short of running away and leaving him tied to her bed. But given the fact that he knew Ellie, and Ellie always had a way of finding Becca even when she tried her best to disappear, leaving him tied up wasn't an option anymore. He would eventually get free, one way or another. The last thing she needed was to be killed while she slept in the middle of the night.

It all came down to one thing. She didn't want him dead. As deep as her loathing for vampires went, something about this one stirred her inside. He was different. Maybe it was because he was the first once since Tony she'd talked to the next day. She didn't know, couldn't explain it if she tried, but it was there. And she couldn't kill him now.

She sat up, took a deep breath, and walked to the sink for another glass of water. There had to be a solution. And she'd find it, too. As soon as she cleared her mind enough to think.

Chapter Three

Wil rolled his shoulders as much as he could, trying to ward off the sleep threatening to claim him. It seemed like hours had passed since Becca had stomped out of the room. At least she hadn't left the house. Yet. He picked up on her heat, her movement, and even her scent. But still she stayed away. When she'd granted him her so-called reprieve, he hadn't expected it to last this long. Was it because she still planned to kill him, or because she didn't want to anymore? He wasn't taking any chances.

He'd dozed a few times while she'd been away, but didn't allow himself to drift into a sound sleep. That would give her the perfect opportunity to come in and stake him. He wouldn't give her the satisfaction. If she wanted to do it, fine, but he wasn't going down without a fight. In the past hour or so the foggy sensation had cleared from his head and his muscles no longer felt weak. Now he'd be alert and strong enough to defend himself.

He yawned and shifted his back on the bed. The movement caused the cuffs to clink against the headboard, but this time he thought he felt a little give to them. He tested it again, giving his arm a quick tug, and felt the metal bend a little under the strain. He smiled as everything slipped into place. The strange, surreal sensations, the loss of strength. She hadn't restrained him using specialty cuffs. She must have drugged him instead. That was a new one. No wonder she was able to get her prey to be so compliant. But she must not have expected it to wear off so quickly, or else she would have either killed him or let him go by now.

She hadn't been as prepared as she thought. It couldn't get any more perfect than this. She thought she was in control.

She was so wrong.

He wouldn't hurt her, though she'd probably expect him to after what she'd done. No, he didn't want to harm her in any way. But he'd scare her a little. Not too much. She'd been hurt in the past and he wouldn't be the man to do it again, but it wouldn't kill her to be left doubting, wondering and questioning everything she knew. And when he was finished, he'd return her to her sister a different woman than the one Ellie had known, but also a different woman than the one she'd become. There had to be some middle ground, a good mix of the two, and all he had to do was find it and bring it out. Then he could go on with his life knowing he'd fulfilled his promise.

But he was going to have a little fun with her first.

The door opened and Becca walked in, the same indifferent expression on her face. His body reacted to just the sight of her, his cock lengthening and stretching. He chastised himself. Why couldn't he control his reaction to her?

Her gaze turned approving. "Very nice, Wil. Planning on sharing?"

"Hell no."

His body had other plans.

She stepped further into the room, the same mix of lust and humor he'd seen before on her face. "Come on. Once more, for old time's sake?"

He didn't say anything, just stared at her. Knowing he had her right where he wanted her, under his control though she hadn't a clue, renewed his lust. He held the power now, and he planned on letting her know that. But not yet. When she came to that realization, he wanted to make sure it took her by complete surprise. He could do nothing to hide the growing erection. And now there wasn't much reason to bother. He could have her again, and not worry that his life was in danger.

"Sorry. Not in the mood."

She raised an eyebrow again. "Liar."

"I'm a guy, honey. You look at my cock like that, it's gonna stand at attention. It doesn't mean my mind is into it." It was, though. He just liked putting her off balance. She deserved it after what she'd put him through.

Her cool mask slid a little before she recovered and snapped it back into place. But he'd seen the slip, and it made him smile. She might not be the same naïve woman who'd left her family in Stone Harbor three years ago, but she wasn't as tough as she wanted everyone to believe. She needed someone to reintroduce her to the tender side of herself. Someone to shower her with the attention she needed.

He coughed to cover a harsh laugh. That someone would most certainly not be him. He had neither the time nor the inclination to baby a woman in need. He liked his women independent, and disposable. None of that had changed. He wasn't looking for a psycho bent on murdering him. One psychotic girlfriend in the past few years was enough.

Michelle had caused endless problems in his life. Caused him to lose a job he loved, a job he'd held for ten years. And he'd never be able to work as a detective again, at least not without changing his identity. He'd had to leave his home, the peaceful little town he'd been hiding in for a decade. All because he'd gotten involved with the wrong woman. In the end, he'd been a suspect in her murder.

What would happen this time?

He was a fool to think he'd be able to walk away.

Half of him wanted to pull her close, to promise her that everything would be okay. The other half of him wanted to pull her close for entirely different reasons. And she knew it, too, damn the woman.

But she didn't know that the drugs she'd given him had worn off. He still had that little secret and he wasn't quite ready to share.

"Again I'll say it. You're a liar, Wil."

"Maybe I am."

"Are you willing to do anything about it?"

She had no idea. He'd enjoy this more than the night before, since he knew something she didn't. Something important. It would make his release all the more sweet. "Believe me, sweetheart, I'm more than willing. But in the position you've put me in, I'm pretty much useless. You're going to have to do most of the work."

* * * * *

Becca smiled despite the horror this job had become. She'd gladly do all the work if it meant getting to have him again, on her terms. This time he wouldn't take control as he had before. He wouldn't be able to. She had him right where she wanted him, on so many levels.

"That's fine with me." She pulled the sheet down from his body, exposing him completely in the dim lamplight.

He was a magnificent specimen to look at—tall, well-built body, strong muscles, skin lightly furred with hair as dark as the hair on his head. His cock was long and thick, nestled in a bed of dark hair. He looked beautiful, like an offering to some pagan god, stretched out naked on her bed with his arms fastened to the headboard, his chest and side muscled pulled tight from the strain.

For a long time she just looked at him, enjoying the reactions her gaze provoked. His breathing grew heavy. His cock twitched, hardened and lengthened even more. When her gaze locked with his, his eyes darkened and his lips drew into a thin, straight line. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. She knew what he was feeling inside. Confusion, frustration. Anger and lust. She knew because she felt the same emotions swirling deep inside her, churning around until she couldn't make sense of anything. The smart thing to do would be to let him go. But she couldn't. Not now. There were too many unknowns for her to take that chance.

She reached out and placed her hand on his thigh, just above the knee. The muscle under her palm jumped. She moved her palm slowly up his leg, stopping just before she reached the juncture of his hip and groin. He sucked in a breath.

"What are you doing?"

"All the work, remember?"

His groan was answer enough.

She leaned in and kissed him right above her hand and he groaned again. Her pussy fluttered, her juices seeping out to coat her outer lips. As much as she wanted to sink down on top of him and end the wait for both of them, she'd enjoy torturing him more. *He'd* have to wait, but *she* wouldn't. Instead of moving her hand to grip his cock, she pulled it away from his body, stood, and stripped out of her clothes.

When she was naked, she knelt next to him on the empty side of the bed and smiled down at him. "You look like you might be in pain there, Wil."

He let out a harsh laugh. "Just a little bit."

"I'd love to say I'm going to help you with that, but right now I have my own needs to take care of." She brought her hands up to cup her breasts, plumping them together. Her fingers brushed her nipples, circling around the stiffened, sensitive flesh. A moan escaped her lips, as much from the heated look on his face as the touch of her fingers to her own skin. She pinched her nipples between her thumbs and forefingers and let out a ragged sigh. The only thing better at the moment would be if it were Wil's hands on her body, Wil's fingers pinching and pulling at her distended nipples. Wil's lips suckling her, his tongue swirling, his cock buried deep inside her pussy.

She trailed one hand down her stomach and with slow, deliberate movements parted her thighs to give Wil a better view of what she planned next. She slid two fingers into her slick cunt. Her inner walls gripped them tight, pulsing around them with every long, slow thrust. She writhed, rocking her pelvis back and forth.

"God, this feels so good." She brought her thumb up to circle her clit in time with the thrusts of her fingers.

She'd never touched herself in such an intimate way in front of a man, and it was more of a turn-on than she'd ever expected. The knowledge that Wil watched, hard and ready but unable to do anything about it, only increased her arousal. Most of the time she was perfectly happy to let the man take charge in the bedroom, but with Wil everything had changed. She wanted to be the one in control this time. The one to decide what happened and when, the one to set the pace of the encounter. The one to drive her partner crazy with want and need.

The strokes of her fingers grew sharp and erratic. Her lower muscles tightened in anticipation. It wouldn't be long. Having Wil watch her pleasure herself was pushing her toward the edge almost before she was ready. Soon she fell forward, her free hand hit the mattress and her whole body shook. She gasped and moaned, trying to hold back but afraid it wouldn't be possible much longer.

Wil's pained groan echoed through the room. "*Stop.*"

There was such torment in his voice that her fingers stilled inside her. She opened her eyes and glanced up at him.

"What?" she asked, her voice breathless with her impending orgasm.

"I want to make you come."

"How?"

"Straddle my face."

A quiver ran through her core at his words.

"Please," he continued, his tone edgy and pained. "I want to taste you. *Need to taste.*"

He gave her a hot, intense smile that bared his gleaming white fangs. She shivered, remembering what it had been like when he'd sunk those fangs into her shoulder when he thought she'd been too far gone to pay attention. There had been pain, but the pleasure of his bite had far outweighed it.

She licked her lips. "I don't think so. I don't think you deserve a taste."

Her body screamed at her in protest, an ache she couldn't silence settling into her stomach.

"You deserve it. Let me lick you. Let me suck your clit into my mouth, fuck you with my tongue. Let me make you come, Becca. It'll be worth it. I promise."

His voice was hoarse, hot and very convincing. With a shuddering sigh, she moved up to the head of the bed and straddled his face.

He didn't waste any time once he had her there. His tongue ran from her clit to her cunt before he speared it inside her, stroking and lapping her juices. She had to grip the headboard with both hands to keep from losing her balance. He alternated between thrusts into her cunt and swirls around her clit, bringing her closer and closer to the edge without letting her tumble off.

Her body rocked and bowed, her mind hazy and her vision blurry. She could do nothing more than close her eyes and hang on for the ride. What a talented tongue the man had. She'd never felt anything so intense. So damned near perfect it turned her inside out.

Her skin heated, her muscled clenched tight. When he finally stopped the thrusts and stroked his tongue hard over her clit, she came with a sharp cry. Her body stiffened before letting go into a series of convulsions that thrust her breasts against the high headboard. All the while Wil kept his mouth on her, wringing out every last moan and shudder until she'd regained enough control over her body to move down and straddle his chest.

"Wow," she told him, trying to hide her goofy smile. Her skin flushed in embarrassment at the intimate position he'd been able to coax her into. Her juices glistened on his lips and chin and the scent of her arousal filled the air.

"You're amazing," Wil told her, his voice a little strained. "Ride me, Becca."

She frowned. "I can't take any more."

"Believe me, I won't last long. Not in this state."

She glanced behind her at his huge, throbbing cock. In her post-orgasmic state she'd forgotten he hadn't gotten any relief. She should leave him like that, make him suffer to show she still held power over him, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She slid down his body, grasped his cock in her hand, and lowered herself down until he was fully seated within her. He bucked his hips, sending a wave of tremors through her body. One stroke of that thick cock inside her, then two, and she was exploding all over again.

Her body pitched forward, her hands landing on the mattress on either side of Wil's body, her cunt spasming around his cock as he continued to thrust inside her. And then he stiffened, her name on his lips as his cum spurted inside her, bathing her insides with the hot jets. When he relaxed underneath her she let herself fall forward, every muscle in her body giving out. Delicious tremors still raced through her cunt, only

adding to the experience. She smiled against his damp skin. She'd been in control the whole time and it had been awesome.

* * * * *

For the first time since he'd woken up cuffed to her bed, Wil was glad Becca hadn't released him. Having his arms free would be a very, very bad thing right now. He had the strangest urge to hold her, to stroke her hair and the soft skin of her back and comfort her while she lay half-asleep on top of him. An urge like that, no matter how misplaced, could never be good. He had no interest in offering comfort to a woman. At least not a woman he was sleeping with.

And definitely not a woman who wanted to kill him.

Becca yawned against his chest. "You're something else, you know that?"

He couldn't help but laugh. Did she even know that, in the afterglow from her orgasm, she seemed to have forgotten that she planned to drive a stake through his heart?

"Yeah, you too." He wanted her to sleep, since he had plans for her as soon as she did, but he also wanted information. "You said you make money off this vampire hunting thing, right?"

Her soft curls slid against his chest as she nodded.

"Who hired you to kill me?"

"You don't want the answer to that."

She didn't need to give him a name. Just the answer she gave him was enough. Not some nameless, faceless stranger, but someone he knew. And he had a pretty good idea of just who that might be. Someone who didn't want to pay him for a job he'd done, and thought killing him would be the easiest way to rid himself of that debt. He sighed. He wouldn't put it past Rex, but before he approached the man he needed to know with absolute certainty that it was Rex who'd hired Becca.

He said nothing for a long time, waited until her breathing had evened out and her lips parted in sleep before he spoke again. "Becca?"

"Huh?" came the sleepy reply.

"You still didn't answer my question. Who hired you? What's his name?"

"Rex," she said on a yawn. It wasn't long before she dozed back off again.

He lay still under her, not wanting to jostle her and drag her out of the fragile early stages of sleep. For what he had planned, he needed time, and he needed her to sleep right through it all. She'd be out for a while, given the rigorous sex and the blood he'd taken from her twice in such a short period of time. He shouldn't have fed from her the second time, but it had served two purposes. First, it would help him get the rest of his strength back. Second, it would help her to sleep like the dead and give him enough time to accomplish his plan.

Chapter Four

When Becca had been sleeping for about twenty minutes or so, Wil pulled his arms and broke the cuffs holding him to the bed. In his still slightly weakened state, it took a few tries, but it was worth the effort. He worried at first that she'd wake up as he was trying to escape, but she barely stirred. With the blood he took from her and the exertion he'd put her through, she was probably too exhausted to do anything but sleep. As soon as his arms were free the blood rushed back into them, sending jolts and tingles along strained nerves. He let them drop relaxed to the bed, needing to give them some time to get feeling and full range of motion back before he dared to use them. He'd have one chance at what he'd planned, and he wasn't going to ruin it because he was too impatient. He'd waited this long. Another few minutes wouldn't kill him.

Once he was able to move his arms without any pain, he shifted Becca's body off his and onto the mattress with careful, measured movements. When he had her settled beside him he stood, rolling his aching shoulders and cursing that she'd left him there for so long. She was lucky he hadn't dislocated his shoulder or pulled an important muscle or two. Then he would have really been angry – and she might have woken up to find herself naked in the middle of a crowded downtown intersection. As far as he was concerned, she was getting off easy, though she might not see it that way when she woke.

He stood by the bed, unmoving, for a few seconds to make sure she didn't stir. When she stayed blessedly asleep, he walked to her dresser and opened the top drawer. A quick search produced a pair of fantasy-inspiring thigh-high black stockings with intricate lace tops. He smiled. They'd be perfect. He took them back to the bed with him.

Someday he'd love to see her wearing them where they were meant to be worn, but for tonight they'd serve a different purpose. Retribution. He rolled her slowly onto her back, raised her arms over her head and used the stockings to tie her hands to the bedposts. Now she'd see what it was like to wake up at someone else's mercy. But unlike her, he wouldn't accidentally leave a way for her to get out. He'd learned some very interesting tying techniques from some even more interesting and dangerous sources. The more she fought against the bonds, the more they'd tighten. To be remotely comfortable, she'd have to lie still.

He wouldn't leave her there forever, but he'd leave her long enough for her to surrender to what he needed her to do. To pack her shit and go home to her sister. And then he'd be able to walk away before he got in any deeper than he already was. She'd threatened to drive a stake through his heart and that bothered him to no end that he wanted to make sure she was *comfortable*. It was crazy, and he needed some space

before he completely lost his mind and gave up the idea of revenge for what she'd put him through. He was the injured party here, and he was damned well going to make sure Becca understood that before he let her go.

Once he'd finished binding her to the bed, he pulled on his boxers and jeans, grabbed his cell phone and left the room. The main area of the house was spacious enough, and far enough away from the bedroom where Becca lay sleeping, that he could clear his mind and get his focus back on the business he'd come to Pennsylvania for. Being so close to her for so long was messing with his head. Her scent hung heavy in the air and it seemed he couldn't get away from it. But at least if he wasn't staring at her all night long, he'd be able to achieve a small semblance of peace of mind.

He wandered down the hall into the living room and flopped down on the couch. He had a long-overdue phone call to make. At least when Becca had dropped his phone it had landed on his piled clothes. Otherwise she might have broken it. He didn't like to use landlines for business-related calls, and he didn't know if Rex had her line bugged. He wouldn't want her employer to know he was still alive. If Rex or his bouncer goons came looking for Wil, they'd ruin his plans. He flipped open the phone and dialed Ellie's number.

She answered on the fourth ring. "It's a little late Wil." She sounded sleepy and guilt barraged him for calling at such a late hour. But this was a call that couldn't wait until morning, since he had no idea what the rest of the night would bring.

"Sorry if I woke you. This is the first chance I've had to check in. I wanted to give you an update, if you have a second."

"Got any good news for me?" Her voice had perked up. "Did you talk her into coming home?"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean?" she asked, her voice hesitant.

"I've almost got her convinced. In another day or so, we'll be on our way back." He didn't say home, knowing Ellie and Eric no longer lived in Stone Harbor, where the Holmes sisters had grown up. They'd chosen to move after the birth of their son, Aidan, to a more secluded area. Having a child with the ability to change himself into a panther tended to make people a little secretive, especially when the child was only two years old and hadn't yet learned when was an appropriate time to make that change. "How's the little guy."

"Little? Hah! Sometimes I swear he eats more than I do. He's growing like a weed, already three or four inches taller than most children his age. My sister Charlotte's very involved in his life, and I'd really like to see Becca get involved too. We used to be so close. Before everything fell apart."

Fate had a way of taking that away whenever a person got comfortable. Wil knew that well enough. He'd had his own share of heartache in his life. More than he'd share with casual friends. "I know. I'm doing the best I can. I'll get her home soon."

"Wil? How does she look? Is she okay?"

Besides the fact that she was a total nutcase who liked to stake vampires for a living? “She’s healthy, if that’s what you’re asking.” At least physically. The verdict hadn’t come in yet on her mental health.

“I’m glad she’s okay. Is she giving you a hard time?”

He laughed. If only she knew how hard Becca was making things – and him – on a regular basis. He’d never been so confused in his life. “Nah. Piece of cake.”

He stood and wandered around the room, taking in the expansive area and its impersonal décor. There wasn’t a single thing in the house to tie her to anyone, at least nothing he’d seen. No family pictures, no address books, no handmade quilts from obscure relatives or artwork from her nephew. Just furniture, a few newer DVDs and twenty or so hardback popular fiction titles. It seemed Becca had tried to cut everything personal, every part of her past out of her life, and she’d succeeded. In a materialistic way. He’d seen the sadness in her eyes when he’d told her what Ellie had done. Some small part of her still remembered that life, and held onto it. But unless he could find a way to fix her, he was going to be returning Becca to her family a broken woman.

“Thanks, Wil. I appreciate it,” Ellie continued, dragging him from his thoughts.

“No sweat.”

At least it wouldn’t be, if she decided to spare his life after she found out what he’d done to and with Becca. He still didn’t know if he’d be walking away from this situation with all his body parts intact. The way he saw it, there was a better chance he wouldn’t be.

“You’ll keep me updated, right?” Ellie asked.

“I will. Take care.” With that he disconnected the call and dialed another number. Royce, an old friend he knew would be awake at this time of night. A vampire Wil had known for centuries, and one of the few people in his life he could implicitly trust.

Royce answered sooner than Ellie had, and in a much better mood. “What’s going on?”

“Well, I found Becca.”

“Good.” Royce let out a long sigh. “Is she okay?”

“Yeah, mostly.”

“Mostly?” Wil pictured Royce’s blond eyebrows shooting up, his expression amused at Wil’s cryptic choice of words. “You wanna elaborate on that a little?”

“She’s a little psycho.”

“Becca?” Royce laughed. “Nah, she’s easy to deal with.”

Said the man who hadn’t seen her since she was eighteen years old. “She’s a vampire hunter. And get this one. Rex Holden hired her to kill me.”

Royce laughed. “Talk about irony, huh? The hunter became the hunted. In a big way.”

"Just shut up, okay?" Wil ran his free hand through his hair, battling the anger and frustration welling inside him. "This isn't funny."

"Oh, I think it is. I think it's friggin' hilarious."

"You would. You're not stuck in the middle of it."

"And I wouldn't want to be. What are you going to tell Ellie when she finds out you've been sleeping with her sister?"

"Who said I—"

"You didn't have to say it. I know you. If there's danger involved, you're there. And I've seen Ellie's sister. Believe me, I completely understand. But Ellie's gonna kill you."

"Like I haven't figured that out already."

Royce laughed again. "What are you going to do? Do you have some sort of master plan this time, or did you just jump in without looking...again?"

Wil considered for a moment disconnecting the call. Why had he thought calling Royce would make him feel better? The only thing it did was make him wish Royce and his mate lived closer so he could go find him and wrap his hands around the idiot's thick neck. "Of course I have a plan. I'm going to drag her back to where Ellie wants her, as I promised I would. That way she can't do any more damage to our race. With any luck, Ellie will be able to talk some sense into her before it's too late."

"Yeah right. Do you need any help?"

"Nah, I've got this one."

"I don't doubt it for a second. Keep me posted." Royce disconnected the call.

Wil sat there for a long moment, thinking about what Royce had said to him. How could he have known what had happened between him and Becca? Was he that easy to read that something in his voice gave him away? No, it couldn't be that. It had to be something else. Something here wasn't right.

He thought back to the few times he'd spoken to Ellie about Becca. She'd been a little too insistent that he be the one to check up on her and get her home if she wasn't safe. Why him? Why not Royce?

And why hadn't he questioned it sooner?

Because he was an idiot. He hadn't listened to what Ellie was really saying. What would she think when she found out her little scheme had nearly gotten him killed?

He was tempted to give up, to walk away without looking back, but in the end he decided against it. Becca really did need help, and Ellie had to know that or she wouldn't have cooked up this scheme. He'd stay, do what he'd promised, but now he'd be able to walk away with a clear conscience.

An image of Becca as she'd been the night before floated through his mind. Strong, sexy, take-charge and damned near lethal. But under all that, there was a softness she tried not to show to the world. It intrigued him. Made him think getting away might not be as easy as he hoped. The longer he spent with her, the more he wanted to know her. That wasn't good, considering she'd been threatening to murder him just the day

before. She was an assassin, of sorts. A killer for hire. But so was he. What made it right for him to do what he did, and not her?

He stood up and walked back toward the bedroom, his bare feet echoing softly on the cool wood floor. There was one possible difference between them. He didn't kill innocents. Did she?

He didn't know, and he wouldn't be finding out anytime soon. For now, he had more important things in mind. He stepped through the bedroom door and smiled down at her sleeping form. It wouldn't be too long before she woke up, and he planned to be there when she did. He didn't want to miss the look on her face when she realized what he'd done.

* * * * *

Becca woke with a start and tried to sit up in bed. She only moved a few inches off the mattress before she had a distressing revelation. Her arms were anchored to the bed. *Wil*. Fury heated her insides and turned her stomach inside out, a healthy dose of fear on its heels. She shivered, goose bumps spreading across her skin even though the room temperature was comfortable.

"It's about time you woke up. You think your anger is scary? You should see mine."

She snapped her gaze the doorway where Wil stood. Exactly where she'd stood to watch him wake up the night before. He'd put on his jeans, but his feet and chest were bare. She couldn't see his eyes well enough to read his expression, but the set of his shoulders and unsmiling line of his mouth said it all. He was pissed.

And she was helpless.

The drugs hadn't lasted as long as they should have. The chains hadn't held him as they were supposed to. She'd trusted Kel, believed what he'd told her when she'd gotten the new equipment from him last week. But with his distracted mental state, he might have given her the wrong things. And now Wil had gotten loose and left her in the position he'd vacated. Though he could do so much more damage to her than she could have done to him.

He'd turned on the bedside lamp and muted light filled the room, casting him in an eerie, menacing glow. The covers had been stripped away and she lay naked on the satin sheet, her body exposed to him in every way imaginable. Her skin flamed. She slid her legs closed, as tight as they could go. No way in hell was he getting a free show out of her torment.

"What's the matter, Becca? Scared?"

"No," she bit out, though her tone lacked conviction. What woman in her right mind wouldn't be scared? Bravery only went so far, and she was no idiot. Vampires were dangerous creatures, and Wil Brogan was no exception. In the past week she'd listened to more than a few of Rex's patrons tell stories about his exploits, both alone

and with Royce Cardoso. What she'd heard didn't exactly inspire calm. She might very well have found — and antagonized — the worst of the bunch.

"How does it feel to be helpless, Becca?" he asked, a sneer in his voice.

She said nothing. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"Don't want to talk? Fine. I already know how it feels. It sucks knowing you can't move, can't run, you're stuck at the mercy of someone...dangerous."

Dangerous, yes. She'd known that about him from the start. It had been a big part of what attracted her to him. But would he hurt her? Ellie had hired him, so she must trust him in some small way. Ellie didn't leave family business to strangers. But Becca had done something unthinkable by threatening his life. He'd obviously taken offense to that, no matter what his relationship to Ellie was. He might decide she wasn't worth his time, or he might be looking to inflict a little pain after what she'd put him through. She shuddered. She had no choice but to wait and see.

His hands in the front pockets of his jeans, he walked toward the bed. His gait was too easy, his stance too relaxed. It only made her stomach churn harder. She braced herself for something...anything.

"I'm sorry, I think I must be scaring you," he said, his tone taunting.

"Doubtful."

"It seems to me you aren't in any position to lie."

Damn straight she wasn't. But that wouldn't stop her. "Why should I be afraid of you? You should be thankful that I didn't kill you when I had the chance."

Of course, it would be more than simple for him to end it all right now. She winced at the thought.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, again mirroring her earlier actions. But he held no threatening objects in his hands.

"Let's get one thing straight, Becca. I'm not going to hurt you. Much. I certainly won't do any lasting damage."

She swallowed hard. "Really?" The word squeaked out before she could pull it back.

"Really." He leaned in and, in a more than intimate move, brushed a kiss across her stomach. "I have other plans for you. It isn't often I can get a woman into this position, and I think I'm going to take full advantage."

Arousal rushed through her system, trying to push aside the fear and anger. "What are you going to do to me?"

"The better question would probably be what am I *not* going to do to you."

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, bracing herself for the worst. But he didn't touch her again. "Open your eyes, Becca. You need to watch this. I need to know you're watching."

She shivered at the sensual tone in his voice. He wouldn't hurt her. He had other things in mind. Her eyelids drifted open and she found him standing near her feet, his expression dark and unsmiling. Then again, maybe hurting her was exactly what he had in mind.

"I'm watching," she told him. "What do you have planned?"

Wil's answering laugh was a rugged, sexy sound that nearly turned her inside out. Anticipation beaded her nipples and sent a wash of goose bumps over her skin. Her hands clenched into fists, her body awaiting his touch.

He stripped out of his pants and boxers and dropped them to the floor. "I have so many plans for you right now."

With a heated smile he climbed back onto the bed, straddling her chest. His cock bobbed in front of her face and she licked her lips. She leaned her head up to taste it, but he shook his head.

"Not quite yet. Soon."

Then he cupped her breasts in his hands and squeezed them together, sliding his cock between the mounds of flesh. She let out a ragged sigh. The heat in his eyes was almost enough to make her come. She pressed her back into the soft mattress, trying to will her body to relax, but her helpless position only seemed to increase her arousal.

He pulled his cock back and slid it forward again in slow, measured strokes as he fucked her breasts. His thumbs skimmed over her nipples and her back arched toward his touch. A few rough flicks of his thumbs had her whimpering and moaning. And then he pinched the sensitive flesh between his thumbs and forefingers and her whole body bucked.

"You like that?" he asked, his tone taunting.

"You know I do," she bit back.

"Good." He continued playing with her breasts, stroking his cock a little further forward. She opened her mouth to accept him inside, swirling her tongue over the head to catch the drop of pre-cum that had formed there.

Wil hissed out a breath, his grip on her breasts tightening before he gave up all pretense and moved up to thrust his cock into her mouth. He tasted as good as he had the first time. Hot and musky and all male. And hers, if even for just a little while.

He pulled his cock away too soon and moved to kneel next to her on the bed.

"Why did you stop?" she asked, panic filling her at the thought that he might walk away now and leave her in such an uncomfortable position.

"I have other things in mind for now. The cool thing about the way I have you tied is that I've given you a little more mobility than you gave me." He demonstrated his point by rolling her over and flipping her onto her stomach almost effortlessly. Her cheek came to rest on the cool satin of the pillowcase. Then his hands were at her hips, lifting her lower body up. "Bend your knees for me, sweetheart."

She bent as he lifted, and she ended up with her ass sticking up in the air in an undignified position with her pussy probably just about shoved in his face.

"Wil, this is a little embarrassing."

"Why is that?" He trailed the tip of one finger down her slit, making her body shake. "You don't want me to be able to look?"

She blinked. "I don't know."

He laughed. "Maybe there's something I can do to make you more comfortable."

His hot breath fanned across her skin just before he drew his tongue along her slit, following the path his finger had taken moments before. She cried out, her arms jerking against their bonds and tightening the thigh-highs around her wrists.

"Is that better?" he asked. He didn't give her a chance to respond. Instead he spread her labia with his fingers and found her clit with the tip of his tongue, concentrating all his efforts around that tiny bundle of nerves. Her back arched, pushing her shoulders harder against the mattress.

"No. Yes." His tongue pressed hard against her clit and she moaned. "I don't know."

She'd never let a man tie her up before. Had never been able to give any of them that much trust. But then Wil had come along and taken the choice away from her. She supposed she deserved it after what she'd put him through those first two nights. She wasn't nearly as angry with him as she should be, and that was what worried her. Being tied to the bed, helpless, unable to even see what he was doing to her, turned her on. In a big way. And with his face buried in her cunt, he had to know what he was doing to her. She shuddered at just the thought and a flush crept from her center out to her extremities.

He brought a finger to her slit again, driving it into her waiting pussy. Her muscles clenched around him, fluttering, readying for her impending release. Her nipples ached, mashed against the mattress since most of her weight was on her upper body. Wil's teeth nipped at her clit, not hard enough to cause her any pain. Just a shimmering, shuddering pleasure that burst inside her. She rocked her hips back against him, pressing harder and harder into his touch, but still he held her back from the release she so desperately sought.

"Please, Wil. I need more."

He laughed again, but this time the sound was strained. "I wouldn't want to keep a lady waiting."

He moved away from her body and rolled a condom onto his cock, something he had forgotten to do before. Her pussy wept the loss of contact until she felt his cock prod her entrance before sliding inside. The position gave him freedom to touch her wherever he wanted, and he took full advantage. His fingers slid down to her clit and plucked at the throbbing knot of nerves. That single touch was enough to send her body shooting into a climax that stole her breath away. Her body fell forward as much as the position would allow, straining her shoulders and pushing her breasts harder into the

mattress. She writhed while he continued to stroke her clit, continued to thrust that hard cock into her spasming cunt.

His groans echoed through the room, mingling with her whimpers and the sound of his flesh slapping against hers every time he thrust into her. When her tremors stopped he brought his hand back up to her ass, his palms caressing the soft globes. He squeezed them tight, his body hard against her, and cried out her name as he pumped his hot seed into her cunt.

After what seemed like an eternity he pulled out of her, helped her roll onto her back, and flopped down on the mattress next to her. She glanced at him, expecting to find smug satisfaction in his eyes. The worry she found there instead surprised her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, smoothing a strand of sweaty hair away from her face.

"I'm fine," she told him, though she wasn't sure if that was the truth. She'd had the best sex of her life in the past two days, had allowed him to do things to her that she'd never tried before. She should be feeling wonderful, but in her mind confusion reigned.

She had a sinking suspicion that, after this was all over, things would never be the same again.

Chapter Five

"You wanna let me go now?" Becca tugged a little at the thigh-highs to make her point, wincing as the stretchy fabric tightened around her wrists even more. She'd have to get him to teach her to tie those knots. They might come in handy someday.

Wil cracked his eyes open and smiled. "Nah. Not yet. You've had me going for far too long. Excuse the bad pun, but I'm about dead on my feet. I need a full day's rest to recover, so I think I'm going to have to keep you tied up. Sorry, sweetheart. It's the only way I know of to keep you from hurting me while I sleep."

She fumed inside, but fought to keep her expression in check. There had to be another way to get him to set her free. Promises wouldn't work, and she was no longer in a position to make threats. But she did have one more weapon in her arsenal. One women had been using since practically the beginning of time and getting away with it. She was a woman, perceived as weaker by chauvinistic pigs like Wil, and that right there could be her ticket to freedom.

If she played the submissive little female role, at least until he untied her, would he buy it? Somehow she doubted he would. But she had to try. It was the only choice she had left.

"Um, I understand what you're saying and I don't blame you for not trusting me, but I have a little problem."

His fingers stroked a sweaty curl away from her face, his expression bordering on tender when he probably didn't even realize it. She trembled inside, and then chastised herself for feeling a moment of weakness. She had to get out of there — *now* — before they both had a problem. She'd all but kidnapped him, tied him to her bed, and threatened his life. She couldn't start liking the guy now. Just because he fucked like a dream didn't mean he was one of the good guys. She'd made that mistake once before, and she damned well wasn't going to make it again.

"What's the problem?" Wil asked, his fingers still stroking her skin. "Are you cold? Want a blanket? Something to eat?"

"No. I have to go to the bathroom."

His hand froze, his expression surprised for a second before it turned to contrition. "I'm sorry. I should have realized sooner. You humans with your constant need to hydrate. Okay. I'll let you out. For just a few minutes, and then you're right back here on your back."

He slid off the bed, facing away from her, and stretched his arms over his head. His position afforded her a look at the play of strong muscles stretching under his skin. Her mouth watered. He really was something to look at. Her gaze drifted from the backs of

his hard thighs, to the ass she wanted to cup in her palms again. But when she continued on her visual journey, those scars she'd noticed earlier caught her attention again. Long, thin white welts peppered his back, at least fifteen or twenty of them running across the skin from shoulders to hips. Her breath stuck in her throat. Had someone beat him? Whipped him? She couldn't be sure, but that's what it looked like to her. A pain slashed through her heart at the thought, but she shoved it away. Whatever had happened to him, he'd no doubt deserved every second. Must she keep reminding herself that vampires were not the good guys?

"Wil?"

His arms dropped to his sides and he spun around. "What?"

His tone, and the coldness in his eyes, told her he knew what she'd been doing. And he didn't like it one bit. She licked her lips and drew a deep, steady breath. "It must have hurt."

"Sweetheart, you have no idea. Absolutely none." Pain filled his eyes and her heart went out to him.

He glanced away, and when he looked back at her the pain was gone. "Didn't you say you needed the bathroom?"

She nodded. "But I want to talk to you first. Why won't you tell me what happened to you?"

"It was in another lifetime. One I moved beyond a long time ago. Sometimes the past is better left in the past. I'm sure you understand that."

She had a feeling there was more to the story than that, but she didn't press him. If she made him angry, he might storm out and leave her helpless. Once they were on even ground, though, all bets were off. She'd ask all the questions she wanted to. If she had to face her past, he should have to do the same thing. It was only fair.

That is, if she ever saw him again. Once he had her untied she wasn't planning to stick around long.

"Okay. Fine. Don't talk about it." She rolled her eyes for effect. "Believe me, I really couldn't care less. I just thought the pattern was kind of neat."

Temper flared in his eyes. "Neat? No. Not even close. Is this some sort of joke to you?"

She shrank back against the mattress. Maybe now wasn't the ideal time to antagonize him. It would have to wait until she could run if necessary. Only a few more minutes. "Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. If it was another lifetime, though, why is it getting you so upset?"

"Because it's none of your business. End of story, damn it." He let out a harsh breath and shook his head, leaning over to untie her hands. In less than a minute he had her free and she pushed up into a sitting position.

Her back ached, her arms feeling ready to dislodge from her body at the shoulders. She rolled her shoulders a few times, which only made tingles run from them to the tips

of her fingers. Her chest muscles throbbed and her wrists pinched where the thigh-highs had surrounded them. Deep red welts circled the tender skin and rubbing them to get some feeling back only made the pain worse.

"Ouch."

"What hurts?" The concern was back in Wil's eyes, but it was gone almost as soon as she'd seen it.

"Everything."

"I'd say I'm sorry, but I just can't manage to do it." He laughed. "Now you know what it feels like to be tied up for so long."

An involuntary shiver ran down her spine, not from the reminder but from the memories of what he'd done to her when she'd been tied up. She'd never tell him, but he could do it again. Anytime he wanted. She wouldn't even put up a fight. At least not much. As long as he untied her as soon as he was finished.

She got up from the bed and rubbed her hands down her face. "Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet. You're going right back when you finish in the bathroom."

"Can I at least have a shower?"

"No. Not yet. I told you I need my sleep."

She sighed. "Can't handle a little sleep deprivation?"

"You don't want to see me like that. Trust me. You wouldn't like it."

Given his demeanor when he'd been fully functional, she had to agree. "Okay. Give me just a few seconds."

She walked over to the bathroom, stepped inside, and started to shut the door behind her.

Wil put his hand against the door. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Closing the door. So I can pee in *private*. Is that okay with you?"

"I don't think so."

For the love of God. What was the matter with him? "Where am I going to go? I have no clothes on. Do you expect me to run around my neighborhood naked?"

He glanced into the bathroom, his gaze scanning the room, before he gave up with a shrug. "Okay. Fine. But you have two minutes before I come in after you."

"Thank you." She beamed at him as she closed and locked the door.

And then she leaned against it and her smile widened even more. For a smart guy, he was awfully dense sometimes.

She took care of business, both because she needed to and because it would give her story some validation. Then she turned on the water.

"Almost done?" Wil called through the door.

"Just a second. Let me wash my hands first." She opened the hamper and searched for something wearable, finally deciding on a pair of soft cotton pajama shorts and a

baggy black sweatshirt. No underwear—she had to draw the line somewhere. She pulled the clothes on, paired the mismatched outfit with the white terrycloth slippers she kept in the bathroom, and glanced at herself in the mirror. She nearly laughed. She wouldn't win any beauty awards, but at least she'd be safe for the time being.

She opened the window, giving silent thanks that the windows were the quiet vinyl kind, before she slipped outside into the bright sunshine of the morning. She hit the soft ground below with barely a thump. She didn't dare take a minute to adjust to the brightness after being in semi-darkness for so long. Even though Wil was a vampire, she'd heard stories that sunlight was only fatal with prolonged exposure. Once she got far enough away from the house he wouldn't be able to search for her. And she could wait for him to fall asleep before she headed back to the house for her purse and keys. Then she'd be able to get her car.

* * * * *

Wil gave the bathroom door a hard shove. The lock gave, the doorknob clattered to the ground and the door slid open on silent hinges. The room was empty, the window open, the curtains blowing in the breeze.

"How Hollywood cliché," he muttered. And exactly what he'd expected to find. Had she really thought she was fooling him with her little bathroom game? He stepped inside, squinting from the bright sunlight that streamed into the room. It tingled across his bare skin as it touched him, but he ignored the small pain. It was nothing compared to what he'd felt in his lifetime.

He walked out of the bathroom and shut the door, pacing to the bedroom window. He parted the curtains an inch just in time to see Becca run across the street, turn the corner and walk out of his sight. Wearing that baggy, faded sweatshirt and threadbare shorts made her look like a harried mother running to the store after she dropped her kids off at school. She wouldn't attract much attention, not unless she wanted to. But would she go to the police?

He was betting she wouldn't. Vampire hunters as a general rule were a secretive bunch. Moving from place to place every few months, staying at the edge of society. Loners. Their line of work required it. If they were discovered, everything would explode in their faces. If the masses found out about the vampires walking among them, that would start a chain of reactions no one wanted. But it would also be bad to the hunters who sought and killed the vamps. There was no medical explanation for what they did, as there was with vampire. The hunters would be very likely be tried for crimes. Vampirism, after mostly extensive research, would be found to be exactly what it was. A genetic mutation of human DNA. But vampires were, in a way, human.

Wil smiled to himself. There was no crime in being different. And Becca was smart enough to realize that. She wouldn't go to the police, not after she'd tied him to her bed. Even if she did decide to get help, it would be her word against his. And he could be very persuasive. So he didn't worry, not about that. The only thing he worried about

was that she might not come back. But she'd left without her car keys, without her purse. Women carried their lives in their purses—she wouldn't be able to survive long without it. So instead of chasing her, he decided to sit tight and wait. She'd come back. And when she did he'd be more than ready.

He went back into the bathroom, pulled the shade down over the gaping window and turned the shower on hot. She wouldn't be back for a while yet, most likely not until she thought he'd had time to fall asleep, and he had some time to kill. Might as well spend it cleaning her off his body. Not that he wouldn't be covered with her scent again soon. He had no plans to keep his hands off her. It hadn't taken him long in life to learn that sexual chemistry didn't necessarily mean emotional chemistry. He didn't have to like Becca to want her.

His cock rose a little at just the thought of wanting her again, and it got even harder when he grabbed the bar of soap from the ledge and lathered up his body. The soft, clean scent reached his nostrils and made his gut tighten. It smelled just like her. Just like the smooth skin he wanted to lick every inch of. The nipples he wanted to roll over his tongue and nip with his teeth. The soft, creamy thighs he'd have his face between while he made her come with his mouth.

Shit. Why did she affect him so much? It wasn't right. She killed his kind. He should hate her, but he couldn't bring himself to muster the emotional. He still felt a strong, out-of-place protective instinct where she was concerned, since Ellie had been so specific in the fact that she felt Becca was in danger. Even knowing Ellie had set him up didn't diminish the instinct. Someone needed to save Becca from herself. It shouldn't be him. *Couldn't* be him. But he wanted it to be—a fact that made no sense to him at all.

He washed his hair using her shampoo—yet another thing to remind him of her softer, more feminine qualities. Within minutes the steamy shower had filled with her scent and his cock was fully erect. It throbbed and a drop of pre-cum leaked out of the tip. He'd protested being tied up, and it had been uncomfortable, but at the same time it had been exciting in a strange way. A way he'd never before experienced. Never wanted to experience. But now that he'd done it, he wanted to do it all over again. At least he did if it was Becca who'd bound him to the bed. She could do it again to him anytime she wanted. But it wasn't something he was sure he wanted with any other woman. With Becca, all the rules had changed.

Even better than being bound and having her straddle his face had been what had come after. Becca, tied to the bed, writhing under him as he fucked her hard. He'd love to tie her up again. There were a hundred things he'd love to do to her in that position. Helpless, at his mercy and loving every second. She might have gotten off on fucking him while he'd been bound, but she'd liked her own wrists bound better. Her ever-expressive eyes had told him that. She'd wanted him to take charge. Practically begged him to do it with her gaze.

And he'd nearly been overcome with the urge to release the ties and pull her close.

Stupid. Crazy, stupid and probably suicidal. But she got to him. He couldn't stop his mind from reacting to her on some base level. He'd always loved a challenge, and so far

she'd proven to be one of the hardest ones he'd ever faced. He couldn't let himself care about her, but somehow she'd gotten under his skin. It was crazy, but he couldn't stop if from happening. Didn't even want to, though that was another huge mistake.

He took his cock in his hand, letting the hot water rinse his body clean. Becca had held him like that, that first time. Just before she'd opened her mouth around him and encircled him in those lush lips.

He groaned in response to the memory of her soft lips, the warm cavern of her mouth enveloping him. The tongue she'd used to expertly manipulate him to orgasm within minutes, like a human teenager with out-of-control hormones rather than the centuries-old vampire he was. He wanted that feeling again. He wanted it to never end.

His hand stroked along his hard length, mimicking the movements of Becca's mouth the night before last. He'd taken her hard and fast that night, once he'd recovered from the excellent job she'd done sucking him off. He'd worried briefly about hurting her, but she hadn't complained, not even once. She'd done all she could to encourage it. Pushed him into taking her in a way he'd never taken a woman the first time he bedded her. Usually he liked to take it slow, get to know her body and what she liked before he brought his own desires into the mix. Becca's wants and needs seemed to match his perfectly.

The memories of mounting her in such an animalistic way nearly sent him over the edge, but he held back. He leaned against the smooth tile wall, his hand stroking and squeezing at a leisurely pace. The whole time he wished she'd come back through the window and finish him off. Jerking himself off was fine, but he'd much prefer a woman's hand or mouth. Or cunt.

His shuddered, jerked, as his impending release wound tight inside him. She'd felt so perfect around him, squeezing him as he thrust in and out of her wet cunt. So damned perfect. A damned perfect match for his needs. Sex with Becca would never, in a million years, be boring.

He came on that thought, his semen spurting onto his hands and the shower floor, washing down the drain along with the scents of her soap and shampoo. It was a long time before he had the strength to push away from the wall and climb out of the shower. By the time he did, the water had started to run cold and his legs shook so hard he was afraid they'd fall out from under him.

Once dried off and dressed, he snooped through her bathroom cabinets until he found what he needed. A hairbrush, toothpaste, a razor and a can of shaving gel. The shaving gel scent was peaches and cream, but at the moment he didn't have much choice. Either use the girly scent, or leave stubble burn on the inside of Becca's legs once he got her naked on the bed with his face between her thighs.

He shaved quickly, ran the brush through his hair and borrowed her toothbrush to clean his teeth. Though his body urged him to sleep, cleaning up refreshed him a little. He wouldn't sleep now, not while he waited for her to come home. He'd meant it when he told Rex he valued the element of surprise, and his body was used to being

deprived. He'd survive, though when this ordeal was over he might need to sleep for a week.

When he finished he left the room and wandered down the short hall to the main area of the house, where he started pulling the shades on the many windows closed. A little sun was one thing once in a while, but bathing in it would do some damage. No sense risking a major sunburn. Once he finished his task, he settled onto the couch to wait for her to come home.

* * * * *

Becca sat on a park bench downtown, watching people pass by. No one even gave her a second glance, despite the puffy slippers. Strange that the world had gotten so informal that she could walk around in her pajamas and no one would say a word or shoot her a questioning glance.

A variety of people passed her on the street—businessmen and women in dark power suits, young mothers pushing small children in baby carriages, teenagers who didn't look old enough to be home from school on the Monday morning. A cool breeze muted the warmth of the spring day. The sounds of cars and motorcycles filled the air around her. Dogs panted and barked as their owners walked by. Just a normal day in Ardon, Pennsylvania. But her life was anything but normal.

She squinted into the brightness, not for the first time wishing she had her sunglasses. They were in her car, and she couldn't go back to the house yet. She had to make sure Wil had enough time to fall asleep. Unless he'd left. That was always a possibility. One she hadn't thought of until now. Could he have left in the middle of the day? Vampires weren't supposed to be able to go out in the sun for more than a minute or two. That was what she'd always been told. But what if it wasn't true? What if Kel had been wrong? Her mistake could very well get her killed.

There were some things Kel had been evasive about, some things he'd told her she didn't need to know. Well, she needed to know them now. He'd always insisted they work only at night, insisted that vampires couldn't tolerate the sun. But how would he know that with absolute certainty? Most of what humans knew of vampires were legend and myth. Stories that had been passed down in so many different ways that everything blended into what vampire hunters liked to call knowledge, but most of them had no real facts to back it up. Kel had trained her, and trained her well, but passing information from human to human only went so far.

She had to talk to him. Now.

She pushed up from the bench and rushed down the sidewalk in the direction of the apartment Kel had rented when he'd moved out of the house they'd been sharing. It was a ten minute walk from downtown, but she made it about half that. By the time she stomped up the two flights of stairs and banged on his door she was out of breath and her face flamed from the effort.

After a few minutes he answered the door, shirtless, his hair disheveled and a look of confusion on his face. He took in the sight of her and muttered a soft curse. "Morning, Becca. Ever hear of calling first?"

"I have a problem." She didn't wait for his answer, just pushed the door open and stepped past him into the tiny space.

She shook her head at the sight of his apartment, still baffled that he'd chosen to move out of the luxury rental into what amounted to not much more than a closet. A studio half the size of her living room. A card table sat against the wall by the door, flanked on three sides by scuffed metal folding chairs. A countertop refrigerator and a hot plate were his kitchen appliances, and a small black and white TV on top of the card table served as his entertainment. The only other furniture the room contained was a mattress tucked into the far corner.

"Do you have any idea how early it is?" he asked, his eyes narrowed and his arms crossed over his chest.

"It's the middle of the morning." She shook her head. "How can you live like this? You're not poor, are you? I know what you make, Kel. You should have plenty of money."

He shrugged. "Money comes and goes, Becca."

Something inside her hitched at his tone. What was wrong with him? He'd moved into this dump, tried to cut all ties with her more than once. They'd been so close, she still saw the caring in his eyes. It wasn't her. It had to be something else.

An idea hit her and she sucked in a breath. "Kel, are you using drugs?"

This, at least, got a laugh out of him. His expression softened and his body relaxed, but not enough for her comfort. "No, honey. I'm not using drugs."

But there was something going on. She heard it in the words he left unspoken. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about. I told you before. I'm burnt out. I need some time away from everything. Now why don't you tell me why you're here since you've already woken me up? I'll never get back to sleep now."

She flopped down into a creaky chair and snuck a sidelong glance at Kel. Tall and athletic rather than overtly muscular, he kept his light brown hair cut in almost a military fashion. His brown eyes were warm, despite his aggravation at being disturbed at what he considered an ungodly hour. He grumbled and complained a lot, but she knew he didn't mean it. "Like I said, I have a problem. Do you have any coffee?"

His answering laugh was a rough, grating sound. "Give me a second to wake up. It was a long night."

She swallowed hard, wrung her hand in her lap. Her gaze moved to the closed bathroom door. "Are you alone? Did I interrupt anything?"

"Nope. Nothing to interrupt in a long while." He waggled his dark eyebrows at her. "Why? You interested?"

She pushed up from the chair and walked to the counter where the coffeemaker sat. She needed her daily caffeine fix before the headache started, and Kel looked like he needed it more than she did. If he was just going to stand around and complain, someone needed to take action. "Where's your coffee? I'll make a pot if you just get the can for me."

Without waiting for a response, she brought the carafe to the sink and filled it with water. By the time she walked back to the coffee maker, Kel had placed a small can of ground coffee next to it.

"Thank you." She smiled at him before filling the filter basket with coffee, closing the lid, and turning the machine on. She turned back to him with her hands on her hips. "And you know damned well I'm not interested."

He clucked his tongue. "Too bad. We could have had a really good time together."

She glanced at him. Despite his easygoing nature, she knew him well enough to know he wasn't always so genial. He could be a hard-ass when he wanted to be. She'd seen him in action more than once. She wouldn't want to be on his bad side.

"Nah. We're friends. We're not really compatible any other way."

His eyes narrowed and his smile grew. "What I wouldn't give to prove you wrong right now."

He flirted with her—with all women—all the time, but she knew better than to think he meant anything by it. It was just part of his personality. He'd made it clear early on, back when they'd first met and he'd agreed to train her despite his misgivings, that he wasn't interested in anything more than friendship. They were too similar to get along as anything more than friends, and they were both happy with it that way. At least they had been until a few months ago, when he'd started acting strange.

Maybe he was telling her the truth. Maybe it was just burnout and he'd get over it given enough time and space.

Or maybe he was lying through his teeth.

She had a sinking suspicion it was the latter, but in the three years he'd known him he'd never lied to her before. He wouldn't do it without good reason. So if it was time and space the guy wanted, that was what he'd get. After she got the answers she needed. And if she planned to get them today, she'd have to wait for him to wake up a little more before she started badgering him.

She swatted him on the shoulder. "Give it up, Denison. You know you don't mean it."

"You wound me, Rebecca." He put his hand to his heart and shook his head, an mock expression of pain on his handsome, boyish face. "Now what is that problem you had to come rushing over here to tell me about?"

"In a second."

Once the coffee had finished brewing, Becca poured two mugs and brought them to the table. She grabbed the milk out of the fridge while Kel got the sugar bowl and added three heaping spoonfuls to his mug.

She wrinkled her nose. "That's so gross."

"Better than drinking it with none."

She poured milk into her mug and then passed the jug along to him. When she'd had a few sips and given her breathing a chance to calm after the stress of the past few days, she opened her mouth to speak.

"I have a couple questions for you before we get to that."

Kel's eyes darkened and he leaned forward, all joviality forgotten. This was the Kel she knew well. Calm, serious and collected Kel who always got the job done with an efficiency that inspired awe and envy. When he spoke, his tone was short and even.

"Nothing personal."

He wasn't asking. He was telling her that personal questions wouldn't be tolerated. It raised her curiosity even more, but she ignored the urge to ask him about it. She has more important things to find out. "No, nothing personal. Don't worry, your secrets are safe."

The fear that flashed across his eyes—an expression he'd never shown her before—clenched her stomach.

"Good. What is it you need to know?"

"Can vampires stand prolonged sun exposure?"

"That's basic, Becca. We've already been through that before. No, they can't."

"But what if you're wrong?" she asked, her mind flashing back to Wil at her house—or maybe out looking for her as they spoke.

"Trust me. I know this for a fact. You've been hunting for three years. I've been hunting for eight. Since I was fifteen years old. I know what I'm talking about. I've seen a lot more in my time than you have."

She swallowed hard. She hated to dispute what he said, knowing he'd only get angry, but she had to be sure. And she did have some personal experience with Tony, though at eighteen she hadn't paid attention enough to remember what was fact and what was fiction. "I remember Tony going outside during the day."

Kel's expression darkened even more. "With you, or alone?"

"Alone."

"Then he probably had someplace dark to hide. Vampires pretending to be humans can be very sneaky, and in today's world of nontraditional schedules, they easily can slip into a near-human existence as far as outward appearances go."

He was right. She knew it. But it didn't clear things up at all in her mind. "So hypothetically speaking, a vampire wouldn't be able to leave the safety of a house in the middle of the day and spend hours searching around town, right?"

"No." He let out a breath. "Spill, Becca. What the hell is going on?"

"Okay, here's the thing. Do you remember the vampire I told you about last time we spoke? The one who'd been hanging around Rex's bar staring at me?"

"Yeah. I remember."

"Two nights ago I brought him home with me."

"You do that all the time. What's the problem?"

"He's still there."

Kel just about jumped out of his chair. His eyes widened and he slammed his fisted hands into the tabletop. "What do you mean by that? Please don't tell me you have a vampire, alive, still tied to your bed. I trained you better than that. You wouldn't be that stupid."

Wanna bet? "Well, he isn't exactly tied to my bed anymore."

Kel said nothing for a few minutes. He drained his coffee in one gulp, set the mug down with a heavy thump, and glared at her. "That's stupid, Becca. Plain stupid. Now he's going to be after you and —"

"Actually, I don't think so." She dropped her gaze to the table, her face flaming. "I have a funny feeling I may be able to trust this one."

"You slept with him more than once."

It wasn't a question. It was a statement and there was no need to answer. She wouldn't lie to Kel about something like that. And even if she tried, he'd see right through her. She was a lot of things, but a good liar wasn't one of them.

She braced herself, waiting for his tirade, but it never came.

"Not all vampires are bad, Becca," he murmured instead.

Her gaze flew up to meet his. His tone worried her. Was he involved with a vampire and was afraid to tell her? She didn't know, but at the moment it was the only thing she could think of to explain his sudden shift in behavior. "I know that. Don't you think you've told me that enough?"

"At this moment in time, I feel it bears repeating." He shook his head, a forlorn expression in his eyes. "You should have let me check out this one before you brought him home."

"What are you, my keeper?"

He let out a heavy sigh. "No, but when you used to contract through me at least I could make sure you weren't killing senselessly. Now you seem to have gone on a rampage."

"I have not. I've chosen very carefully."

"What do you know about this one?"

"Rex hired me to take him out. He was trying to get money from Rex. Rex told me he was threatening him."

"And you believed him?"

She pushed her mug away. "Rex has never lied to me before. He'd always been upfront. I was there to provide security, of sorts. What else was I supposed to think? You know my history."

"That's becoming a damned poor excuse."

She knew it, too, but she refused to let him see he was getting to her. She squared her shoulders and tilted her chin up. "Oh well."

"You found out he wasn't as bad as you thought," Kel said softly. "Or else you would have killed him by now."

She nodded. "But it gets worse."

"Can it get any worse than you keeping a vampire locked up inside your house?"

Unfortunately, yes. The whole incident had become a twisted mess she could no longer make sense of. It weighed on her mind, fighting for precedence with Kel's unusual behavior until she felt like she was being pulled in too many directions at once. Another tug, maybe two, and she'd be yanked apart.

"My sister hired him to find me and bring me back home."

He let out a low whistle. "That sucks. Sometimes I'm really glad I have no family to get in my way."

He said the words, but the sarcasm hung heavy and thick within them.

"You should be. Trust me on this one. Especially when you have a family like mine." Demons and vampires coupled with the fact that her sisters, mother and grandmother were traditional witches. All her life she'd fought for normalcy until three years ago when she'd finally decided to give up the fight.

Why couldn't she just have been born into a normal dysfunctional family rather than a supernatural one?

"It sounds like you're in kind of a sticky situation," Kel said, his tone amused. Well, at least she'd managed to lighten his mood if nothing else.

"It would appear that I am."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

"I was kinda hoping you'd be able to tell me what to do." She ran a sweaty palm down her face. "Give me a ride home. He should be sleeping right now. Maybe you can help me assess the situation."

Kel stood and glanced out the window, a pained look on his face. "Now?"

"Well, yeah. While the vampire is sleeping would be the opportune time, don't ya think?"

"Fine. Give me a few minutes to get ready." He disappeared into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him.

Five minutes later he came out, wearing a pair of baggy jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. He grabbed his car keys, put on a pair of mirrored sunglasses, and headed

for the door. Once he had it open, he glanced back at her over his shoulder. "Are you coming with me, or are you going to stand there staring all day?"

She raised her eyebrow at him. Something wasn't right. "What's with the shades?"

"I told you it was a long night last night. Tough job, too much to drink. The sun will kill my eyes. I already have a headache as it is, so give me a fucking break, okay?"

"Okay. Jeez. *Sorry.*" She followed him out the door, sticking her tongue out at his back.

When they got down to the parking lot where he kept his car, he tossed her the keys.

She shook her head. "I don't have my license with me."

"And this headache is screwing with my depth perception. Either you drive, or we go nowhere."

She relented with a sigh, climbing behind the wheel as he settled himself into the passenger seat and put the seatback all the way down.

"Have you seen a doctor about this?" she asked, more than a little concerned.

"Shut up and drive, okay?"

Normally she'd take offense at being spoken to like that, but she wasn't in the mood for a fight. If they kept arguing, that was what it would turn into, and she didn't want to aggravate him any more than she already had.

"Okay. Fine. I'll shut up," she told him as she started the car.

For now. But once she had the problem with Wil cleared up, she was going to sit Kel down and make him tell her what had gone so wrong in his life.

She made the drive back to her house in less than three minutes, according to the dashboard clock.

"Just keep quiet in case he's not asleep," Becca told Kel as she unlocked the door and let them into the house.

Kel nodded, pulled off his hood and stuck his sunglasses in the pocket of his sweatshirt, and followed her inside.

They had just reached the kitchen area of the main room when a light snapped on. Wil stood behind them, blocking the front door.

Chapter Six

Wil fumed as he watched Becca's expression shift between guilt and irritation. Like he was the one causing a problem around here. Who did she think she was, treating him like this? He hadn't killed her, though he was starting to think he should have left last night rather than fuck her again. Some women, no matter how enticing, just weren't worth the trouble. She was fast proving to be one of them.

She gulped, took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. What might have been a smile, or possibly a smirk, passed over her delicate features. "Honey, I'm home?"

"Nice try. Who's your friend?"

He stepped further into the kitchen to get a closer look at the man tagging along behind her. A smile spread over his face. This was good. Very good. In fact, it didn't get much better than this. If he ever needed proof that she was an inept hunter, he had it now. Did Becca know whom she was keeping company with? From the looks of things, he doubted it.

His smile widened, displaying the fangs he'd willed to elongate. The glare he shot her friend was pure male challenge. A challenge the younger, weaker man wouldn't be able to resist. "Did you replace me already?"

The man stormed toward Wil, his hands bunched into fists, and took a swing. Without much effort Wil grabbed his fist and forced it back down to his side. "I highly doubt that's going to happen."

The man winced, yanked his fist out of Wil's grasp and rubbed his wrist.

Becca punched Wil in the shoulder. Hard. "Kel's a friend, Wil. *Only* a friend. So cut the macho possessive bullshit. I'm really not into that."

A friend? Or so she thought. "That's not all he is, sweetheart."

He glanced at the man and ran his tongue across his fangs. "What's your name?"

Becca turned around and put her hands on her friend's shoulders. "This was a mistake. I didn't mean for a confrontation to happen. It's all a mess and I don't want you in the middle of something that isn't your problem. Maybe you should go."

"I'm fine, Becca. I can handle him better than you can. Trust me." He stepped around Becca and stood in front of Wil. "I'm Kel Denison."

Hearing the name brought a smile to Wil's face. He'd thought he recognized the boy— young man—but hadn't been sure until he'd heard the name. "Lela's son."

"You knew my mother?" Suspicion etched the kid's features, his hands bunching into tight fists again.

Wil didn't blame him for being suspicious. It was obvious from looking at him that Kel had had a hard life. Reared alone by a single mother who most likely had no clue how to deal with her child, a loner father Wil knew kept no close ties to anyone. All but orphaned at probably fifteen or sixteen years old when Lela had passed away. Yes, he'd known Kel's parents, and that alone told him this young man was in pain. Fighting the nature he probably cursed every day of his life.

Wil nodded, his gaze searching Kel's face. He favored his mother, definitely. Striking features, almost beautiful in their intensity. A darkness about him that didn't come from his father's heritage. "I knew both of your parents."

"Then you understand why we do what we do."

"I'm not so sure I do." Wil let his gaze drift to Becca before he brought it back to Kel again. "Are you more discriminating than she is?"

He'd hope so, given Kel's parentage.

Kel surprised Wil by glancing over his shoulder at Becca. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing."

"Becca," Kel chided.

"I might have led him to believe I...enjoy the kill. Sort of."

Sort of? Wil glared at Becca. Was she saying she *didn't* enjoy the kill? She'd certainly led him to believe otherwise when she'd woken him up by slapping a stake in her palm. "What exactly are you trying to say, Becca?"

Kel huffed and turned his attention back to Wil. "This isn't what you think. Whatever she told you, she didn't mean it."

"I'm not so sure about that. It seemed to me she meant every word. Wholeheartedly. And I don't know if I can let her get away with that. Does she work for you?"

Kel shook his head. "She used to. Not anymore. Now she does her own thing."

Kel shot Becca a look that told Wil he didn't approve of her "own thing" more clearly than words ever would have.

Wil cleared his throat. "Are you the roommate she told me about? The one who upset her by moving out on her?"

"Would the two of you quit talking about me like I'm not even here?" Becca demanded, her tone laced with fury. When neither of them answered, she stomped to the fridge, pulled out a can of soda, and popped the top. After a long swig, she set the can down on the counter so hard soda splashed over the tile surface. "This is ridiculous."

Wil was inclined to agree, though for very different reasons. He should have left when he'd had the chance, rather than wait around for the three-ring circus to begin. Could this possibly get any more demented? "Why the reinforcements, Becca? Afraid of me?"

She snorted. "You wish."

He didn't want her fear. But he didn't want her friend hanging around forever, either. He turned his attention back to Kel, determined to put him at ease so he'd walk away and leave them alone. "You must have had a hard life after your mother passed away."

Kel nodded, his expression still wary. "It was tough, but I managed okay."

"Have you ever had any contact with your father?"

"No. And I want to keep it that way. If I find him..." His voice trailed off and he slammed a fist into the tabletop loud enough to make Becca jump.

She blinked and shook her head. "I thought you said your father was dead?"

Kel didn't even look at her. "He's not."

"Why would you lie to me, Kel?"

He held up his hand, glanced in Becca's direction. "I don't want to talk about this now, okay? Remember when I told you I needed space and time? This is why. You won't let up. I don't need to be badgered right now."

Wil understood that to be a comment to him as well, but he had to keep prying. It was the only way he was going to get Becca to understand that he wasn't the only one she should be wary of. "We have a lot in common."

Kel raised an eyebrow. "How's that?"

"Children of mixed parentage."

The tension seemed to drain out of Kel right in front of Wil's eyes. Kel blinked, his eyes wide. His shoulders relaxed and his hands unclenched. "You are?"

Wil nodded.

"You taught Becca everything she knows." He turned his attention to Becca, who was trying her best to look bored. "Did you ever wonder how he knows so much about vampires?"

"Why should I question him? He had the information I needed. I don't care how he got it. He's been hunting them for eight years. A person's got to acquire a good working knowledge of the creatures after that long, don't they?" She glared at him before turning her attention to Kel. "And what's this crap about mixed parentage? What the hell is he talking about? Mixed races?"

Kel said nothing, didn't even look at her.

Wil decided to shake things up even more. From Kel's actions, he obviously hadn't accepted himself for what he was. Not only did Becca need to know what she was dealing with, but Kel needed to learn that his particular mix wasn't a bad thing. "Mixed parentage, as in one parent being human."

"And the other...?" she asked, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Wil opened his mouth to finish, but Kel beat him to it. "The other being vampire. My father...isn't human, Becca."

"No. That's not possible." She shook her head, her face turning a ghostly pale. "Please tell me this is some sort of sick joke."

She didn't give them a chance to respond. Like a flash of lightning she pushed away from the counter and shot out of the room. The bedroom door slammed seconds later, shaking the dishes in the cabinets.

Kel turned a glare on Wil, his breathing ragged and his face flushed. "What the hell are you trying to do? Is this some game to you?"

"You shouldn't have walked away from her. That was a bad move. She was heading in the wrong direction. Wanting to take out vampires for sport rather than because they're a danger to the world. Forgive me if I don't think that's a good thing."

"Why did you have to drag me into it?"

"To show her that we aren't all bad. She's close to you. Used to work for you. I figured that had to count for something."

Kel stood and rubbed a hand down his face. "I hadn't told her for that reason. We're too close. She's a good friend. At least she was. Before you made me blab what I'd been working my ass off to keep from her. Now you had to go and fuck it up. She's never going to talk to me again."

"Honesty's always best, don't you think?"

"What the hell do you know about anything?"

Wil laughed. He knew a lot more than Kel would ever understand. More than he could ever try to explain. But Kel was young, stubborn and angry, and he'd never listen. "I know you're fighting something you can't control. Let go. What's wrong with being who you're supposed to be? Sit down for a few minutes. I'm going to go talk to her. I think I can make her understand."

"I'm not sticking around." Kel stalked toward the door. He turned the knob and started out before he glanced over his shoulder. "By the way, I'm not anything like you."

"How is that?"

"I'm a human, not a vampire."

Wil sighed. He understood Kel's existence, understood the choices he'd made. He'd made similar ones himself a few centuries ago. It was hard for a half-vampire to understand that even a small amount of vampire blood was enough. The few that survived childhood and made it into adulthood had trouble denying their tendencies. When they finally snapped, they lost control. People died.

"You're vampire."

"No, I'm not. I don't have to accept that part of myself. I'm not full blood. I can be human."

No one had ever explained it fully to him, and now wasn't the time. Wil knew he wouldn't listen. Not yet. But now that his secret had come out, he'd think about it. His

nature would be a lot easier to accept if he didn't have to hide it from everyone he was close to. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

So young. Not much older than Becca, but yet too old to be fighting what his body really wanted. "You won't be able to fight the urges much longer."

"I'll fight them for the rest of my life. *I will.*" He pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on. The sweatshirt hood followed. "You can just go to hell for all I care. Don't ever try to tell me how to run my life, and don't you dare do anything else to ruin my friendship with Becca."

He didn't give Wil a chance to respond. He turned and left the house, slamming the door behind him.

Wil sighed. There wasn't any more he could do there. Chasing him down would only make things worse. He needed to give the kid time to cool off. Someday he'd have to learn, like they all did, to accept his destiny. He just hoped no one got hurt in the process, though he had a feeling that wasn't going to be possible.

He turned away from the door and headed down the hall toward Becca's bedroom. Time to find her and do some damage control before things got any worse. Now that the walls had been torn down, he didn't want to see her build them up again. This was the perfect opportunity for him to finally get through to her.

When he reached her room, he expected to find her sitting on her bed crying. Again she proved him wrong. She was packing.

"God damned men. Couldn't be truthful if someone was shoving bamboo spikes under their fingernails," she mumbled as she stuffed clothes into a huge black duffel bag. "Would it have been so wrong for him to tell me he's part vampire? That he knew everything he knew because he fucking lived it? And would it have been so wrong for Wil to be upfront with me and tell me Ellie hired him? Jerk."

He propped his hip against the doorframe. Something in his heart clenched and that strange urge to hold her washed over him again. "I was afraid if you knew my reasons, you'd run before I got the chance to explain things to you."

She spun around, fists in the air in front of her. She frowned when her gaze landed on him. "Get out."

"Not until you listen to me. I didn't tell you about Ellie because I hadn't had the chance."

"So why did you fuck me, then? Pity?"

He closed his eyes. For hell's sake. "No. What happened between us had nothing to do with what Ellie hired me for."

"Bullshit." She took a few steps back and slumped against the wall.

His eyes flew open at her harsh tone. "Believe it. I wanted you from the second I saw you in Rex's bar. The second you looked into my eyes and gave me that smile that told me you wanted me, too. It didn't matter to me who you were. And by the way,

Ellie will probably skin me alive when she finds out what happened between us." Unless his instincts were correct and she'd set him up for that very thing. He was ninety-nine percent sure that was what had happened, but until he could be completely certain Becca didn't need to know.

"It shouldn't have happened," she told him, her voice almost a whisper.

"Yes, it should have. You wanted it to happen. So did I."

He still wanted it to happen, even now. Just looking at her stirred his cock all over again. And it stirred other things. Emotions and instincts that he'd thought had long ago died. He couldn't be falling in love with her. Not this soon. Not when they had nothing in common except a scorching sexual chemistry that would probably burn out a few years down the road anyway. He shouldn't be feeling it, but he was. With a speed that was nothing short of irrational.

He'd been in love before, but had never felt anything so quickly for a woman. Royce had chided him in the past few years since he'd found a mate of his own. Told Wil that it was only a matter of time. That he'd never found his true mate despite his decision to marry. Royce had always stuck by one theory. If Elizabeth had been his true mate, she would have turned vampire instead of insisting to spend the rest of her life as a human. Royce had also warned that, when he found his true mate, he'd know it without a doubt.

Wil glanced at Becca. He had doubts. An overabundance of them. But most of them stemmed from the fact that she'd try to kill him the night after they'd met.

Could she be the one? He didn't even want to think about it at the moment. It had been far too long since he'd had her naked in his arms. *That* was what he felt for her. He had to be confusing lust with love. He took a step toward her. Surprise filled him when she didn't move away.

"Will you sit down and listen to me for a few seconds?" he asked.

"I really don't know. Everything is so screwed up right now it doesn't feel like it'll ever be normal again." She sighed. "Not that it ever was, mind you, but I really could use some sort of anchor right now."

He'd be her anchor, if she'd just let him. So would Ellie or Charlotte, or even Royce. Why did she feel such a strong need to shut out everyone who cared about her?

"Where's Kel?" she asked.

"He's gone."

Her eyes widened and she started toward him, a deadly expression on her face. "What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. He got upset and left."

She stopped her forward motion and seemed to consider that, finally backing down and slumping her shoulders. "I knew something was going on with him. Heck, I'd even guessed what it was, but I'd been hoping and praying I was wrong. I thought he'd been seeing a vampire, or been turned by one against his will. I never expected he'd been one

all along and hadn't wanted to own up to it. We have to go find him. I have to talk to him before he hurts someone."

"He's fine for now."

"No, he's not. He's got a temper. You don't know him like I do."

"Becca, he'll be fine. He needs some time alone, like you did this morning."

Her shoulders slumped even more and her face lit with despair. "But Wil, he's..."

"Fine." Wil was ninety percent sure that he was. But knowing his own experience with the choice, even if Kel wasn't fine he wouldn't welcome the company. It would only make him madder, and that wasn't a good situation to put a man into who was, for all intents and purposes, a fledgling vampire. He might go on a rampage and seriously hurt an innocent.

Kel had been living with it long enough to know what he could handle and what he couldn't. If he was anything like his mother he had a good head on his shoulders and wouldn't put himself—or anyone else—in danger.

"What if he favors his vampire side?" she asked, her tone a thready.

"He will. That's just the way it goes. I suspect he's been fighting it for a long time, and it's only getting worse."

"What does he have to do? Is there some ritual he has to go through to make him a vampire? Some sort of ceremony to mark the change?"

Wil shook his head. "No. There is no change. He is who he is, who he always has been. He just has to stop denying what he really is. Once he feeds that first time, instinct will kick in."

"So you can survive without blood?"

"For a time. Vampire children are usually able to. It's when their body matures that the blood becomes a necessity. It's complicated, and the mind is an amazing thing. A person can convince themselves they're one thing, when they're really not. He's still young, hasn't been fighting it that long, and I suspect he eats his steaks rare and drinks a lot of milk."

She nodded slowly.

"Then he's just compensating." And most likely he'd been taking advantage of the services at bars like Rex's when Becca wasn't around. Bars that served alcohol as well as other sorts of cocktails. "He'll be fine."

Now he just had to see what he could do about fixing Becca.

"If you're sure..." Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the cold indifference was back in her expression.

Ellie was *so* going to kill him when she got a hold of him. He was supposed to convince her to go home, or to take her there himself. He was not told to break her defenses and break her heart within days of meeting her, but he was afraid that was what had happened. She'd never be the girl who had left Stone Harbor three years ago.

But maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. She was one of the strongest women he'd ever met. He admired her that strength and determination.

It was time to put the focus back on the positive. Instead of berating himself any longer, he took Becca's hand and led her out of the room, back into the living room. He wanted to talk to her, and have her talk back as honestly as she could, and hanging around her sensual bedroom wasn't going to do that.

When they got to the couch he sat her down, took a seat next to her and faced her. "Tell me what happened with Tony."

She shook her head.

"Please? I want to know."

Her gaze trailed around the room for a long moment, her lips pursed and her hands clasped in her lap. When she finally looked at him, determination filled her gaze. He groaned. She was up to something. "Then I'll make a deal with you. If I tell you about Tony, you have to tell me about those scars. My pain for yours. It's only fair."

His shoulders slumped. She was asking a lot, and by the look on her face she knew it. For some reason she still felt the need to bait him, to get him angry enough to walk out. When would she realize he wasn't going anywhere, at least not at the moment? Nothing she said was going to chase him away. He wanted to be with her. It was the only reason he hadn't walked away when he'd had the chance. It wasn't about protecting her, or bringing her back to her family. Not anymore. She fascinated him, and he had to know all he could learn about her.

So he relented even though instinct warned him it might be a huge mistake. He didn't let most people into his world, especially not human women with a penchant for drugging men and tying them up. But if she needed his story in order to start to trust him, he'd give it to her. "Deal."

"Thank you." For the first time since he'd known her, she offered him a genuine smile. But it was gone in the next second, when she started relating her story. "I met Tony back in Stone Harbor, before everything in my family went wrong. I was eighteen, he showered me with attention. My family hated him, and at the time when I just wanted to get away from all their craziness he seemed like the perfect solution. So I moved in with him and deserted my family. What can I say? I was a stupid kid. I fell for him, and he destroyed my sister's life."

He wanted to tell her that he saw Ellie once in a while, and she didn't look destroyed at all. In fact the middle Holmes sister, Charlotte, assured him that Ellie was perfectly content with her new existence. Even more than content. He knew for a fact that she was, but Becca hadn't seen her and she apparently refused to accept what everyone else understood to be true.

Ellie had a family. A mate and a pretty terrific little boy. One Becca would fall in love with the second she saw him. He smiled as an idea struck. Maybe her feelings for her sister weren't the bridge to bring Becca back to her family. Maybe that bridge was Aidan.

He took her hand. "Aidan's beautiful. Do you want to see what he looks like?"

"No. Absolutely not. I have no interest in him whatsoever." She pulled her hand out of his grasp and turned away, but turned back again in the next second. "Do you have a picture?"

"Ellie gave me one to show you. In case you were a little bit curious."

"I'm not. I have no reason to be curious." A hint of a smile drifted across her lips. "But you might as well show it to me anyway. I know enough about you to know you won't back off until I do what you want, so go ahead and take it out. I guess I could have a quick look. Then maybe you'll stop pestering me."

He held back a laugh, knowing she wouldn't appreciate it, and stood long enough to pull his wallet out of his pocket. He fished out the small picture of Aidan sitting on Ellie's lap and handed it to Becca.

Her soft sigh echoed through the silence in the room. "He's beautiful."

"I told you." He settled back onto the couch, an unfamiliar warmth swelling in his gut.

"He doesn't look like a *Panthicenos*."

"Did you expect him to? Do Ellie and Eric?" *Panthicenos* could assume human form, and most had adopted that form in their daily lives, only making the shift to their true form when necessary.

She shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know what I expected. Not this. He looks just like Eric."

"Do you want to give your sister a call?"

She nodded, but then shook her head. "Later. She's waited this long. I'm sure she can wait a little longer. I think you owe me a story first."

He folded his wallet, leaned forward and stuffed it back into his pocket. She wasn't going to make this easy for him. And once he started confessing, he was in for the whole thing. Though there were certain details of his past that she didn't need to know. Those truths he'd keep to himself—now, and forever.

"Just remember—you asked for it."

"Please. I'm not a child, and I'm not weak. I can handle it."

"When I was young, I had to make the same choice Kel has to. But I waited too long, and I got a little out of control. I hurt people, did some really bad things, and I got myself into trouble. Do you know what an *Aparasei* is?"

She nodded. "I've heard the name."

"They're bad creatures. Some of the worst there are. I got tangled up with one when I should have known better. They don't have very forgiving natures."

"That's how you got the scars?"

He nodded. "Fifteen lashes with a poisoned whip. That's why the scars are still there. They weren't given a chance to properly heal. It's been centuries and I can still

feel each one in my dreams. I wanted to die when it was happening, and in the weeks it took my body to recover, but I wasn't that lucky."

"I'm glad you didn't."

Her voice was soft, but willful, and it brought a smile to his face. She cared, too, though she'd probably refuse to admit it until someone forced it out of her. They had that much in common, the two of them. Both stubborn until the end.

"Why did you get into a mess like that?" Becca asked.

"I'd been stupid in my early years, thought there was a time I could deny the vampire part of me. I tried to settle into a relatively normal life, got married and Elizabeth got pregnant. She and the baby died in childbirth."

He turned away and Becca moved closer, putting her arm over his shoulder. She leaned in and pressed a tender kiss to his cheek. "I'm so sorry, Wil. I didn't realize."

"It's fine. It was centuries ago. Nothing I can do about it now." It was the truth. The pain had faded to a dull ache long ago, replaced mostly by guilt. Guilt at allowing the pregnancy to happen instead of taking precautions. Guilt at marrying her in the first place. If he'd just left her alone, he might have saved her life.

They sat in silence for a little while until Becca moved away. "Is there anything I can do?"

He pushed away the lingering sadness, sadness that had become a part of him but hadn't controlled his life for too long to remember. "Actually, there is."

"What's that?"

"Call your sister."

* * * * *

Becca puffed out a breath. Leave it to Wil to take a terrible story and use it to his favor. She shook her head, trying to fight the aggravation building up inside her—and trying even harder to fight the affection. Affection she didn't want, didn't need, and could most certainly live without. But the more she tried to fight it, the more it battered at her. It was just a matter of time before it was too late to fight anymore. Maybe she'd already reached that point and just didn't know it yet.

She softened her gaze. It did no one any good for her to continue holding her grudge against Wil. He was only trying to help, in his own delusional way, and the least she could do was let him. It had been too long since she'd spoken to anyone in her family. As twisted and strange as they were, she missed them. And she'd missed out on seeing enough of her nephew's life. It was time to try fixing things. Wil had known it from the start. It had just taken him this long to convince her.

Maybe things weren't beyond repair. It would take some labor, but for the first time in three years she could honestly say she was willing to work on it. She let out a breath heavy with frustration.

"Okay, jerk. If that's the way you want it, fine. I'm not going to sit here and argue with you any more. Call her. I'll talk to her, but I'm not making any promises."

He smiled, pulled his cell phone out and dialed. A few seconds and a mumbled greeting later he handed the phone to her. "Play nice with the other children, sweetheart."

She stuck her tongue out at him and turned away. "Hi Ellie."

"Rebecca Louise, what do you think you're doing worrying me like this? It's been years. The least you could have done was call and let me know you were okay."

Becca leaned back against the couch, closed her eyes and sighed. This was going to be one hell of a long conversation. And she wouldn't even be able to get a word in.

Five minutes later, Ellie finally stopped berating her long enough to take a breath. "So, tell me what you've been up to for *three years*. And let me tell you, this had better be damned good."

"I don't even know where to start."

"How is Wil treating you? Are you okay?"

"He's fine." Her face flamed even as she said the words. He was fine, that was the truth. Just thinking about him brought to mind all sorts of fantasies she'd never before imagined. Ones she wouldn't dare share with Ellie.

"Oh really?" A long pause stretched between them. "Just how well are you two getting along?"

"We aren't. We fight all the time."

"In bed or out?"

"Out. In bed we get along just fine." Too late she realized her words, but she couldn't pull them back. Ellie was already laughing.

"Imagine that. You've spent the past three years trying to avoid vampires, and now you're falling for one."

"Impossible. I've only known the guy for two days."

"That's enough. I'm telling you, sometimes it doesn't take much more than that."

"Whatever."

She didn't dare tell Ellie how their first time in bed had happened. She'd never live it down.

"Wil's a good guy," Ellie told her. "Despite his insistence that he isn't. I know he'll be good to you."

It was then that all the pieces of the puzzle slid into place. Becca had to give her sister credit. She was good. Sometimes a little too good. "You set this up, didn't you?"

Ellie was silent for a moment too long. "Why would I do that?"

Her tone reeked of lies.

"That was a stupid idea. Did he tell you I almost killed him?"

Ellie laughed. "Sweetie, Wil doesn't kill easily. Ask him to tell you about the scars on his back sometime, when you've known him a little better. You'll understand what I mean."

"He already told me."

"He did? Well then. Case closed. Are you coming home soon? Eric and I would really love for you to visit."

Or move back. The words were unspoken, but definitely there in her tone. The thing that surprised Becca was that the idea didn't make her want to run screaming in the other direction.

"I'll come visit, but I'm still not sure when." She sighed. "Ellie?"

"Yes?"

"I miss you."

"Miss you, too. Tell Wil I said thank you. And tell him I owe him one hell of a big, huge favor."

Yeah right. He wouldn't get thanks from her, even if it did come from someone else. "I'll talk to you soon, Ellie." She disconnected the call and turned to him, ready for his gloating expression.

But he wasn't gloating. He was fast asleep.

Chapter Seven

The first thing Wil noticed when he woke up was Becca sitting next to him on the couch.

The second thing he noticed was the stake lying across his chest.

He cursed under his breath and shot into an upright position, knocking the piece of wood onto the floor with a clatter. "What the hell is this all about? I thought we moved past this crap."

"We have." She gave him a succinct, smug nod. "I just wanted to remind you that I could. In case you forgot that you aren't the one with the power here."

Her words were big, but he understood the meaning behind them. She was still on guard, a little afraid of him, but she considered this a truce of sorts. He kicked out at the stake, sending it sliding across the floor. It thumped against the wall on the other side of the room. She didn't make a move to pick it back up again, and he took that as a good sign.

She'd changed into a white T-shirt and a pair of worn jeans. Her hair hung in damp tendrils around her shoulders. She'd taken a shower while he was asleep. How long had he been out?

"Things went well with Ellie?"

She nodded again, her eyes huge, almost sad in a way. "They did."

Tense silence stretched between them for too long before she spoke again, her voice low and soft. "I'm going to visit Ellie, maybe stay a while and get to know my nephew."

She was leaving. Not going back with him, as he'd originally suggested—or just about demanded. She was going to visit Ellie, and she was going to *stay*.

"Good for you." Something in the vicinity of his heart clenched, but he did his best to ignore it. "When are you leaving?"

"The sooner I get this over with, the better." She gave him a small shrug, her expression letting him know she wasn't as sure about any of it as she tried to pretend. He gave her credit, though, this much stress and she hadn't had a breakdown yet. That could only be a good thing. For her. But not for him. She was *leaving*. And he hadn't had nearly enough time with her.

"Good for you. I'm sure Ellie will be glad to see you."

"I guess. I'm worried about Kel, though. He was there for me when I really needed him. I don't know if it's right to leave him now that he needs me."

"Call him."

"I did. A little while ago, right after I got out of the shower and finished packing. You were asleep for a long time." She laughed. "He says he's fine, nothing to worry about, but he wants to be left alone for a while, and he'll call me when he's ready to talk."

Wil nodded. Not much had changed there. "What more can you do for him other than give him the space he wants?"

"Me, nothing. My plans are made." She gave him a look that was a combination of hope and pain. It made his heart squeeze and a lump of something unfamiliar lodge in his throat. "But you don't have anything lined up right now, do you?"

He ran a hand through his hair, trying to ignore the ache in his chest. Why hadn't he seen that one coming? He should have. She knew what he did for a living, and she needed someone to watch out for her friend. Of course he'd be the natural choice. Unless she'd wanted him to go with her.

But apparently the feelings he'd started to develop for her were one-sided. "Are you trying to hire me?"

"Would you take the job if I offered it to you?"

That was a loaded question. How was he supposed to answer it? He wanted to tell her to take her fucking *job* and...

No, he wouldn't do that. Not to Becca. She'd been hurt enough in life. She deserved so much better.

"What would Kel think of you hiring someone to watch over him?"

She laughed. "He'd probably feel the same way I felt when I found out Ellie had hired you to look after me."

Except Kel was a hell of a lot stronger, and angrier, than Becca. And a vampire, though Wil doubted he'd come to realize his full potential yet. He'd be harder to contain if things went wrong.

"You put me through hell. Tried to kill me, even. And why would I want to go through that shit again?"

"For me?" Her gaze turned pleading. She sucked her lower lip between her teeth, a nervous gesture she'd never done in his presence before. She really was worried about her friend. She might have good reason, too, if he refused to see her.

What could he do? She'd asked for his help. He couldn't turn her down. His plans had been to go with her to Ellie's, maybe stay for a while and get to know Becca better. But whether or not she wanted him there, she needed him more for something else. He couldn't say no to her, not when they'd finally started to see eye to eye. Not when he'd started to care after so much time promising himself he wouldn't.

"Okay. I'll do it."

Her smile made it all worth it, even though he knew there was a chance he'd never see her again.

In reality, leaving with Becca now wouldn't even have been doable. He still needed to go see Rex and take care of their little problem. That might take some time, since he had yet to decide whether to let the man live or not. He was an evil man, but Wil could no longer justify killing him as he'd first planned. Becca had changed something inside him, made him see there were other ways to take care of the problem. Whatever he did, he'd have to see that Rex never started any kind of a...collection again. Those women needed someone to get them out of Rex's claws. No one else around here had the know-how or the drive to do it. Whether or not he got his money – it just didn't matter to him anymore. Maybe it was time to change professions, since the one he'd been doing for the past few years had somehow lost its luster.

It hurt to think he and Becca wouldn't see each other again, at least not for a long while. Would she even want to see him once she'd gotten back with her family? Once time had gone by, she might decide she wanted to put all of her past, including him, behind her. He wouldn't blame her if she did. He'd done the same thing himself a few years ago after his ex-girlfriend Michelle had been killed and he'd walked out on his home and the job he'd held for a decade. He'd left everything that wasn't important – furniture, most of his clothes – and hadn't looked back.

Now he'd been living the solitary life again and loving it. Having no ties, nothing to hold him down when he wanted to be free to come and go as he pleased. No family, no relationships. His close friends, the few he had, knew how to get in touch with him if necessary. Ellie had contacted him via their mutual friend Royce and if Becca wanted to see him she'd be able to find him the same way.

He glanced over at her. The pained expression was back on her face, intensified even more. "Are you okay?"

She nodded.

"Want to talk about it?"

She shook her head, but then apparently changed her mind. "You're not anything like Tony, or any of the others."

He narrowed his eyes. How many others had there been? Ten? Twenty? More? If they weren't dead, he'd have hunted them down and killed them all personally. She could have gotten hurt, messing with something so much more powerful than she was.

"Why didn't you tell me upfront about Kel and how you used to contract through him?" And why hadn't she mentioned that she'd only been killing the bad ones? She'd led him to believe the killing she did was indiscriminate.

"I didn't think it mattered. Rex said you were threatening to kill him. I thought you'd had some connection to the other vampires who had been bothering him, so I was stupid enough to take him at his word. Sue me."

He couldn't help but laugh. Even now, after everything that had happened, she refused to let go of the attitude. He suspected it was part of her now. Her past had shaped her, made her into a strong, independent woman who resented any implications that she couldn't take care of herself. He admired that about her. To a point. But it

wouldn't kill her to relax a little, at least as far as he was concerned. She had to know by now he'd never hurt her. He'd had the chance to do so on more than one occasion, but he hadn't. He wouldn't.

"Besides," she continued, "for a while there you gave me no indication that you were any different from the rest. You didn't tell me Ellie hired you, and you certainly didn't act any different."

She meant sexually, he knew. "What can I say in my defense? You turned me on. Still do. I'm not going to apologize for that."

"I don't expect you to." Her sigh echoed through the stillness of the room. "I'm going to miss you, Wil."

There it was. Neither of them had wanted to say it, but finally Becca had. Though she didn't speak the words he wanted to hear, she said she'd missed him. He'd miss her, too. More than he cared to analyze. So he said nothing. He pulled her close and kissed her instead.

* * * * *

Becca melted into Wil's arms and accepted his kiss. From the first touch of their lips that first night, she'd known he could mean something to her. She'd just never expected to feel so much, so soon, for a man she had nothing in common with. He was a vampire. She hated vampires as a general rule, had made a career out of getting rid of the ones who should never have been let loose on society. But here she was, falling fast and not knowing how to pull herself back.

That was part of the reason she'd asked him to watch out for Kel. She was worried about her friend, but she'd also needed some space. Lots of it. If she wasn't around Wil, she'd forget about him. Eventually.

But it wouldn't come easily. She had to put a stop to her silly infatuation before it turned into something neither of them was prepared for. She couldn't fall in love with him. No way in hell would she let herself do something so stupid. So self-destructive. She'd jumped into a relationship once, with Tony, and he'd turned out to be the wrong man for her. For anyone. Tony had been in cohorts with a demon bent on destruction. He'd taken lives, and then tried to atone for it by telling her he hadn't known his own mind. As if she'd take him back after he'd cost Ellie her life.

But she'd learned her lesson too late. The damage had already been done. She had to make sure nothing like that happened again.

Before she could even think about getting involved with anyone, she needed to straighten herself out. And before she could do that, she needed to take care of the mess her family life was in. One baby step at a time. It would be a long while before she was ready for anything more. And when she was, a vampire wouldn't be the man she chose, no matter how much her heart told her Wil was *right*. She needed someone safe, comfortable, and as human as they came.

But until then, she could indulge a little. It would very likely be her last chance to spend time with Wil, and she intended to take full advantage. She wound her arms around his neck and settled herself into his lap.

The kiss heated like a brush fire out of control, sweeping her away in its intensity. His lips brushed hers, his tongue delving into her mouth to tangle with her own. Their lips crushed together, teeth caught in between, and she felt the bite of his fangs on her skin. She smiled against his mouth and ground her pelvis against his. Part of her wanted it slow and easy tonight since she'd most likely never get the chance with him again, but a larger part of her wanted it like it had been the first time. That was what she wanted to remember him by. Hot, sexy, fast and thrilling in a way she'd never before experienced and would probably never experience again. One last time to experience everything Wil could show her. Anything akin to tenderness could be dangerous to her psyche.

But he pulled away. "Don't rush this, Becca."

She shook her head. Who was he to tell her what to do? For once he needed to see things her way. She reached for him, but his hands were there to stop her. "No. I'm serious. We're going to take this slow tonight. Do I need to tie you up?"

She shook her head. She wanted her hands to be free, like they'd been that first time. She wanted to touch him everywhere. She wanted to tear him apart.

But he wasn't having any of it. He pushed her off his lap, stood, and took her hand. Despite what she craved, he walked slowly with her into the bedroom.

Wil led her over to the bed and sat her down on the edge of the mattress. He dropped to his knees in front of her and took her hands. When his gaze locked with hers, his was filled with trepidation, sincerity, and heat. "Don't ruin this, Becca. I don't need to say it, and neither do you. We both know what this is. You've made your decision, and I have to live with it. But I'll be damned if you're going to take this away from me, too."

She opened her mouth to protest, but closed it when she realized the truth. Any protesting words would have been lies. This was goodbye. She'd leave, he'd disappear again, and that would be it. Like he'd said, she didn't like it, but she'd have to live with it.

But what he was asking of her now would break her heart.

"I don't want to wait," she told him in hopes of getting on with it. The sooner she lost herself in the oblivion of her orgasm, the better.

"Too bad. It's not your choice." His hand came around the back of her neck and he drew her head down. Their lips met again, this time softer. Gentler. His tongue teased the seam of her lips, tickling, never quite demanding entry.

She parted her lips and his tongue stroked into her mouth. All too soon Wil broke the kiss to trail kisses down her throat.

She tilted her head back, half hoping he'd sink those fangs deep into her skin, but he didn't. He just kept planting hot, open-mouthed kisses along her flesh until he

reached the neckline of her shirt. His hands cupped her breasts through the fabric, his thumbs kneading her nipples. They beaded under his touch and she moaned.

She moved her legs apart, tried to coax him in between her spread thighs, but he pushed her back on the bed instead. She scooted up to lay her head on the pillow and then he was beside her, his lips on hers again, pulling her body onto its side, flush with his. His erection pressed into her belly, but he made no move to thrust it against her. Instead he threaded his hand through her hair and angled her head back a little to deepen the kiss.

She sighed into his mouth and his hand tightened a little in her hair. Their mouths moved together as one, tempting and teasing until she didn't think she could take it anymore. She needed his touch somewhere. Anywhere would do.

When she thought she'd explode from wanting, he pulled away and sat up, taking her hand and pulling her into a sitting position. Once he had her where he wanted her, he lifted the hem of her shirt. She lifted her arms while he pulled the soft fabric over her head and dropped it to the floor. She fell back to the mattress and reached her hands out to him. Wil climbed between her parted thighs. His hard cock pressed into her through the layers of their clothes, driving her crazy. She knew what he could do with that cock. He thrust it against her softly once, twice. Not enough.

With his lips parted he brushed kisses along the sensitive area where her shoulder met her neck. Trilled them down along the edge of her lace bra. He dipped his tongue into the valley between her breasts, leaving a path of wet heat, before he brought his mouth up and closed it over one distended nipple through the lace. A tremor ran through her pussy, her panties wet at the feel of the lace dampening around the nipple.

He moved to the other nipple, soaking the lace before he reached between her breasts and let loose the front clasp of her bra. Her breasts ached for his touch. He didn't disappoint. Leaning on his elbows, he cupped her breasts in his hands and pressed them together, plumping them. He brought his mouth to them again, his tongue going from one nipple to the other to lave and swirl over each one. Every moist touch made sent little jolts of pleasure from her breasts to her cunt. She arched into his lips, silently begging for more. He chuckled against her skin.

Her breasts had always been sensitive, and Wil seemed attuned to that. He cupped them in his warm palms almost reverently, closing his mouth over one nipple, his fangs brushing the skin and inciting a riot among her nerves. She whimpered. He bit down hard enough to break the skin and she nearly came off the bed.

"God, Wil. That's so good."

He glanced up at her, suckling at the wound he'd made, a knowing smile on his face. A tremor raced through her cunt muscles, soaking her pussy with her juices. His lips pressed hard against her, his tongue moving slowly back and forth as he lapped. Heat rose in her body, from her core and extending out to her limbs. His fangs burned, but the touch of his lips and tongue made it so much better. After licking the wound one last time, he moved on to her other breast and gave it the same treatment.

By the time his fangs pierced her skin for the second time, she was a second away from coming. All it took was a press of his cock against her pussy and she exploded. Her cunt muscles squeezed and relaxed, wanting him to be inside her, wanting to milk everything out of him and suck him dry. He kept his cock pressed tight against her, still drinking from her slowly as he made sure she felt each aftershock with the maximum intensity. When he finally let up, her body was so limp, her mind so fogged from afterglow, that all she wanted to do was sleep. But then he was there, unzipping her pants, dragging them down her legs and dropping them along with her shoes to the floor at the foot of the bed. He stripped off her socks but left her panties on, much to her dismay. Then he pushed her legs apart and came up between them, his face inches from her pussy and his fingers resting along the skin at the tops of her inner thighs.

He leaned in, his nose against the damp triangle silk covering her pussy, and inhaled. "You smell incredible. So hot. So wet. I need to taste you."

Before she had a chance to protest, to tell him she needed some time to recover, he kissed her there. His tongue prodded the fabric covering her clit, sending another round of tremors through her. He bit gently through the fabric, sending jolts through her pussy lips. Then he pushed the panties aside and stroked a finger into her cunt. His tongue continued its assault on her clit through the thin silk, his finger stroking in and out of her in a rhythm that had her clutching the sheets. Her whole body rocked, tense and on edge, begging for him to bring her over the edge one more time. But he didn't. He pulled away.

"These are in the way." Within seconds he'd stripped her out of her panties and dropped them to the floor. "Ah. Much better. Tell me what you want, Becca."

"I want to come."

A sensual smile tilted the corners of his lips. "A little greedy, aren't we?"

"I have to be greedy right now." Because she needed this one last time. Needed *something* to remember him by. And something to remind herself of why she shouldn't get involved with vampires.

They always lied, and always left her alone. Tony had. Wil was about to. And even Kel, a man she could easily consider her best friend, had cut her out of his life. A tear formed in the corner of her eye, but she batted it away. No sense getting upset over something she'd known would happen all along. She was done with vampires. In every way. The pleasure wasn't worth the ending pain. So she'd take what she could get from Wil now, before he decided to walk out of her life. And he would. They all did. It was just a matter of time.

He leaned in again, spreading her lips with his thumbs, and lapped her pussy from her clit to her cunt. He dipped his tongue inside, stroking in and out the way his finger had been moments before. She arched into his touch, her hands clenching the sheets tighter, her eyes squeezing shut. If he kept it up, she was going to come again. Two orgasms in the span of a few minutes...she couldn't take it. Her body would probably break down from the pleasure.

He placed little love bites along her pussy lips in between strokes of his tongue inside her, and swirls of it over her clit. Her own moisture drenching her even more, along with the wet heat from Wil's tongue. He stroked and pressed along her clit, bringing her closer and closer to release again. Her body bowed, strung tight, every nerve along her skin sizzling with tension. Short, breathy moans escaped her lips. She brought her hands down and cupped them on his head, threading them through the silky waves of his hair. His tongue felt like wet silk gliding over her skin, lapping at her juices.

Her body finally unable to take any more, she exploded in orgasm. Her vision grayed, her extremities tingling and for a harrowing second she thought she might pass out. She may have, couldn't be sure, when he sank his fangs into her labia. The sharp, stinging pain in contrast with the ultimate pleasure racing through her body sent her into another orgasm right on the tail of the one before it. She rocked against him, moaning and screaming and having trouble drawing breath. And when she finally came down, he was there at her side again, holding her close and whispering words of encouragement.

"Be right back," he said softly. He stood up long enough to strip out of his clothes and then he was there again, between her legs, stroking his cock into her pussy before she even had a chance to recover from her last orgasm. He thrust in and out, hard and fast as she'd first wanted it, but now she was too far gone to even care much beyond the fact that he kept moving. He held her close, calling her name as he came inside her and filled her with hot jets of his semen. And when he finally rolled off her, she could do nothing more than fall asleep in his arms.

Chapter Eight

Wil climbed out of bed, careful not to wake Becca. He dressed quickly, gave her a brief but meaningful kiss on the cheek, and left the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. The soft click echoed somewhere inside his chest. He fought the urge to go back to her as he went into the living room and sat on the couch to put his boots back on. The whole time a small part of him hoped she'd wake up. She didn't, though. It served him right for acting the way he did. He didn't deserve her. He took one more look around her house before he grabbed his keys and left.

His heart clenched at the act of leaving her, especially when he hadn't had a chance to say goodbye. At least not in words. But it was better this way, and they both knew it. Had known it the night before, when they'd made love. And that was exactly what it had been, though he'd never admit it aloud to anyone. If he'd stuck around any longer, he would have fallen hard for Becca. So it was best for both of them if he left in the dead of night, like she would expect someone of his kind to do. They had nothing in common past the intense sexual chemistry they shared. She didn't even like his kind, and he'd vowed long ago not to get deeply involved with another human woman. Ever. So nothing between them would work. Still, he couldn't help the dull ache that formed in his chest.

She deserved so much more than he could ever give her. Now that she was going home to her family, and hopefully starting a new life, she'd find all she was looking for.

Becca's future didn't include him.

She'd made that clear when she asked him to find Kel and watch out for him. Yes, she wanted to make sure her friend was safe, but her plea held a deeper meaning. She wanted Wil out of her life. Seeing his own life going down the drain if he got any deeper with her, he was all too happy to oblige. And completely miserable at the thought of walking away.

With a heaved sigh, he unlocked his car door and slid behind the wheel. He turned the key in the ignition and backed out of her driveway. Once on the road, he made a snap decision to push her out of his mind and focus on the present. There were two problems that needed taking care of. The first one was Kel. The second, Rex. And given the recent revelation about Becca's friend, he had a strange suspicion he might find both men in one place.

Ten minutes later he walked through the front door of Rex's bar. The grating music and stench of alcohol hit harder than usual, churning his gut and making his head pound. The dim lighting would make it easier for a vampire to hide, but Wil could see just fine in the dark, and he knew where to look. He glanced around and it didn't take him long to spot the man he was looking for.

Kel sat at the end of the bar, hunched over, a glass of something dark in front of him. The tension in the young vampire's body was evident, even from a distance. Maybe Becca had been right. Maybe there was a reason to worry. Wil walked over to where he sat and slid onto the stool next to him.

"Becca said you told her you're fine."

Kel slid a sidelong glance at Wil, his eyes narrowed and his jaw tight. "I *am* fine. This is wonderful. Just what I fucking needed in the middle of everything else. Don't you people know when to leave well enough alone?"

"Sorry, no." Wil gestured to the woman tending bar, a small, petite blonde he recognized as Shannon. "I'll have the same thing he's having."

He had no need to feed, having drunk his fill from Becca in the past few days, but a little bonding seemed to be in order. What better way for two vampires to bond than over a cocktail made up of ninety percent blood?

Shannon nodded and went to work pouring him a glass. When she sat it in front of him, Kel got up to leave. Wil stopped him with a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "Sit for a second. I want to talk to you."

"I don't feel much like talking right now."

"Too bad." Wil brought the glass to his lips and took a sip. Ah, heaven. Not as good as Becca's blood, but a close second. It was enough to keep any vampire alive for long periods of time—but it was also very expensive. Maybe that was why Kel continued with vampire hunting. To finance his habit of sorts.

He turned to Kel. "How long have you been drinking this stuff?"

"Since I realized I needed it." Kel downed the rest of his glass in one gulp, set the crystal down on the bar with a clatter and called for another. He scooped it up as soon as Shannon set it in front of him and drained half the glass. "This is hell, you know? Why does it have to be this way?"

"There's no shame in being a vampire."

"You said you know my father."

"We've met a few times."

Kel shook his head. "Then you understand my shame. I don't know how to be any different. My mother drilled it into my head that I was human. Didn't even explain to me what my father was until the urges started to overwhelm me." He let out a rough bark of laughter. "She told me the reason she home-schooled me was because I was allergic to so much. Allergic to the sun, allergic to so many different types of food. She lied to me, and I bought it until I got old enough to wonder why I had fucking *fangs*. And my father wasn't there through any of it."

"You don't have to be like him."

"I never had a father around, so I can't be sure. What if I turn out exactly like him? My mother told me he killed his donors a few times. That he scared her."

Wil cursed Lela under his breath. She'd been so worried about convincing her son that he was a normal human boy that she hadn't allowed him the education he needed to survive. Kel was paying for her mistakes now. "I can't say that I've never hurt anyone I shouldn't have. But that was a long, long time ago. The same with your father. He might have killed before, but he doesn't kill now. And you won't either. Don't let what your father was shape who you are right now. Your mother was a special woman, even though she tried to convince you you're not who you really are. You have a lot of potential. And the hunger is stronger than you'll let yourself believe if you've been in here drinking blood cocktails. How many years have you been doing this to yourself?"

"Up until the last few years, I could control it. But then it got worse. I heard about places like this, and I researched them, found the ones near wherever I was staying. It's been a help."

"But it's hell hiding the secret, especially from people you care about."

"Yeah. Like Becca. She's been there for me, and I couldn't tell her any of it. She wouldn't have understood. Working with her has been tough, trying to sneak out whenever I could. And then she started working *here*, and I couldn't deal with it anymore."

"She understands now. At least on some level." What was he doing, pushing Kel toward Becca again? If he had any sense, he'd be trying to keep them apart. They might be friends now, but who knew what would happen a few years down the road. Wil wanted her all to himself. But he'd made a promise to her and he wouldn't break that. "She asked me to make sure you're okay."

"Why didn't she just come herself?" Kel took another big gulp of his drink. "She's so in my face about stuff like that. Sometimes she's like a pit bull. She latches on and won't give up. I almost confessed to her so many times, but then I remembered how she really feels about vampires. She thinks they're all scum. It took a lot of training just to get her to accept that we only got rid of the bad guys."

A pit bull? Wil had to laugh at the apt description. "She's going home."

Kel's head shot up and he swung his gaze in Wil's direction. Worry and disbelief warred in his expression. "When?"

Wil shrugged, tried to keep the irritation and hurt out of his eyes. "Whenever she wakes up, I'd guess."

"Without even saying goodbye?"

"Would you have wanted to listen to her if she came to find you?"

Kel closed his eyes for a brief second, his lips so tight they'd whitened around the edges. When his eyes opened, he shook his head. "I don't even know. I'd like to say yes, but I can't. Everything is such a mess right now. I don't even want to deal with this."

"But you have to. It's a part of who you are, and you need to get over your fears and learn to accept it."

"I have no fears."

"You do, and I understand that. But there's nothing to be afraid of. Vampire life has benefits as well as drawbacks. You're already extremely sensitive to sunlight. Already craving the blood you need to survive."

Kel hesitated, then nodded. His hands tightened so hard around his glass his knuckles turned white. Wil understood all too well what he was going through. For years he'd lived with the same things. It had taken him a long time to learn to accept them. He hadn't had anyone to help him fully understand what he was capable of.

The need to be there for Kel took him by surprise. When had he gone from caring about no one to caring about everyone who crossed his path? First Ellie and her predicament, then Becca, and now Becca's *friend*, a man he should see as a rival. But he didn't. Kel needed someone to help him through what might be the toughest time of his life. Becca had asked Wil to be that person, and he'd do it. He'd do it for her, since he couldn't offer her anything more.

"And your fangs come out at the most inopportune times," he continued, pushing all thoughts of Becca out of his mind. Again.

Kel said nothing, but he didn't deny it, either.

"You'll learn to hide them." Wil smiled. "And you'll learn when to use them to give a woman the most possible pleasure."

Kel's expression finally opened up and he laughed. But soon the laughter was gone, replaced with uncertainty. "I've never fed from anyone before. It's just been blood bags or blood bars. I don't think I could actually bite someone."

The kid didn't know what he was missing. "Blood bags are fast food compared to having a live donor. A live donor is like a four course meal in a gourmet restaurant. You've never had sex like you would when you feed. For vampires, feeding is part of the sexual experience. Blood and sex. It's all tied in together. Trust me. It'll be worth it."

Kel shook his head. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

"You won't. You have good instincts to do the job you do and not hurt innocents. And apparently you have iron-clad control if you've been able to survive this long the way you've been living. It's expensive, sitting around here drinking all night, isn't it?"

Kel nodded, his eyes downcast.

"And blood bags are even more expensive, unless you steal them. Have you been buying them?"

"Sometimes." He kept his gaze trained on the bar. His shoulders sagged a little more with each breath. "Dealers aren't easy to come by. Sometimes it's easier to break into a place and take them."

He didn't sound happy with the lengths he'd had to go to, and Wil didn't blame him. It was a tough life, the life Kel had chosen for himself. And Wil knew just the thing to make him feel better. At least for the time being. He needed a woman to show him the pleasure he could find, the pleasure he could give her. A human, someone gentle

rather than demanding. Someone who understood what a vampire needed and didn't mind giving it all.

Celia, the pretty redheaded waitress he'd often used the services of, walked by and winked at him. He smiled back, the idea cementing in his head. He turned to Kel. "Sit tight. I'll be right back."

He walked over to the table Celia was cleaning and propped his hip against it. "Hey."

"Hey Wil." She gave him a killer smile, one that would have turned him inside out before he'd met Becca. Now it didn't even stir his gut. "You need a live meal rather than that swill you've been drinking?"

He shook his head. "Not me. The man I was talking to."

"Kel. He's a friend of Becca's, isn't he?"

"Right." Her friend. He fumed inside, but pushed the thoughts away. "He's a little less than accepting of his true nature. He's never had a donor before. Can you help him out?"

Her smile widened. "Sure. No problem."

"Thanks."

"Are you going to be in town long?" She rested her hand on his arm, stopping him when he would have walked away.

"Nah. I'm leaving sometime tonight."

"Give me a call the next time you're around."

"Sure," he agreed, though he had no intentions of calling her again. Hell, he had no intentions of returning to Ardon after tonight. With Becca gone and Rex soon to be out of the picture, there would be no need. And Celia...she'd been fun while it had lasted, but it had meant nothing to either one of them. Now things had changed inside him and he couldn't see bothering with one-night stands. The only woman he wanted, the only one he'd want for a long time to come was Becca. Too bad she didn't want him the same way he wanted her. He'd been someone to pass the time. But to him, she'd always have a special place in his heart. Though they'd have to torture him to get him to admit that aloud.

He watched Celia go over to talk to Kel, who smiled in return to her flirtations. She planted a kiss right on Kel's lips before Wil wandered in their direction. Kel glanced up at him as he handed the bartender a fifty to cover the expensive cocktail he'd barely touched.

"I'll see you around," Wil said to Kel.

"You going with Becca?" Kel asked.

"No. She doesn't want me there. I've got to respect that. I'll be in touch." With that, he turned and walked toward the back of the bar.

He slipped into the kitchen area and asked one of the employees if she'd seen Rex. She directed him to the back area of the bar, toward Rex's small office.

Wil stormed in through the office door and found Rex sitting on a chair in the corner of the room, a small brunette woman on her knees in front of him. Rex pushed her away, stood and tucked his stubby cock into his pants. "Wil. What a surprise."

The woman, naked except for a pair of red silk panties, crawled into the chair and wrapped her arms around her bent knees. Her eyes had widened to an almost unnatural size, her swollen lips parted and her breath ragged and noisy. Wil turned away from her, dismissing her as unimportant. She was no threat to him.

Neither was Rex. "A surprise to see me alive, I'm sure."

"What do you mean by that?" Rex frowned and pursed his lips, but the flash of fear in his eyes gave him away.

"Don't play games with me, Rex." Wil edged toward him, his hands clenched into fists in front of him. Rex backed up a step. "Becca told me you hired her to kill me."

Rex muttered a curse under his breath. "She must have misunderstood me. When I asked her to take care of you, I meant sex. Like we'd agreed upon when we made our deal the other night. That's all I said. I wasn't any more specific than that, and I certainly never told her I wanted you dead. But I guess I wasn't clear enough for her. She must have thought I meant murder instead of sex."

Wil shook his head. Rex couldn't lie worth a damn. The man was so inept it was almost pathetic. "No, she didn't misunderstand. She tried to do exactly what you wanted her to. Obviously she didn't succeed."

Rex sputtered for a few minutes before he regained his composure. Barely. His face relaxed, but his body still shook so hard Wil was afraid he might topple over. "What did you do to her?"

Wil said nothing. Let the man draw his own conclusions. He walked toward Rex and pulled out of his pocket the knife he'd retrieved from his hotel room when he'd checked out earlier. It was bigger than the last one he'd threatened Rex with. Long and thin, the blade serrated on both sides. The handle was a dark wood, intricately carved and laden with multicolored jewels. It was a favorite piece of Wil's, one of the most valuable in his collection. A very rare piece he'd picked up years ago and often put to use.

"What is that?" Rex asked, swallowing hard as he backed up toward the far wall. His back hit the wall with a thump, his eyes going wide and his lips parting.

"A few hundred years ago, it was used as a ceremonial blade in certain black magic ceremonies. Ones involving human sacrifice. Pretty, isn't it?"

Rex shook his head, his brow glistening with sweat. "You're sick."

"I just thought since you were so kind to share your...collection with me, I'd offer to share mine with you. This is worth a lot of money. Strange, but a collector would pay even more if the blade was tipped with blood."

Rex held his hands up in front of him and waved them wildly. "Okay. Stop. Enough. What do you want?"

Wil stepped closer until he was inches from Rex and pressed the sharp tip of the blade into the man's neck. It pierced the skin and a fat drop of blood dribbled from the wound. His gaze fell on the red liquid and fangs descended at the sight, his mouth watering and a knot forming in his stomach. He used the automatic reaction to his advantage and smiled, making sure Rex got the full effect.

Rex's already pasty face turned a sickening shade of ghostly white. His body buckled. "Please. Stop, Wil. I'll do anything you want."

"Leave town. Tonight. Don't ever come back. And if I get wind of you starting another collection like the one you have here, I'm coming after you. And next time, I won't be so kind. I'll take you apart, inch by excruciating inch, instead."

He dropped the knife from Rex's throat and backed up. He lifted the blade to his lips and licked the blood from the tip. When he was done, he smiled at Rex. "Then again, maybe I'll just drain you dry right here."

"No. I'm going. Just stay the hell away from me."

With a brief nod to the scared-looking woman cowering in the chair, Wil walked out of the office without looking back. He didn't doubt Rex would leave, and leave quickly. The rat valued his life too much to piss off anyone stronger than him.

Wil passed by the bar and noticed Kel's seat empty. Celia was nowhere in sight. Satisfied that he'd done all he could do for everyone involved, he walked out of the bar. There was nothing left to do but leave, and start putting his solitary existence back together. He had several hours before daylight and he intended to use them wisely.

* * * * *

Becca hung up the phone, the pain in her heart growing more intense with every second. It was bad enough Wil had left her before morning without saying goodbye. But as the desk clerk at the hotel he'd been staying at had just told her, he'd also checked out of his room. He'd left her. Walked away without looking back. She'd woken up at a little after ten am and he'd been gone. She'd known that was the way it would happen, but it didn't make it any easier to accept now that he'd done it.

A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye, but she pushed it away. The tears were stress-related, and nothing more. She couldn't be crying over a *man*. She barely knew the guy. Why cry over a man who, just days ago, had been a total stranger?

The answer was right there as soon as she'd asked the question. Because they fit. There was no other way to explain it. She hadn't met a man before who made her feel the way Wil did. He brought to the surface such intense emotions that she'd wanted more time. Months, years, decades to explore what was going on between them. He could have been her forever, the man she wanted to be with despite everything else. But it just wasn't meant to be. He was a vampire. Forever with a vampire took on a meaning she wasn't ready to accept. Maybe she'd never be.

She picked the phone and dialed Ellie's number.

"Hey," she said when Ellie answered. "It's just me, the long-lost sister."

Ellie laughed. "Becca. I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"I'm packed. Getting ready to put my bags in the car and leave now. Where did you say you and Eric had moved to?"

She wrote down the directions as Ellie rattled them off. A small town in southern Maine. About twelve hours, give or take, from the Pennsylvania town she'd been living in. "I should be there sometime tomorrow."

"Good. Aidan is so excited to finally meet his aunt we all keep talking about," Ellie said. "And he's really looking forward to seeing Wil again."

Becca swallowed hard, the tears fighting to break free again. She shook her head. "Wil's not coming."

"Why not?"

"You know nothing could ever last between us, Ellie. We're too different."

"So were Eric and I. And that worked out fine."

Becca bit her tongue to keep from telling Ellie how *not* fine she thought being turned into a demon was. Ellie would take offense to Becca's opinion and that would only be detrimental to their impending reunion. "No, it wouldn't. I barely know him, anyway. That would make for a very uncomfortable car ride. And I had something to take care of here that I asked him to do for me. You know, him being for hire and all."

Ellie clucked her tongue. "Are you still upset with me about that?"

Duh. "Why wouldn't I be? It was a very sneaky and underhanded thing to do, even for you."

That got a chuckle out of Ellie. "I only did what I thought was best. I just wish it could have worked out differently. Royce and I thought the two of you would have gotten along so well."

A chill ran down Becca's spine. "Royce was in on this?"

"Of course. How do you think I found Wil in the first place? They're old friends. They go way back."

Just what she needed to know. Ellie's ex-lover turned good friend was a friend of Wil's. She'd been right. This whole thing had been an elaborate setup from the start. "Lovely. Well, you can tell Royce that the little plan the two of you concocted backfired. Now I'm even more turned off to men. In fact, I don't know if I'll ever want anything to do with them again, for the rest of my life."

Liar. She smiled as she thought about Ellie turning the idea over and over in her mind.

"Don't do anything drastic." Ellie's tone held more than a hint of worry, the words harsh and rushed. "Just come visit. We can talk about it when you get here."

Becca's smile widened. That was fine with her. But Ellie was wrong if she thought she was going to get off that easy. She didn't know Becca very well.

"Sounds good. I'll be leaving in a little while, so I'll see you as soon as I can."

"Great."

Becca disconnected the call, feeling better than she had in too long to remember. She'd been away, on her own, long enough and now it was finally time to change that. Though she'd gotten used to living a certain way, without busybody family members, and it would be hard to walk back into the life she'd wanted to leave from the time she'd been eight years old. She'd visit Ellie and Eric for a while, but she wouldn't stay long. She'd get her own place, close enough that she could visit Aidan when she wanted to, and far enough away that Ellie wouldn't be at her door with some lame excuse every single morning.

She walked around her house, taking in everything since it was the last time she'd get a chance to do so. She'd called the landlord an hour or so ago and told him she'd be moving out a few weeks before the month ended. Once she got to Ellie's she'd hire movers to come in and pack up the rest of her stuff—the stuff she wanted, at least. The furniture had come with the rental property, but she couldn't fit all of her clothes, books, and personal possessions in her sports car, so she'd have to make do for now.

She let herself out of the house and locked the door behind her. She'd miss the place—hadn't even gotten a chance to use the pool due to the cool spring weather. But it was best to cut all ties. That was what she always did when she'd overstayed her welcome in one place. And this time, she'd done that in spades.

Once she was on the road, she took her cell phone out of her purse and dialed Kel's number. When he answered his tone was sleepy, as had become the norm over the past few months. She couldn't help but smile. Now that she knew the reason behind his tiredness and crabby attitude lately, she understood him better. It was like a weight had been lifted from her chest and she could stop worrying about him. Once she'd learned from him that he was fine.

"Hey handsome. How's it going?"

"Becca." She heard the smile in his voice when he said her name. "Everything's as fine as it's going to get for the moment." He paused. "But it's getting better, I think."

"That's good to know." She stopped for a red light, her gaze searching the area almost instinctively for Wil's navy blue SUV. She let out a breath when she didn't see anything remotely similar.

"What's the matter?" Kel asked, his tone a little more relaxed than she'd heard him in months.

"Nothing. I was just looking for someone."

"Wil."

"Yeah." The light changed and she drove through the intersection. Almost at the edge of town. Where was Wil? Why hadn't he even bothered to tell her goodbye, or leave contact information where she could get in touch with him if she needed him?

And why had she been stupid enough to even hope he'd hung around? He was gone. He'd checked out of his hotel and left, and she had to learn to accept that.

"He's a good guy, Becca. You can trust him."

"You talked to him?"

"You know I did." He laughed. "I know you told him to come talk to me."

She bit the inside of her cheek before she responded. "Are you mad at me?"

The trees grew thicker along this nearly deserted stretch of road. Lush leaves in all shades of green. She barely noticed the beauty around her, though. She was too busy glancing in the rearview mirror. Still no sign of him. Maybe he really was going to let her walk out of his life.

Maybe she deserved it if he did.

And why wouldn't he? She nearly laughed at her own stupidity. She'd been nothing to Wil. She'd been a job, and nothing more. He'd left her before sunup, and had probably used whatever dark hours he could to start his journey out of her life. Even if he had hung around town, he wouldn't be out looking for her in the middle of the morning.

"No, I'm not mad at you." Kel's voice brought her out of her thoughts. "You have more reason to be angry than I do, kid."

She had to agree. He'd lied to her about something important. Had been lying to her about it for years. But for some reason, it didn't seem to matter very much anymore. "I'm not mad now. A little disappointed, maybe. But I have to warn you, that could change to anger real soon so be prepared."

He laughed, but said nothing to her comment.

"Will I see you again?" she asked him. She couldn't stand to lose the person who'd become her best friend, no matter if he was vampire or human.

"Hell yes. Don't think you're getting rid of me that quickly. Where are you going to be staying?"

She gave him Ellie's address. "I'll have my phone with me. Call me anytime. I'll probably be there for a while. Heck, I might even decide I love it and want to settle down near there. Be sure to come and visit me, okay? It isn't going to be the same without having you close by when I need to talk to someone."

"I'm only a phone call away, hon. If you need me to come see you, just call. You know that, right?"

"Yeah." But it wasn't the same as having her best friend always close. Always right there. It was just another thing she'd have to get used to. "I think I'm going to be looking for a new job."

Kel laughed again, this time louder than the last. "Yeah, you and me both. I have an idea, but give me some time to work on it, okay? It could be good, but I don't want to spoil the surprise quite yet."

"Kel—"

"No, no. Don't press it. I don't want to get your hopes up. Or mine, either. I'll let you know soon if everything pans out, okay? But until then you aren't allowed to bug me about it." He chuckled, the first time she'd heard a happy sound from him in too long to remember.

She let out a dramatic sigh, barely able to contain a fit of giggles. "Oh, okay. I suppose if I have to."

"You do. Now I'm going to have to let you go. I don't want you talking on the phone while you drive. It's bad for your concentration. Call me when you get there."

With that he disconnected the call.

She dropped her phone on the passenger seat and ran a hand through her tangled hair. After talking with Kel, doubt about her plans had started to creep in. Could she really stay with Ellie and pretend everything was normal? Could she pretend that the past few years hadn't happened? She let out a heavy sigh. Either this decision to move back in with Ellie temporarily was going to be the best one she'd ever made, or the worst.

Chapter Nine

Becca dropped down into one of the wicker chairs on Ellie's deck and patted her lap. Aidan scurried over and climbed up, wrapping his arms around her neck. She smiled down at him and kissed the top of his head. The sun had just started its descent. A cool breeze rustled the leaves in the trees and crickets chirped a soft song.

"What do you want to do this evening, kiddo? Want to read a story before bedtime?"

"No." Aidan's full lips turned into a killer grin, one Becca had learned she had a hard time refusing. Ellie and Eric were going to have their hands full with this one in a few years. "Wanna play."

"We'll play tomorrow. Now it's time to settle down." She leaned back against the chair and Aidan rested his head against her chest.

Playtime sounded like fun, but Ellie would kill her if she worked him up right before it was time for him to go to bed. "Where's mommy?"

"House."

Becca nodded and murmured soft words, hoping to calm him enough that he'd give Ellie an easy time tonight. His energy astounded her. She'd never know how Ellie kept up with such a ball of fire Aidan was. She wanted to stay with him forever, but that wouldn't be possible. She needed to go out and find a job at some point. It had been three weeks since she'd left Pennsylvania and Wil behind. She had a decent amount of savings from her jobs over the past three years, but that would only last so long. She'd made good money, but she'd also gotten good at spending it. She'd enjoyed living comfortably, so she didn't have as much saved as she should have. So now she had to figure out what she wanted to do with the rest of her life.

As they always did when she thought about the future, her thoughts drifted to Wil. She spoke to Kel on a weekly basis and he assured her Wil was fine. Sometimes she got the impression that the two men were in close contact, and it made her a little jealous that Kel spent time with Wil when she didn't. It also made the little ache inside her heart intensify. Why did Wil contact Kel when he hadn't even bothered to pick up the phone and call her? Not even once since he'd walked away.

Aidan's chubby hand came to rest on her cheek. "Okay?"

"Yeah, honey. Auntie's okay."

She was still having a hard time coming to terms with the fact that the little boy on her lap was something other than human. With his thick black hair, golden skin and green eyes, he looked vibrant, beautiful and all too mortal, though he was anything but. He was a *Panthicenos*, an earthbound demon whose main purpose was to keep the

balance between good and evil. He had some pretty big shoes to fill when he grew up. She had no doubts that he'd fill them, though. The little guy in her lap was destined for greatness. All she had to do was look in those big, bright eyes to know that. Ellie and Eric had brought something special into the world.

And she'd spent the past two years ignoring his presence.

She intended to make up for all the time she'd missed, and all the time she'd missed with her sisters. She'd shut them out of her life for too long, and it was time for that to come to a stop. Seeing Aidan is what had changed her mind about what Ellie had become. It had taken so long, but now she was finally able to let it go. He was so pure and innocent she couldn't help but love him, no matter what sort of being he was.

Wil had changed her mind, too, just a little bit. He wasn't what she'd expected from the dark and brooding stranger she'd been watching every night he came into Rex's bar. In the short time she'd spent with him, she'd started to care for him. A lot more than she should have. She'd wanted more time, but he hadn't given her that. She didn't know whether to be sad or angry by his lack of communication, so she settled for a little of both.

Ellie stepped out onto the porch deck and shut the door behind her. "Aidan, don't you think you need to give Auntie Becca a little break once in a while?"

He shook his head forcefully. "No."

Becca shifted the child on her lap. "I'm fine, Ellie. Really. Aidan and I have a lot of catching up to do."

Ellie smiled. "Well, you're going to have to do some of that catching up later. There's someone here to see you."

Becca's heart skittered and a sheen of sweat coated her palms. "Really?"

She nodded. "Do you want me to send him out?"

"Yes. Absolutely." Hope filled the hollowness inside her heart. Had he really come to see her?

"Okay. Aidan, give Auntie a kiss. It's time for bed."

Aidan pressed his lips to Becca's cheek, bounded off her lap and followed his mother into the house. Becca sat forward in the chair, waiting an endless minute for Wil to walk through the door. Her palms got clammy and her mouth ran dry. What would it be like to see him again? She might have to kick his ass for walking out on her the way he did. She'd forgive him, but she wasn't going to let him get away with it.

Her budding hopes crashed when Kel stepped out onto the deck and closed the door behind him. "Hey kiddo."

"Oh, hi."

He gave her a tentative smile. "You don't look happy to see me."

That snapped her out of her mood. He'd been a good friend to her for a long time, and he didn't deserve to be ignored simply because she'd been hoping he was someone else. Someone who would never show up so she had to stop waiting around for him.

She got up from the chair and walked over to give Kel a hug. "Of course I'm happy to see you. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to give you the impression that I wasn't."

Kel squeezed her tight before he let her go. "I know you didn't. You were just expecting someone else."

"No, I—"

"Becca, it's okay. Believe me, I understand."

She didn't bother to deny it any further. He'd know it was a lie. "Is it too bright out here for you?"

"Nah. The sun's going down, and the trees are thick enough that I should be fine." He gestured to the grouping of chairs where she'd been sitting when he stepped outside. "Why don't we sit down and talk for a little while?"

"Sure, why not?" She settled back into her chair and Kel took the one across from her, trying to hold back her sigh. "What have you been up to lately?"

"Getting my life back together." He laughed. "It's funny, but this is still taking some getting used to. I kept a lot from you, and I'm really sorry. I should have been more honest with you from the start."

She'd long since gotten over her anger with Kel, if there'd really been any at all. He'd had his reasons for concealing the truth, and she had to respect that. He had to have gone through hell, though, and it bothered her that he hadn't felt close enough to her to confide in her.

He looked good now, though. Better than she'd seen him in a long time. Healthy and happy. She should have been the one to help him through his troubles. But she'd sent someone else instead.

"If you'd told me, I would have helped you."

"I know, but I'm not sure if I would have listened. It took someone who'd lived it to clue me in on what I needed to do. That I needed to stop living a lie and accept who I really was."

Wil. He'd told her that he'd made the same choice Kel had had to make. She smiled. Wil hadn't let her down. Perhaps what she'd done had been for the best, after all. Now Kel was whole again, and she had Wil to thank. "Wil helped you."

"Yeah. And I think I should probably be mad at you for asking him to do that, but I can't bring myself to when you most likely saved my life."

She rolled her eyes to cover her sudden discomfort. She didn't want to be thought of as anyone's savior. All she'd done for the past few years was cause people pain. "Whatever."

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, all humor suddenly gone from his expression. When he spoke again, his voice was low and grave. "I'm serious, Becca. I was in a really bad, dark place. You don't even understand. I didn't want to live. I wouldn't have lasted another few days if Wil hadn't stepped in to do something."

Her heart stopped. She darted her tongue out to wet her lips. Had he really been considering suicide? "Don't talk like that. You're fine now. You were fine then, too. I know you. You would have pulled through. You're so much stronger than I am."

He shook his head. "No. I'm not. I moved in with you because I'd latched onto your strength, fed from it emotionally. If you hadn't been there for me, I don't know what would have happened to me. I had to move out because I was risking your life getting so close to you, but it damned near killed me to do it. You've always been the strong one."

"No," she whispered softly. If she'd been strong, she'd never have run away.

"Yes. You need to learn to accept that." He sat back and his expression lightened again. "Enough about that. I don't want to depress you. I came here for another reason. I have a business proposition for you. How would you feel about being a paranormal investigator?"

"A paranormal investigator?" She frowned. Hadn't Charlotte, the sister of the ever-changing jobs, been one of those at one point in her life?

"Ghost hunts and that sort of thing, and taking out the occasional rogue vampire or equally dangerous bad guy." His lips tipped up in a mischievous smile. "You know, just to keep your skills up."

It sounded like a dream come true. She smiled. "I like the sound of that."

"I thought you would. There's only one problem. Wil and I are working together."

She blinked. "What's the problem with that?"

Kel was silent for so long worry started to gnaw at her gut. When he finally spoke, amusement tinged his tone.

"He doesn't want you doing that kind of work."

Anger replaced the worry. Who was he to decide what she did or did not do for a living? She was perfectly capable of making her own decisions, no matter what the big jerk thought. "I don't care what he thinks. He can take his archaic ideas and shove them for all I care. I've known you longer. Doesn't that count for anything?"

"It counts for it all, honey. That's why I told him I want you in. The problem is I think you need to explain that to him yourself."

"Fine. Whatever. Put me in touch with him and I will."

"You can talk to him right now if you want to. He's here."

Her stomach clenched tight, the anger inside her sharpening. Had he not thought to mention that sooner? "Excuse me? Where?"

"Inside talking with Ellie and Eric."

A fact that Ellie had also conveniently forgotten to mention. She pushed up from the chair and stomped into the house without another word to Kel. She'd deal with him later. Now she had more an important man to put in his place. She found Wil sitting at the kitchen table with Ellie and Eric, Aidan on Ellie's lap.

Wil's expression softened when he saw her. "Hi."

She didn't return the pleasantries. "Come with me. We need to talk."

"No time for even a hello?" Ellie asked.

Becca shot her a glare before taking Wil's hand and pulling him out of his chair. "No. No hellos. No anything until I get some answers."

She ignored Eric's laugh and Ellie's gaping mouth, leading Wil up the stairs and down the hall to the room she'd been using. When she opened the door and they stepped inside, she turned to give him the scolding of a lifetime. But he kicked the door closed with his foot, spun her around and pressed her back against it. He put one hand on her waist, one over her head against the wood of the door and leaned in close.

"Answers can wait." With that, his mouth crushed down on hers.

She made a token resistance, but it didn't last long. She hadn't stopped wanting him in the three weeks they'd been separated. She'd thought about him nonstop, craved him in the night when she tossed and turned in her bed, unable to sleep. It was crazy. She'd spent a few days with him, not months, not years. But her feelings ran stronger than she'd ever expected. Chaining a guy to a bed and threatening to kill him must bring people closer in a strange and twisted sort of way.

Wil's tongue traced the seam of her lips and she parted them, welcoming him inside. Their tongues brushed and stroked, lips mashed, the tips of his fangs nipping against her lips and tongue. He pressed his body flush against hers. Her nipples beaded under the satin of her bra. Her pussy tightened and her panties went damp.

She moaned into his mouth. She'd missed this. Too much. The feel of his lips against hers, the weight of his body so close against her.

Wil broke his mouth away and leaned his forehead against hers, his eyes closed, his breath heaving in his chest.

"Are you okay?" she asked, cupping his jaw in her hand.

He turned his head and kissed the center of her palm. "Yeah. I am now. This is going to sound nuts, but I missed you."

"I missed you, too. And believe me, it doesn't sound as nuts as it should."

Wil laughed and pulled back, walking the few steps to the double bed, and sat down. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "You said you wanted answers."

"Yeah." She gulped back the lump forming in her throat. Knowing what she wanted to say to him was easy when he wasn't right there next to her for the first time in weeks. Now the aggravation moved aside, making room for something she didn't dare classify so soon.

"You want to know why I won't agree to Kel's suggestion."

"Well, yeah, that too. But first I want to know why you walked away."

He glanced up at her, surprise in his eyes. "You do?"

"Well, duh. Did you think I'd let you get away with sneaking out in the middle of the night, no goodbyes, no way to contact you? That was pretty low, even for a vampire."

Something dark flashed in his eyes. "You asked me to look out for Kel. I took that to mean you didn't want me around."

Men. They could be so dense sometimes. "Watching out for Kel was a temporary situation. I thought you would have known that. I didn't mean anything by asking you to do it beyond needing someone to make sure he didn't hurt himself. I never once said I wanted you to go away forever."

"Actually, you said a few similar things that second night when I woke up handcuffed to your bed."

She narrowed her eyes at him, her hands clenching into fists. "Don't be a smartass. You know what I mean."

He didn't say anything, but a slow, hot smile spread over his face, making her knees threaten to buckle.

She pushed the nerves away and let a little bit of the aggravation seep back in. Now that she knew he was okay, she planned to let him know exactly how she felt about archaic ideals. "Now feel free to explain to me why you told Kel you don't want me working with you."

"I didn't say I didn't want to work with you. What I told him was that I wouldn't let it happen."

"Hmm." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Sounds like the same thing to me."

"It's not. Believe me. Just because I want something doesn't mean it's good for everyone involved. Wanting it myself doesn't make it the right thing for you."

"I can take care of myself, Wil. I don't need you watching out for me."

"There's a lot of danger involved in this. I don't want you in the middle of it."

"Like I said, I'm perfectly capable of defending myself. I've spent the past three years hunting vampires, and I'm still alive. I can handle anything."

"Not some of the things we might run across. It's not just vampires anymore, Becca. It's shapeshifters and specters and a few very powerful demons. A human woman doesn't stand a chance. You need immortality in this profession."

She stomped to the other side of the bed and sat on the mattress, her back facing him. She took a couple of deep, calming breaths before she dared to speak again. "I lasted *three years* in that world. *Three years*. It didn't take me long to become Kel's equal. I can handle myself. You know that. I think this is about something else. You don't want to be around me anymore. If you don't want me working with you, maybe I'll just go into business for myself."

'Not gonna happen."

"And how are you planning to stop me?"

"Sweetheart, I can think of at least twenty ways. And those are just the ones that don't involve pain."

Becca sighed even as something fluttered low in her gut. This was getting them nowhere. If they continued to argue, they might very well end up in an all-out brawl. And as appealing to some strange part of her as that was, it wouldn't help her cause.

"In the interest of fairness, I think you need to give me a chance."

"In the interest of my sanity, I have to say I disagree."

He was worried about his sanity. *Poor baby*. If he kept up this resistance crap she'd show him insane.

"You've got to be kidding me." She turned and flopped onto her stomach on the mattress. What a stubborn, pigheaded jerk he was. She searched her mind, but couldn't come up with a single valid reason for why missing him had been in the forefront of her mind for so long. They had *nothing* in common. She still wanted him, but in all honesty he wasn't worth the trouble. "Go away, Wil. Just get out. Tell Kel I said thanks, but no thanks. I don't want to work with an arrogant asshole."

Wil's heavy sigh echoed through the room. The mattress moved as he pushed himself up and walked away from the bed. She opened one eye and glanced at him, found him raising the blinds.

"It's so quiet here."

"Yeah, it's great. I love it."

He threw her a quick, unreadable glance over his shoulder. "I don't care much for the quiet. I prefer cities. Lots of noise, lots of people. It's easier for my kind to get lost there."

A little too much emphasis on "my" for her liking. She muttered an unladylike curse under her breath. "Cities are nice too."

He pressed his hands to the window frame on either side of the glass, his shoulder muscles bunching under his T-shirt as he moved. "Look, Becca, I don't know where to go from here. We aren't compatible, not long-term. I don't know what I want, and I don't know what you're looking for. All I know is I have this irrational urge to be with you, and an even more irrational urge to make sure you're safe and protected."

"I don't need your protection."

"Don't you think I know that? Why do you have to make walking away from you so damned hard?"

She rolled onto her back and patted the mattress next to her. "Come sit back down, Wil. I promise I'll keep my hands to myself."

He laughed, pushed away from the window and came to join her back on the bed. He sat down next to her, one knee bent, his leg resting on the mattress. His expression was so torn she had to laugh.

"Tell me something, Wil. Why are you here?"

"Kel had it in his head that he wanted you working with us. I had to come to make sure you understood why that wouldn't be a good idea."

"So instead of calling on the phone, or trying to talk him out of it, or just putting your damned foot down like you're doing with me, you decided to come and visit instead?"

A guilty look flashed across his eyes.

"Isn't that a little extreme?" she continued. "I mean, for someone who doesn't know what he wants and all, you sure made a long trip to tell me that."

When he stared down at her, unmoving, she decided to make the first move herself. She sat up and kissed his jaw. When that got only a minimal reaction she kissed his cheek, and then his lips. When he started to respond, she pulled away. "You don't want this, remember?"

"I never said that."

"We've been in here for ten minutes and you haven't said much of anything."

"Maybe there's nothing left to say."

She laughed. When was he going to give it up? "Or maybe I've finally met the one person on this earth more stubborn than I am. You know why you're here, even if you refuse to admit it."

He let out a breath on a frustrated sigh. "I did miss you, but that doesn't make any of this right. I promised myself too many years ago to count that I wouldn't get involved with another human woman. Ever. I'm about ten seconds away from breaking that vow, and it's killing me. But humans don't live forever and I won't lose you a few years down the road."

"Nobody ever said anything about forever. It doesn't have to be like that."

"But that's what it will come down to. I know that. You must know it, too."

She took a deep breath. She'd just found him, just discovered the irrational depth for her feelings for the obstinate, sexy man, and she wasn't about to lose him because he couldn't get over his past. "What if I promise to let you turn me? Would that make you feel better?"

His gaze locked with hers, his eyes hopeful. He shifted a little closer on the bed. "Would you do that? You'd really let that happen?"

"Yes. Eventually. You know how I feel about vampires, so needless to say it would be a huge compromise for me. You'd have to compromise, too."

His eyes narrowed. "What do you want me to do?"

She fought back a smile. She had him, and he didn't even know it yet. Or maybe he did, and he'd given up the fight. "First, you'd have to give me space as far as turning goes. I need a little more time to be human."

"I think I can manage that." He swallowed hard. "What else?"

"Second, you need to stop being an idiot and let me come to work with you and Kel."

"I don't like that idea at all." He shook his head, his expression brooking no argument.

She snorted. As if she'd budge on this one point.

"You don't have to like it." Inspiration struck, and this time she didn't bother hiding the smile. "Look at it this way. The easiest way to make sure I'm safe would be to keep me close and not let me out of your sight."

"That's reaching a little, isn't it?"

"Probably. Is it working?"

He gave a slow nod. "It shouldn't be, but it is. Your rationale is twisted, but it makes sense. Okay, fine. I agree to your terms. *If* you agree to mine."

She blinked. She hadn't seen *that* one coming. "What are your terms?"

"First, you move in with me. It's a little hard to keep an eye on you if I don't know where you are."

She glanced around the tiny, plain room she'd been staying in. "Tough choice. Living here all by myself like some kind of nun, or having you in my bed every night. I'll have to think about that for a while."

Wil laughed. "Cute, Becca. Real cute. This second one is a deal breaker. If I feel a situation we're going into isn't safe for you, you stay home."

"That's not fair."

"It's perfectly fair. I don't want anything happening to you. Humans are some of the most fragile creatures here. I'm not taking chances with your life."

She pursed her lips, fighting the urge to stick her tongue out at him. But the more she thought about it, the better she understood his reasoning. "Okay. I'll try to promise. But only until I let you turn me. Then everything changes and you stop being my shadow."

"Fine. How long do you think it'll be before you're ready? A week? Maybe a month?"

She snorted again. So impatient, her vampire. "Probably more like a year or two. I'm twenty-one. I want to enjoy some time in my human state before I give it all up."

Wil's expression shifted, aggravation clouding his eyes. "No. A year isn't doable for me. I don't want to wait that long."

"And I'm really not ready to skip daylight hours and drink blood, so you'd better cool it for a while or I might change my mind." She raised an eyebrow, refusing to back down. She was nothing if not tenacious, and she wasn't going to give an inch. If he wanted her forever, he'd have to give her plenty of time. "I told you I'd let you turn me. What does it matter if it's now, or ten years from now? If it's my looks you're worried about, I'm not going to lose them *that* fast."

He laughed and lay down next to her on the bed. He shifted to his side, his head propped up with his hand. "I'm not worried about that. Though I have to say, you look damned good as you are now, even in baggy jeans and nubby sweaters."

She glanced down at her outfit. Her face flamed. Why had today been the day she dressed like she'd been shopping in secondhand stores?

"Seriously, Becca. You look cute. But you'd look better out of this stuff." He leaned in and kissed her, his lips a gentle, insistent press against hers. He didn't ask for more, not then, just shifted so his body was closer to hers and kept kissing her.

It was nice, the slow, sweetness of the kiss. At first. But then her body reminded her that she hadn't been near him in three weeks and she'd missed him more than she cared to admit. She rolled onto her side and pressed tight against him, stroking her tongue into his mouth to deepen the contact.

Her body immediately burst into action, her nipples pebbling against the sweater, her panties soaking as her cunt readied for Wil's cock. She clutched at his chest, her fingers digging into his skin through the material of his shirt. It wasn't long before he'd rolled her onto her back and fitted himself between her parted thighs. His erection pushed against her clit and she ground her hips against him, her body already craving his in a way she couldn't explain. He made her crazy. Wanton and needy. Even that first time, he'd known exactly what to do to make her lose control.

His lips trailed along her jawline, down the side of her neck to where it met her shoulder. His fangs grazed the sensitive spot, not biting down but inciting a riot among her nerves anyway. She sighed.

Wil pulled away long enough to help her out of her clothes and strip his own off his body. She didn't notice where her things landed on the floor, and she didn't care. At the moment she'd much rather concentrate on the man she'd missed for far too long. She pulled the covers back, reclined on the mattress and reached her arms out to him. With a heated smile, he joined her on the bed.

His lips found her breasts, his tongue laving as he stroked and suckled on her sensitive nipples. She arched her back, presenting herself to his mouth. A ragged moan tore from her lips. Three weeks of celibacy coupled with the flame-to-gasoline chemistry they had could really do a number on a girl. Her thighs parted, her pussy drenched and waiting for him to be inside.

He pulled his lips away from her breasts and smiled up at her. "This isn't going to be slow. Not this time. I've needed you for too long."

"That's fine. I don't want slow. Haven't you learned that by now?"

He laughed—a lust- and pain-filled sound that made her heart squeeze. "I guess I have."

Without another word he knelt up on the bed and helped her to her hands and knees. The old mattress dipped and creaked under them. Wil's hands caressed the globes of her ass, his palms warm against her skin. He trailed one palm down her back,

from her shoulder blades to the small of her back, making her spine arch toward the bed.

"You're so beautiful," he told her, his tone not much more than a sensual murmur. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" She wiggled her ass against the hard length of his cock, hoping he'd take the hint and thrust it inside her. Her cunt ached to be filled. Her clit ached for the brush of his fingers while he pounded inside her.

"For walking away." He ran a finger down her slit, spreading her wetness. "What can I say? I was stupid. I'll warn you now, I won't do it again. You aren't going to get rid of me, no matter what you try."

"Why would I want to get rid of you?" She wiggled again, the movement making her clit brush against the pad of his finger. A delicious shudder ran through her and she moaned. "You're not going anywhere because I won't let you."

"Is that so?" He finally took her hint and circled his finger around the aching bud of her clit. Her body pitched forward, most of her weight landing on her hands.

"Yes," she half spoke, half moaned. Her breasts dangled toward the mattress, making her nipples throb.

He stroked his finger over her clit, back and forth, but still made no move to enter her. He was toying with her, driving her crazy without offering her the release she'd been missing for three weeks, and if he kept it up she might have to kill him. She shoved her ass hard against him.

"Stop it, Wil."

"Stop what?" Another stroke of her clit, not nearly hard enough.

"Stop playing around. I've been waiting too long for this already. Just fuck me, okay?"

His answering laugh was a warm, sexy sound. One she'd never tire of, as long as she lived. She'd meant what she said about turning for him. It would be a hell of a compromise, but she'd do it if that was what it took to spend her life with him.

"Such a dirty mouth." He gave her ass a sound smack that had her whimpering and dropping her elbows to the bed. "I like that, Becca. A lot."

The mattress dipped as he stood, and a second later dipped again when he climbed back onto the bed. She heard the telltale crinkling sound as he tore open a condom packet, and then she felt his steadying hands against her skin. He thrust his cock into her cunt, at the same time gripping her hips and pulling her back against him. She nearly screamed at his rough entrance. Three weeks without sex had tightened the walls of her cunt and the feel of him inside her brought such a pleasure-pain sensation that she almost couldn't take it.

"Did I hurt you?" Wil asked, concern filling his voice. He held her still against him.

"God, no. Just keep going. You feel so fucking good inside me."

He didn't seem to need any more encouragement than that. He drove his hard cock into her, his finger finding her clit and pressing down hard. Her body exploded in release, every nerve vibrating as her inner muscles contracted around him. Her upper body gave out, her chest hitting the mattress, her cheek coming to rest on the soft sheets. Would it always be this good with him? She had a feeling it would. Her body shivered and shook for what felt like an eternity, the tremors washing over her from head to toe and every point in between.

"Shit. I can't wait any longer," Wil ground out seconds before he exploded into her. His hot seed caught by the condom, wringing another tremor from her softening body.

They collapsed across the bed together and Wil curled her into his arms. He brushed a soft kiss to her temple. "This is going to sound crazy, but I think I'm falling in love with you."

She smiled. It didn't sound crazy to her at all.

Chapter Ten

Two Years Later

“Are you ready *yet*?” Wil asked Becca, his whispered tone laced with the frustration of two years of waiting.

Two years of constant worry that she’d be gravely injured on a job and her fragile human life would slip away. Two years of badgering her to make the decision she’d promised to make, to finally relent and let him turn her. Two years of hell on earth while she stalled and moaned and whined that he pressured her too much. He’d been patient—as patient as he could be, and still she held back.

What the hell was she waiting for?

“Shut up, will you?” she whispered, a hint of amusement in her voice. “This isn’t the time. Watch for Kel’s signal so we don’t miss when it’s time to move in.”

He muttered a curse under his breath. They stood in the woods outside a cabin where a killer werewolf had been hiding out after murdering six people in a small midwestern town. Kel, an expert at silent break-ins, was making an entry point for them, something to allow them to sneak in undetected and take the werewolf out before anyone else died. It had only been two minutes since the younger vampire had moved in toward the cabin, and Wil didn’t expect his signal anytime soon. These things took time. Becca was just trying to avoid his question.

“I can’t think of a better way to pass the time than to discuss our future.” The wind blew through the trees, rustling the leaves and covering the soft sounds of their voices.

“I’ve just recently been willing to admit that there is a future here for us, and you still need to get over this whole fixation with babying me. Maybe when you cut that out, I’ll be ready. Can you at least wait until after my twenty-fourth birthday before you start bugging me again?”

“No. I’ve waited a long time. More time than what you’d originally led me to believe. I love you, Becca. I want to spend forever with you. Is that so wrong?”

She glanced at him, squinting through the darkness, and smiled. “No. I love you too. But that’s not going to change my mind.”

“You wouldn’t have to squint if you were a vampire. You’d be able to see like it was the middle of the day. Your hearing would be so much better, your sense of smell too.”

“Are you saying that I don’t do my job well enough?”

He eyed her, watching her expression. She wasn’t offended. She was toying with him. Again. Lately that had become par for the course. “You know damned well what I’m saying. I want you with me, in all ways. I’m sick of waiting around for —”

A flashlight beam cut through the trees before everything went dark again, halting his words. Kel's signal. *Shit*. It couldn't have come at a worse time. He needed to nail her down to a date before he went out of his mind.

"Let's go." Becca was moving along through the trees before he'd even had a chance to snap into action. When she worked, he sometimes had a hard time keeping up. Kel had warned him about that, but even two years later he still struggled with her zeal. One of these days it was going to get her hurt. But she was still young, feeling invincible.

Her feet made too much noise crunching across the leaves and twigs littering the ground around the cabin, though he figured she didn't realize it. A human wouldn't have picked up on the sounds. A werewolf, with hearing abilities that surpassed most of earth's inhabitants, would hear the noises even in sleep. Even in human form, which was the form Wil was hoping the creature had assumed. It would be safer for Becca that way.

"Becca, slow down." He made a grab for her, but she wriggled out of his grasp.

"What's the matter now?" she asked without slowing her hurried pace. "You told me you'd give me the freedom to work without butting in, as long as you thought I was safe. This is easy. In and out, and on our way back home within a half hour."

"I know what I said. But that doesn't mean I have to like it. Cool it a little. He'll hear you and we won't have the advantage of surprise anymore."

She slowed a little this time, glanced at him over her shoulder. "Why did all of us need to be here for this one, anyway?"

He knew what she was asking. Why hadn't he just stayed at the condo. In truth, they hadn't all been needed, but both Kel and Becca had refused to be left behind and even though Wil had long ago accepted that his two business partners would never be more than friends, he still had a hard time picturing them out on a job, late at night, alone. In order to preserve his sanity, he'd decided to accompany them. And common knowledge about werewolves was that, when cornered, they lashed out. Having at least two people on a job was safer than just one. If someone got hurt, the other would be there to fix things.

Unless that someone was Becca. Vampires healed quickly. There were some injuries that humans couldn't heal from at all.

The knot in his stomach tightened into a painful ball of nerves. He'd seen the bodies of the victims. This werewolf was sick, dangerous. He wouldn't be happy with their little surprise visit. And he'd go for the weakest of the group first. Becca.

The knowledge was enough to make Wil want to put her over his shoulder and carry her to the car. He smiled a little as he remembered the last time he'd had that urge with her. It was the first night they met, and he thought she'd been in danger. But she hadn't been, and she'd turned the tables on him a little too easily. Maybe she was right. Maybe she could defend herself better than he gave her credit for.

They met up with Kel along the back of the cabin, near a window he'd jimmied open. He glanced from Wil to Becca and back again, shaking his head. Becca stuck her tongue out at him. With a final shake of his head, Kel motioned for Wil to move inside the building.

Wil had decided in the beginning he'd go into the house, leaving Becca and Kel outside as backup just in case. Neither one of them liked it, but he had centuries of experience on them. He'd had to pull rank, to keep them safe. Safer than he'd be, at least.

His mind didn't stray far from Becca as he lowered himself into the room. It took him all of five seconds to determine what he should have expected. The cabin was empty.

And then Becca screamed.

He rushed outside to find the killer, in a strange mix of wolf and human form, holding Becca against his body. Kel stood in a grouping of trees, training his gun on the wolf's head. With the way the wolf was flailing about, Kel wouldn't be able to get off a clear shot. Wil gave silent thanks that Kel cared about Becca enough not to risk her life. All Kel needed was a distraction for the wolf, something that stilled him for a few seconds, and Wil could provide just that.

"Let her go. You don't really want to hurt her."

"You don't know that." The werewolf's voice was a harsh growl, his eyes narrowed and his long hair whipping around his face in sweaty strands.

His arms tightened around Becca's middle. Her eyes flashed fire and pain. The coppery tang of blood filled the air. The liquid darkened the front of Becca's shirt and dripped from the man's arm. His heart thumped against the wall of his chest at even the thought of Becca being hurt. It took all his willpower not to jump at the wolf and endanger Becca even more.

"I know you don't really want to hurt anyone. I understand you. You can't help what you do. It just happens."

Kel didn't give the man any more time to contemplate things. He rushed forward out of the trees. The gunshot echoed through the stillness of the woods. Wil lunged forward and grabbed Becca just before the wolf fell to the ground in a tangle of hair, limbs and blood.

Once Wil had Becca against him, he sat and wrapped her tight in his arms. The pounding of her pulse reached his ears and he let out a breath. She wasn't hurt bad. She'd be okay, though he didn't like the amount of blood staining her shirt. "Where are you hurt?"

"My stomach. Nowhere important." She laughed, despite the pain shining in her eyes. "It's a scratch. Bleeding a lot. Might need a couple of stitches, but I'm fine. I'm not going to die or anything. You aren't that lucky."

He choked on a half laugh, half sigh. "You're not funny. I'm taking you to the hospital."

Kel came up next to them and knelt down on the ground. He brushed Becca's hair out of her face before he glanced up at Wil. "What are you going to tell them? A werewolf scratched her with his really sharp claws and now she needs to get them stitched up?"

"No, silly," Becca said. "We were out looking for good hunting spots and I fell out of a tree."

Wil didn't like the idea. Not one bit, but he was through pushing her to accept something she might never be ready for. With an agonized groan, he helped Kel lift her off the ground. "Works for me. Let's get this looked at before it bleeds too much more."

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Becca groaned as Wil helped her into the passenger seat of his SUV. Twenty-eight stitches and a couple of pain pills later they were finally on their way back home. She *hurt*, though she'd never admit it to the two macho guys sharing the car with her. She'd never live it down, and Wil would start his campaign to let him turn her all over again. Though after tonight's ordeal, it didn't sound like such a scary idea anymore.

For a little while, when the werewolf had been holding her hostage, she'd thought she was going to die. It was in that moment that she'd understood Wil's hesitation to let her work with them, understood his fear. Even understood why he kept pestering her to let him turn her into something she still wasn't sure if she wanted to be.

"Are you okay?" Wil asked, his voice filled with concern and a little reprimand.

"Of course I am. If I wasn't they wouldn't have released me to go home."

Wil stopped for a stop sign and spared her a glance. "You don't look fine. You look like hell, and it's pissing me off that I could do something about it but you're so damned stubborn you won't let me."

From the back seat, Kel cleared his throat. "You two do realize you aren't alone, right?"

Wil thumped the steering wheel with his palms. "What do you think, Kel? Think she should stop being stubborn and let me turn her?"

The soft leather rustled as Kel sat back in his seat. "Don't even put me in the middle of this. It has nothing to do with me."

"Why not?" Wil asked, the snap of aggravation in his voice. "She listens to you more than she listens to me."

"Wanna bet?" Kel snapped back.

That was the end of the conversation for the ride home.

When they got back to the condo, Kel came around and opened her door before Wil had even gotten out of the car. He gave her a grave stare and mouthed, "Let him turn you."

With a soft kiss on her cheek, he was gone, heading for his own car in the parking lot. Smart man, going home before the shouting started.

Funny thing was, she didn't feel like shouting this time. She was too weak and sore, too tired to put up any kind of fight. And Kel was right. Now was the time to make the turn she'd been avoiding for far too long. She wouldn't risk another injury like the one she'd gotten tonight. An injury that could easily have been so much worse.

Wil came up next to her and put his arm over her shoulders. "Why don't you let me carry you up to the condo?"

"Because I'm not a helpless child?" She smiled at him and gave his cheek a light pat. She leaned against Wil's side. "You know, I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"Sounds dangerous."

She laughed. "Don't be a jerk. This is serious. I think I'm ready for you to turn me now."

"Really?" He glanced down at her, a look of such hope on his face she couldn't help but giggle. "Are you sure?"

"More sure about this than I've ever been about anything."

A huge smile broke over Wil's face. "You won't regret this. I promise you."

She didn't doubt it for a second. A few years ago she would have balked at the idea of letting someone turn her, but now it seemed like the most natural choice in the world. After all, it would give her forever with the man she loved. Nothing could be more perfect.

About the Author

Born in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Elisa Adams has lived most of her life on the east coast. Formerly a nursing assistant and phlebotomist, writing has been a longtime hobby. Now a full time writer, she lives on the New Hampshire border with her husband and three children.

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