



Tianna
Xander

VIRGIN'S
BLOOD

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Virgin's Blood

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ISBN: 1-55410-701-6

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books

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CHAPTER ONE

Never take six thousand dollars with you to a drug dealer.

He will kill you for it. I filed this little bit of information away in my mind as I hurried to cram stacks of money into my book bag.

I searched the place for possible evidence. I didn't want anyone to be able to place me here and was glad we brought Trina's car instead of mine. At least it would be harder for the police to put me at the scene of the crime.

I stuffed the cash in my bag. In my hurry, it was hard to tell just how much of it was ours, since Marco stacked it all together.

Besides, I figured since I'd have to run for the rest of my life, I might as well get off to a good start. Several thousand dollars in cash should get me somewhere.

I reached over to the filthy counter, stretched my arm over a barstool and picked up a used napkin with some sort of red sauce smudged on it.

It was probably pizza sauce. Several flat, square boxes littered the filthy floor and table.

"It's a good thing Marco always used linen," I mumbled to myself, while I wiped the place clean of my fingerprints.

My gaze dropped to the still warm body draped over that of my recently deceased friend, I rubbed my eyes. The scene of him raping her as she died replayed in my mind.

"He got what he deserved."

It was a poor attempt to rationalize what I'd done. I looked down at Trina and wiped my hand over my face.

"Bye, Trina. I love you, Sis."

I turned my gaze to Marco, scowled down at him and drew my foot back. The urge to kick him was almost overpowering. I stared down at my bag, searching for a reason to curb my desire.

Does cocaine get stale? I frowned at the inane thought. Well, it isn't like anyone will be eating it. So what does it matter? I toyed with the idea of taking some then decided against it. It was a temptation but I didn't sit through ten days of withdrawal for nothing.

Stepping over the two bodies entangled together like lovers, I smiled and gave in to the urge to kick Marco's filthy carcass away from Trina. He landed on his back beside her.

I couldn't bear the sight of his naked ass across

her body any longer. The vision it inspired was cheap. Like she'd been in such a hurry to have him inside her, she wouldn't even let him take off his clothes. His black designer jeans were bunched around his ankles and caught on his expensive Italian boots.

That's how I found them, Marco grunting over Trina's body as she died. His shirt unbuttoned and pants still on, sweating cocaine as he rammed himself into her.

Trina's head fell to the side and she stared at me through nearly lifeless eyes. When I saw the ring of bruises around her neck, I lost it.

I grabbed Marco's gun, a .45, I think. It was big, and heavy, and already equipped with a silencer. I aimed it at his head and closed my eyes as I squeezed the trigger. It jerked in my hand, made a strange spitting noise. Stunned, I dropped the gun to the floor.

The sound of Trina's gasp brought my eyes to her face. It was nearly purple from lack of oxygen. The bastard must have crushed her windpipe. Her chest heaved with the effort to draw in one lifesaving breath.

"I love you, Tash," Trina mouthed, before she closed her eyes for the last time.

I didn't feel much when I finally looked down. Marco stared at the floor, his chin propped on Trina's shoulder. There was just the immense

satisfaction of knowing I killed the asshole that just murdered my best friend.

My only friend.

Now, I'm alone. The thought filled me with dread. How can I go on alone again?

I gathered my thoughts together, turned my head and lowered my eyes to my bag. I grabbed it, slung it up over my back with one arm through the strap, and hitched it up onto my shoulder. Then I turned to give Marco one last glance.

"It didn't have to end like this, you prick. You would have gotten most of the money anyway."

Marco didn't answer me, of course. He'd landed on his back when I kicked him, and his eyes were blank as he stared at the smoke stained ceiling. I shuddered with distaste. He was my first and, with any luck, my last kill.

I never asked for this. When Marco found out how much money Trina had on her, he probably figured it would be an easy stash to steal. He hadn't planned on me. Since I wanted to kick the expensive habit, I usually stayed home but something told me to come this time.

When my father disappeared, his lawyer had sent me a quarterly check for twelve-thousand dollars. Half of which, I gave to Trina to clean herself up and get her off the streets. She didn't want to quit. Instead, she brought the whole six-grand with her tonight.

If all Marco wanted was the money, I know Trina would have given it to him. Her sense of self-preservation was as strong as anyone's. But she would have drawn the line at rape and murder. She was a druggie, not a masochist.

I finally gave in to the urge for just one more taste. I picked a pinch of coke from the table and snorted it. Why not? It's good stuff and it definitely wasn't going to do Marco any good in Hell.

I took one more glance around the place, took a deep breath to steady my nerves and wrinkled my nose. The metallic odor of blood hung in the air, and an aura of death surrounded the bodies. Gooseflesh rose on my arms.

The coffee table, which had escaped my notice before, had two plastic bags on it. Obviously ripped open during Trina's struggle with Marco, they lay open on the tabletop and cocaine dusted the room. It was everywhere, with the exception of where I wiped it clean of my prints.

Little paw prints made their way across a table and a few thin skid marks crisscrossed the counter. I picked the gun back up from where I'd dropped it and wiped it clean, sure to remove all of my prints from the weapon I borrowed.

I may be blonde, but I'm definitely not stupid. Okay, so maybe I'm dumb for doing drugs, but I have tried to quit. Besides I'm not crazy enough to

leave any of my fingerprints at the scene of what the authorities are bound to call a double homicide.

Gingerly stepping back over their bodies, and mindful of the puddle of blood around Marco's head, I didn't see the blur of orange until it was too late. I nearly tripped over his damn cat. It arched its back, hissed at me and spit its opinion of my failure to see him when I stepped on his tail. It looked at me through eyes it could barely hold open. The left eye danced around inside of its head. It bounced around like a pinball on crack.

"Getting a little high, Kitty?" I giggled. The little bit of coke I'd snorted from the table started to take effect. It made me a bit giddy. But just a bit, I'd only snorted enough to make a newbie high.

Or just enough to make me have my withdrawal symptoms start all over, I thought with a sigh. When will I ever learn to think things through?

"Whew, Toots! Now I know where you got your name." I gasped, as I waved my hand in front of my face.

The tabby staggered off. It slipped haphazardly through the blood and cocaine, leaving little red footprints behind him. The smell got stronger and I plugged my nose. I turned, shook my head, and picked my way through the garbage on the floor. The last thing I needed was

to slip on this filth and break something.

Then where would I be?

Jail, that's where.

"I have to get out of here," I mumbled and tripped over the damned cat again as I headed for the back. "Oh, God, Toots. Go put a cork in it or something!"

Apparently cocaine gives cats gas. Who knew?

When I finally reached the backdoor, I flipped up the hood of my sweat jacket to cover my gold-blond hair that tends to shine like neon in the glow of the streetlights. I used the soiled napkin, still in my hand, to turn the knob and stepped out into the rain.

* * * *

Three hours later, before the withdrawal symptoms began, I was smart enough to realize if I didn't quit cold turkey, I would never manage to quit at all. I knew from experience that the pain would be even worse in a few hours. I decided to hide my keys. Later, I'd be tempted to drive back to Marco's and try to break in for another hit.

I promptly stashed my keys and hoped I'd be too far gone by that time to look in the sewing desk for them.

Yes, I have a sewing desk. It was my mother's. Don't make an issue out of it.

On my way back to the living room, someone rang the bell. I didn't think and opened the door before I looked through the little peephole.

Imagine my surprise to see a cop standing on my stoop. My knees went weak as I wondered how they found out about me so soon.

Oh, shit!

Visions of international orange jumpsuits with County Jail emblazoned on the back, in big black letters, danced through my head and I promptly fainted.

* * * *

"Miss, can you hear me?"

The muffled question swam through my mind, as I sifted through a nightmare of darkness, snakes and bugs. My skin itched as the sensation of swarming insects crawling over me heightened. I screamed within my nightmare and searched for a way out.

I spied a sliver of light and reached for it. Even death was preferable to this torment. But it wasn't death that awaited me as I opened one burning eye.

At least I wasn't in Hell, unless, of course, Hell is comprised of an eighteen-hundred-square-foot house, in the suburbs of Grand Rapids.

But I don't think so.

I turned my head and wondered absently how I ended up on the couch, and got another glimpse of the cop.

Oh.

He sat perched on the edge of my coffee table.

If I'm not in Hell, he's sure to think he is, if he doesn't get his ass off my grandma's glass-topped table.

"Get off of that!" I glared at him. "I don't even put my feet on it."

Of course I don't. Grandpa made it for Gram. I'd be damned if I'd see it ruined by some cop's ass. No matter how cute an ass it may be.

He was hot. I tried to ignore how incredibly delicious he looked in his uniform and resisted the urge to fan myself.

His thick, blonde hair made my fingers itch to see if it was as soft as it looked and ice-blue eyes gazed at me from an open, boy-next-door face. Well over six feet tall—a pre-requisite for dating, since I'm five ten—he was the epitome of handsome. I closed my eyes and gave a mental shrug.

He probably just appeared taller as I keeled over earlier. People do tend to appear a bit bigger while you're peering up at them from the floor at their feet.

His silver-blue eyes gleamed, even twinkled at me for a bit, as he watched me. Then his mouth

drew down at the corners. How can a person frown and still have their eyes twinkle at the same time?

I damn sure wasn't going to ask him.

"How long has it been?" he asked, as he inspected me with an interest that was somewhat more than professional.

He kind of gave me the creeps looking at me like that. I squirmed under his scrutiny.

Hey, I was attracted to him and all. Hell. Who wouldn't be? The man resembled a Greek God, but there was something scary about him I couldn't put my finger on. I stared up at him and blinked.

"Since what?" Heat rushed to my cheeks. If he mentioned sex, my troubles would be over, because I'd die of mortification right here on the spot.

"How long has it been since your last fix?"

He reached up, took his hat off and pushed long fingers through that glorious thatch of blonde hair. He looked frustrated about something.

I avoided his stare because I don't lie well. I never have. I could only hope he would attribute my inability to hold his gaze to my withdrawal symptoms. Otherwise, I'd be in some really deep doo doo.

If I don't count that little snack after offing Marco ...

"Well?" He raised his brow.

"About forty-eight hours. Why?" I tilted my head to the side, pushed my hair back over my shoulder, and peered up at him, curious.

He stood up and paced the room and my eyes followed his tall, lean frame. I couldn't help but admire the way he moved. I loved to watch as his thick muscles rippled under his uniform.

His pure, sensual grace as he crossed the room was enough to make me drool. The rise and fall of his nicely rounded cheeks under his slacks made me squirm in my seat.

What in the hell has gotten into me? I shifted my gaze away with a frown. A nymphomaniac, I am not!

"Sit down, will you? You're making me dizzy." I shook my head as he started to walk toward me. "So help me, God, if you park your butt on my coffee table again, I'll bean you. It's disrespectful for you to sit down on that table. You should know better."

I surprised myself. I'm not usually so mouthy. I guess the knowledge that he was most likely had orders to arrest me no matter what I said, gave me a bravado I normally wouldn't have had.

He made a detour to the wing chair in the corner and lowered himself slowly into the seat. His eyes burned a trail over my flesh as they traveled slowly and deliberately up and down my

body.

I shivered, as I imagined what it would be like to have his hands and mouth on my skin instead of just that heated gaze. I sat up and gave him my best come hither look. It must have lost something in the translation because he just sat there, his face blank.

A drop of perspiration ran down my temple and I wiped it away. I was covered in sweat, I could have been in a sauna instead of my living room. To top it all off, I shook more than San Francisco during a seven-pointer. Not that I know much about it since I've never been there. So that may or may not be an apt analogy.

"Are you going to tell me why you're here? If you planned to bust me for possession," I coughed out what passed for a laugh, "you're obviously too late."

He didn't even crack a smile, he just stood and stared at me as he waited for my answer.

I took a deep breath, let the air out on a rush, and blew the bangs out of my face. At that moment, I just wanted to curl up into a little ball and die. My life, having never been great, was suddenly in the toilet and circling the drain. I might have let Marco kill me last night, if it wouldn't have included the defilement of my dead body. A shudder of distaste traveled through me.

Marco was a pig.

"I'm trying to quit. My last hit made me sick." That wasn't a total lie. I did throw up two miles or so down the road from Marco's, before I called the cab. But I'm pretty sure it was more from having to run those two miles, or nerves, than the drugs.

My drug-deprived mind played tricks on me. The officer stood up, raised his hands to his waist, and began to remove his clothes. His uniform top and t-shirt came off first.

I marveled at the site of his well-honed abdominal muscles. I never realized a six-pack could be so sexy. Then his gun belt hit the hardwood floor with a loud thunk. It drew my gaze further down and I watched as his pants followed the path of the rest of his clothing. I swallowed thickly. He didn't have any underwear on!

I licked my lips with anticipation. I've never seen a naked man up close and personal. Girls like me just don't get strip shows like this, very often.

"Um ..." Should I say something or just enjoy the show?

Oh, I was interested, to be sure. Another of my late friends, Darla, always preached that a good screw was never amiss. I never put that thought into practice, of course. I'd never been tempted to, before. Now all I could think of was what it would be like to have this huge hunk of testosterone

lodged inside me.

“Ma’am, why are you staring at me like that?”

Apparently, I came to my senses when he spoke. His clothes magically reappeared and covered every delectable inch of his yummy, butterscotch colored skin.

Isn’t that just a damned disappointment? I frowned. I certainly wanted to see more. Oh well, it was just my imagination anyway.

This sure is a strange way for the withdrawal to affect me.

The officer stood before me, now completely dressed in his form fitting uniform, I shook my head to clear it.

“Looking at you, like what?”

I gazed up at him, attempted to appear as though I hadn’t just imagined him naked and resisted the urge to fan myself. Is it getting warm in here?

He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. “You’re looking at me like you’re a starving woman and I’m a bacon cheeseburger – with fries on the side.”

He tucked a finger behind his collar and tugged. His badge winked at me, shining into my face. It blinked like a neon sign that read, guilty, you’re guilty!

I peered up at him and stiffened my spine with mock self-righteousness. “I have absolutely no

idea what you mean." I crossed my arms in front of my chest to cover my hardened nipples. "It must be the withdrawal that has made me look at you funny." Yeah. That's it. Blame it on the withdrawal symptoms.

I forced myself to look just over his shoulder and focused my gaze past his right ear, to the portrait of my newly deceased dog, Tavi. Even I, in my state, couldn't stay horny while I sat and stared at a dog. Not the four-legged variety, at any rate.

I've never been able to look anyone in the eye and lie. Gram always said it would keep me honest. I closed my eyes and willed myself not to cry. I wish she'd been right. If Gram had been correct in that assumption, I wouldn't be in this predicament, now.

Maybe I'd be married to some nice dull guy, right now, with a tedious job and a little dreary house. We'd be Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Normal as we commuted down the highway to Hell.

CHAPTER TWO

I shook my head and pulled myself out of my withdrawal-induced funk. “You never did tell me why you’re here,” I said as my eyelids drooped in a sensual perusal of his perfect physique.

He sat across the room from me. Uniform or not, this guy was fine, with a capital F.

I decided to get comfortable and took my shoes off then tucked my feet up under me on the sofa. My gaze slid around the room, my eyes darted from one thing to another, as the withdrawal symptoms returned with a vengeance. The horrible itch was back too and I knew that no matter how much I scratched, it wouldn’t go away.

God, I hate this.

Experience told me it wouldn’t take long to deal with it. In the meantime I had to put up with the sensation of a thousand tiny bugs crawling over my skin. It was only a matter of time before I

started to dig the flesh from my bones as I tried to rid myself of the sensation.

If my unexpected guest noticed me squirm, he was polite enough not to comment on it. He stood up and began to pace again. He seemed nervous.

I assumed his agitation was because of all of the hot looks I threw his way. I scowled and attempted to turn down my libido's thermostat, but it wouldn't budge.

A cold shower looks good right about now. Or, better yet, a date with my battery-operated buddy.

"Your pacing makes me nervous. Why don't you light on something?" I snarled and glowered at him.

I waited for him to arrest me and wondered why he didn't. I did kill a man, after all, even though it was to protect myself. Nothing could make me believe Marco would have let me live after what I witnessed. I can't stress that enough.

"There was a double homicide across town last night. I was sent to bring you in for questioning."

He stopped pacing and pinned me with a stare. I fidgeted a bit and my left eye twitched. It was a nervous reaction I hoped he missed.

"Why me?" I asked, managing—through my fright, no doubt—to appear properly stunned. I didn't quite trust myself to say much more.

I glanced down at myself. Was all of this shakiness really from the withdrawal, or was I

scared to death that he'd see through my act and figure out I'm the one who pulled the trigger on that scumbag Marco?

I stood up and strode toward the other room. I needed to move and work off some of my nervous energy.

"I need a drink. You're welcome to come with." I indicated the door that led into my outdated kitchen.

"Make yourself strong coffee," he said, as he fell into step behind me.

His footsteps against the hardwood floor were loud compared to the soft slap of my bare feet as he followed me into the next room. Each hard clomp of his boots reminded me of the guards as they made their rounds in a prison movie I'd seen recently. I could understand how the inmates in that movie felt. That short distance seemed like a mile.

"I hear caffeine helps." He shrugged at the unspoken question in my glance. "It's a stimulant."

"Well, you're right about that." I shoveled eight scoops of ground vanilla-flavored coffee beans into the filter and set the pot to brew. "In the meantime," I mumbled and headed to the fridge.

I opened the door, reached in and pulled out a half-full, twenty-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew. It

belonged to Trina and I figured that since she wouldn't need it anymore, it was fair game. I chugged it down, with the hope that he was right about the caffeine. I could use all of the help I could get.

I grimaced at the over-sweet taste. I don't like my drinks really sweet and I'd never liked regular Mountain Dew, but to get rid of the sensation of bugs eating my skin off, I'd do just about anything.

I tried not to think too much about Trina. If I did, I'd lose it. I knew I needed to be strong. I knew that if I gave in to the hurt and the anger I felt over her senseless death, I just might go crazy. I looked up and braced myself for his questions.

"Who was killed and why does anyone need to talk to me about it?" To avoid his scrutiny, I buried my head in the refrigerator again, under the pretence of searching for another bottle of pop. "Shit! There isn't any more. Now I have to wait for the fuckin' coffee."

The cop chuckled, "My, my, you do have a potty mouth, don't you?" He shook his head. The grin on his handsome face was too big to make me believe he really disapproved of my strong language.

I don't know what it was about this guy, even though he scared me half to death, he made me think of sex every time I looked at him. That's

saying something, when it comes from a twenty-eight-year-old virgin. Well, almost virgin.

“What’s your name?” I refuse to entertain another fantasy about this guy without at least knowing what to call him.

I scowled and slammed a lid on my runaway libido. I quashed the desire to strip him and have my wicked way with his delectable body. Then I shot him another sidelong glance and shivered. Okay, maybe I’ll have my wicked way later.

“Carson, Brock Carson.”

“Mind if I call you Brock, or do I have to call you Officer Carson?” I asked when I really wanted to call him lover.

“Brock is fine,” he said, as he leaned against the counter and stretched those mile-long legs out in front of him. He crossed his arms over his chest.

Damn, if he didn’t look absolutely edible.

My gaze dropped back down the massive bulge in his pants and I wondered absently, if it was all him or if he was prone to stuffing a pair of socks down there. A roll of ring bologna, maybe?

I bit my cheek, deep in thought. Wouldn’t it be fun to find out if what you’ve imagined is really under those clothes?

Frowning, I wondered what in the world had come over me. I’ve never been so horny in my life. I was practically drooling over this guy, in spite the withdrawal symptoms I’ve had. And he

seemed so ... so untouched by it all, as if I didn't appeal to him in the slightest.

What did you expect? You're a friggin' drug addict, stupid. And he's a cop. Why would he even want to associate with you? Let alone have glorious, mind blowing, multi-orgasmic sex. I frowned. Just stop it! I blinked slowly and tried to dispel the urge to walk over to him and grab a certain bulging appendage.

It didn't work.

"I can't tell you much about our investigation. Although, I can say I radioed headquarters while you were unconscious. After explaining the condition you were in when I arrived to the chief investigator, he instructed me to make sure you were okay, then report back to the precinct. He doesn't want me to waste any more time here."

"Why the change of heart?"

I pulled a coffee cup from the cupboard above the dishwasher. Before I closed the door, I reached in to straighten the handle of a cup that was out of alignment with the others. I turned around just in time to see him make a face at my action.

"Yes, I'm an anal-retentive bitch. It's scary to imagine someone like me on coke, isn't it?" I said, to his raised eyebrows.

The coffeepot finished its cycle. I walked over, poured myself a cup then took a sip and gagged.

Did I mention I hate coffee?

“It tastes like shit, but if it will help, I’ll drink it by the friggin’ gallon.” I looked at him over the rim of my cup. I’d avoided it for a while since his clothing was gone again. And I was too damned horny to keep my mind from imagining what he would do if we both were naked.

I marveled at the way he filled my kitchen. My mind insisted I saunter over to him and let my fingers do some walking over all of that beautifully tanned flesh. Instead, I tried to keep my eyes focused above his neck. I really did—but I couldn’t help it. My unruly gaze drifted down to his extremely large erection. If the man had any deficiencies, it definitely wasn’t below the waist.

“Why the change of heart?” I still needed to know. I didn’t want to get false hopes.

Finally, I gave up the battle, glued my eyes to his crotch and leaned against the opposite counter to enjoy the sight of him in all of his naked glory. Imagination or not, this guy is definitely hot.

“One of the victims was a known area hooker, and an acquaintance of yours, Trina Devereau. The other was Marco Fargo, a known drug dealer.”

I forced my eyes to return to his face, it was all I could do to keep from shouting out that Trina was more than an acquaintance of mine. She was my best friend. Roommate. Partner in crime. Sister.

“The perp stole all of Marco’s money and most of his stash. The Chief figures you haven’t had a fix in some time, considering the condition you were in, when I arrived.”

I realized where he was headed. Somehow, I managed to keep myself on my feet when my body wanted to crumple with relief.

“And, if I’d just killed a drug dealer and stole all of his smack, I’d either be high as a kite, or as dead as a three day old fish, if I had it,” I finished for him. I immediately took a drink of the nasty coffee. I wanted to keep the smile that tugged at the corners of my mouth from crawling up my face.

I gazed down into the depths of my café au tar and made an effort to control myself. Whoever took those drugs was a mystery I hope never got solved. I certainly didn’t care to meet any of Marco’s business associates.

To think, if I would have taken those drugs last night, I’d be on my way to jail. The authorities would have said I’d murdered that dickhead son-of-a-bitch. Not that I believe for a second that it was really murder, but I wasn’t about to argue semantics with the police.

Brock nodded. “You get the picture. Good.”

He left the kitchen and I followed his ass - I mean him - back into the living room. He was still naked, but hey, you won’t hear me complain.

When Brock put on his hat, he was suddenly dressed again. Damn, another disappointment! I had admired the tremendous size of his flaccid penis. And imagination or not, it was spectacular.

I shook my head. I really need to go take a nap. My mind is playing tricks on me.

“Would you like me to take you to a hospital, or something?”

Or something, honey buns.

The expression on his face clearly stated he thought I should seek professional help.

I took another sip of coffee then wiped the drool from my mouth. God, he’s hot. I shook my head when he threw a questioning look my way. “No, thank you. I think I’ll be fine.” Are these hallucinations part of my withdrawal, or am I just extremely attracted to this guy?

He reached up and tipped his hat back. “It was nice to meet you, Ma’am.”

I frowned. Ma’am? How the hell old do I look, anyway?

“Call me Tasha, please.” I didn’t just gush, did I? Cause if I did ... yeech!

He took my smaller hand in his and smiled. “Tasha, such a beautiful name.”

To hell with it. If I make a fool of myself, I always have the withdrawal to blame.

I reached up with my free hand, stood on my toes and pulled his head toward mine. “I don’t

have the slightest idea why I'm saying this," I said. "But stay."

I put my hands on his shoulders and kissed him. My tongue darted out to run along his bottom lip and demanded entrance to his mouth.

He remained straight for a moment and mortification began to set in, before he raised his arms and pulled me tight against him. He groaned into my mouth and his tongue finally rushed out to play with mine. My arms snaked around his neck and my cup of mud fell to the floor, forgotten.

He ground his lower body against mine. It made my pussy clench. Warmth flooded my middle and moisture dripped from my nether lips and onto my panties.

Brock was the first to regain his senses. He reached up, took my hands in his and unwrapped my arms from around his neck where I attached myself to him like a leech. I fought the urge to whine and wrap my legs around his waist. I had to keep at least a little dignity.

"I can't," he panted, his lips still wet and glistening from our kiss. "You're not yourself, and I'm on duty." He looked like he was in pain. "If I stay, we may regret it."

He pressed my trembling hand against his crotch. I squeezed his erection ruthlessly and ran my fingers up and down the massive blood-

engorged shaft. I reached down with my other hand, cupped his sac through his slacks, squeezed and used my nails to heighten the sensation.

Trina taught me a few useful tricks one day when I made my first and only attempt at prostitution to support my drug habit. I couldn't bring myself to do it but it wasn't because I didn't know how.

To me, sex was supposed to be between two people who cared about each other. At least that's what I thought before I met Mr. Universe, here. That was the main reason I'd stopped using cocaine. I didn't have the money for it and I couldn't bring myself to sell my body to get it. If my Johns had been like this stud, there wouldn't have been a problem.

"I want you to stay, Brock. I need you to stay." I peered up at him through my lashes and smiled. "I don't ask this of just anyone, believe me. Stay, fuck me."

"I can't," he groaned. "I know you're not yourself. You can't be. You must be yourself before I can—" He cut himself off, then pulled a business card and pen from his shirt pocket. He scribbled a number on the back with his strong, tapered fingers.

"If you still feel this way in two weeks, give me a call." Then he turned and walked out of the house.

It was all I could do to keep myself inside. I refused to follow him through the door, and beg him to come back. I never wanted to kill someone so much in my entire life, as I wanted to kill him for leaving me so damned horny. And apparently that's saying something these days.

"Damn it!"

* * * *

Two weeks later:

"You don't want to go out to dinner first?" Brock asked, chuckling, when I started to undress him at the door.

Buttons flew in all directions as I pulled on his shirt and it flew open. I jerked to a stop for a minute and giggled, my mouth already pressed against his chest.

"I guess I don't know my own strength," I breathed against his breastbone. My tongue reveled in the salty taste of his sun-kissed skin. Slowly, I worked my way lower to the treasure under his belt.

"Are you ... ah, sure you don't want to have dinner first?" He ground the words out. He sounded like his mouth was full of marbles.

Brock pushed the front door shut with a laugh when I shouted, "Hell, no! You are dinner."

I've never wanted anyone so much in my life.

It's a wonder I didn't meet him at the door naked. I had contemplated wearing nothing but a big red bow. I didn't give much thought to why I was so attracted to him. After years of men turning me down, because I wasn't attractive, I was too relieved to realize I was normal after all.

"I hope I'm not getting some sort of weird fetish for guys in uniform," I said, before I ruthlessly sucked his tongue into my mouth as I held him by the hair.

"I should certainly hope not."

The strange, cultured, male voice came from behind me. The rich baritone flowed through me like warm honey and made me shiver.

The voice was magic. It pushed thoughts of Brock right out of my head. It brought me to my senses and I wondered, if however briefly, what the hell I'd been about to do.

Brock stiffened and pulled away. He turned us around and put himself between the newcomer and me. He took up a protective stance as he shielded my body with his.

"Who are you? Take whatever you want, just don't harm the girl," he said, in his cop-like tone.

I peeked out around Brock's shoulder. This new man had even more in the looks department than my companion did. In fact, he was drop dead gorgeous! I swallowed thickly, as my mind went through sensual overload with so much

testosterone flying around the room.

A little voice in my head urged me to leave Brock to saunter over to this new man. I ignored it. Instead, I sidled closer to Brock to show my support.

I wasn't about to get fickle. This new guy may be scrumptious, but Brock was still mine. I glanced up at him and worried my lower lip. He is mine, isn't he?

The newcomer turned his dark gaze on me. I couldn't help but notice that his hair was perfectly groomed, with not one ebony strand out of place.

His eyes were almost black, hard, a complete contrast to Brock's open, silver-blue eyes. He was very tall, over six and a half feet. I knew that, because his head stood higher than the bottom of the landscape over my mantle.

I shivered again, my arms suddenly covered with goose-bumps. I fought the ridiculous urge to come out from where I hid behind Brock, and walk toward him.

The man had some sort of weird pull over me. Like magic. My skin prickled and I felt hot and cold all over. I felt his gaze on me like a caress. Each sweep of those dark, dark eyes was like a touch. A caress. Just a look from him made me burn.

You can't possibly know this man, my mind raged, as I fought to understand why he seemed

so familiar to me. I shifted to peer out and Brock grabbed me around the waist.

“Stay behind me, darling. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I sighed, thankful that he obviously didn’t plan to give me up too easily.

The new man bowed gracefully, and visions, like memories, flashed through my mind. Mental pictures of this man as he sat in this room on the sofa. He held a photo-album on his lap, held a glass of iced tea and laughed with my grandmother.

Can these be memories? I shook my head, as I tried to deny the things, buried deep within my subconscious mind. The man sat at the dining room table with my father, looking over a stack of papers after dinner.

These weren’t memories. They couldn’t be.

In another vision, I was a child and I sat on his lap. My hands were on his face as I looked into those beautiful espresso eyes. It couldn’t be the same man. He wasn’t old enough to be the person in my visions. Could he be that man’s son?

The newcomer wore black, designer silk slacks, expensive black leather boots and a black turtleneck sweater. He reeked of old-world elegance. Wore it like a second skin.

Only, I knew from personal experience, that elegance didn’t necessarily make a man good.

More often than not, it was used as a cover by someone intrinsically evil. Like Marco.

Suddenly, I remembered. The man held a beautifully carved cane. He handed it to my father. Pulling on the handle, he showed my father a sword inside. Daddy had carried that cane everywhere he went.

I watched with growing suspicion as he bowed gracefully, before he introduced himself. "I am Micah. You need not fear me. I have been sent to protect you." His dark eyes bored into mine and I had the ridiculous thought that he could see straight into my mind.

Brock turned to face him and stiffened, as he stood taller. He still held me behind him. He blocked my view of the new man as he kept himself between us.

"I can protect her, even from the likes of you. She needs no one else to see to her needs."

The new man, Micah, smiled. He bared his even white teeth, and held his arms out to his sides. I felt, more than saw, the immense power that emanated from him.

"And who, pray tell, shall protect her from the likes of you, Incubus?"

This, of course, was a bit too much for my newly straight state. I collapsed to the floor and welcomed the approaching darkness as it claimed me.

CHAPTER THREE

Micah stood over me and rubbed my hands and wrists together, as I woke. He wore a worried expression.

“It is a good thing I was able to find you before he separated you from your innocence.”

“Huh?” I couldn’t form a more lucid question in my befuddled state. I hurriedly sat up and scurried away from him, my crab-like movements, no doubt, looked ridiculous.

Then, I latched onto the most vacuous thought.

“I hope you don’t think I faint like this all of the time.” I looked up into his fathomless eyes. “I’m not a fainter. Really,” I explained, not sure why I cared what he thought of me. My legs wobbled as I stood and made my way to the couch to lie down.

I was too weak for anything else, and if he planned to kill me ... Well, I wouldn’t be able to put up much of a fight. And right now, especially after all I’ve been through, I’m not sure I would

have.

Micah sat down next to me and his leg brushed mine. I moved away with impotent dismay. What else could I do? Absolutely nothing.

If he'd overpowered Brock, I knew it was very likely he could do whatever he wanted to do with me. That said, I decided to sit and listen. For now, anyway.

"That was no man you were with, Tasha. He is an incubus," Micah stated. "He is not of this world. His job, if you will, is to search out pure individuals, such as you, to have sex with. When this poor woman has sex with him, her life is forfeit along with any psychic powers she might possess."

I must have given away the fact that I thought him nuts. Certifiable. One itty-bitty step away from being dragged off by the men in white coats. This guy is definitely a whole basket short of a picnic.

"You must believe me. One such as he can eat away your will to live. If you are untouched, it can make him even more powerful. Power he can turn on others to claim their innocence." He turned bleak eyes my way. "Power enough to kill even those who have the strength to stop him."

I sat back and rested my head against the pillows on my sofa. What could it hurt to listen? And if, during the course of our conversation, a

vase should fall on his head, could he sue? He did break into my house after all.

He turned those intense eyes on me and I shivered with dread as the gleaming onyx bored right through my mental defenses. Somehow, he knew what I'd been thinking.

"Do not try it, little one. You do not have the strength to overcome someone like me."

How does he know what I'm thinking?

He sat down and stared at me through those cold, empty eyes. A part of me wanted to scream for Brock. He clamped a hand over my mouth.

"You will not call out to him." It was a decree—one he expected me to obey. "I will gag you, if I must, but you must never call out to him. It will bring him to you."

Oh, what a deterrent.

My inner voice screamed for help as those warm fingers mashed my lips against my teeth. My vision grew blurry as my frustration gave way to tears.

"He must be near, then," I said with a sniff, when he finally removed his warm hand from my mouth. I ignored the tingles and itchy sensation between my legs, as I determined not to be attracted to him.

"I don't understand. Bro —" He gave me a severe look, so I decided to humor him.

For now.

"The ... incubus," I almost choked on the ridiculous word. "Could have made love to me two weeks ago, but he told me he wouldn't until I was myself again." The familiar heat of a blush stole up my cheeks. "I was going through withdrawal."

I fisted my hands in my lap and stared down at them. I didn't care to see the disgust on his face when I admitted that I was an addict.

Micah leaned against the back of the couch and crossed his legs. He rested his hand on the doily-covered arm and drummed his fingers impatiently against the rough material.

"An incubus cannot draw power from their victim if the victim is not able to make a conscious choice to participate in the act. You were not yourself while you experienced the withdrawal symptoms and not able to make the conscious choice to lie with him." He shifted in his seat. "So, one could say your addiction may have been a good thing. It saved your life."

"Oh." I tried not to breathe. Every inhalation brought me closer to trusting him. It made me want to act on the desire I felt as it pulsed inside me. He wore the same cologne my father always wore. How could I not begin to feel comfortable in his presence? His scent alone could put me at ease.

I wondered how much the man knew about me and whether or not he wore the scent because

he knew it would keep me off guard.

That's just stupid, Tasha. It's a coincidence, nothing more. When had I become so paranoid? After all, he did say he was here to protect me.

"I wear this scent because it is my favorite. It also brands me as a Cartuotey. It is made by us and solely for us. We protect humans from the evil entities bound to this Earth and from others, like the incubus, who are not." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "The scent helps guides identify a Cartuotey if a Rogue or other creature should attempt to impersonate one of us with a glamour."

I tried very hard to ignore the fact that he'd said they protect humans, as if he wasn't human.

"Car-too-oh-tie?" I repeated. "What in the world is that?" I decided to leave the human and evil entities remarks alone, since I'd already passed my quota for impossible things today.

"It is a word from the ancient language which means, Defender of the Gates. Essentially, it means that I am a paranormal police officer, of sorts. We are helpers, partners to the Guide."

Police officer? What the hell is it, with me and cops lately? Well, I suppose it's not too unusual. I did kill a man two weeks ago. I guess it's lucky that I haven't seen more of them. I bit my lip and changed the subject. I didn't want to hear him spout any more of his crazy paranormal-cop, incubus, and power stealing crap.

"How can you read my mind?" Oh, yeah, Tasha, that's a safe, normal subject. I frowned then told myself to shut up.

It's not like the idea of reading minds was new to me. Darla's mother, tried to teach me how to keep mental blocks up. She used to tell me that I may find it to be a useful tool one day.

"It is a gift. I'm sure you have heard of mental telepathy."

Micah raised one perfectly arched, ebony eyebrow and he looked sexier than any man had a right to. "If not, you should think of getting out a bit more."

He bent and reached down and grabbed me by my upper arms and straightened me in my seat. I contemplated running, but I wasn't sure if my legs would work right or not. Even if they did, something told me I'd never outrun the guy, even if I'd been in the best shape of my life. Which, of course, wasn't the case. A runner, I am not.

It took me a while to digest his last statement. He's not normal! My mind raged. Normal people couldn't read minds. They could be empaths. They knew when you were hurt, mad, or happy. Even I could do that to a certain extent.

That's why Darla's mom had trained me to use the mental blocks. She'd found me bent over her toilet as I cried and puked my guts up over her sick baby. At the time, it never occurred to me that

she knew I could feel the baby's distress.

Another thing Micah said sank in. "Wait a minute. Did you say that my father was some sort of weird cop? Explain."

Maybe this guy knew something that would shed some light on my father's disappearance.

Micah lifted my legs and brought them over the side of the couch, then lifted me into his arms. If I hadn't been impressed by the man before, I certainly was by then.

I'm not a skinny miss at five feet ten inches. I'm a size fourteen, with an over-abundance of womanly curves—as my grandmother always put it. And he just picked me up like I weigh nothing.

"Um. Just what the hell do you think you're you doing?"

He ignored my question. Instead, he chose to answer the previous one. "Your father was a friend of mine." He looked away for a moment. "My best friend," he added almost as an afterthought. "He was a member of my group. Humans are discouraged to use this scent when they sometimes inadvertently find it hidden amongst our belongings. He alone was allowed to wear it, for his own safety." He turned from the couch and walked toward the hall. "It identified him as being under our protection."

"Aren't all Guides under your protection? I thought you said you protected all humans?" I

was confused. I looked at him through narrow eyes, not sure I wanted to believe anything he said. But a part of me, the part I thought needed its head examined, wanted to keep him in my life.

Not only was he carrying me, but the muscles in his neck didn't even bulge. That had to count for something. Yet I still sat stiffly in his arms. I refused to surrender to him in any fashion.

"I don't understand what you're talking about. Maybe you should explain it to me."

My mind still raged, telling me to run for my life. I chose to ignore it, for now. I attempted to blank the screams of protest in my mind before he could read my thoughts again and hold them against me. I am human, after all and the things he told me stretched the bounds of my limited, human, imagination. Impossible things. Too many impossible things.

"First things first," he said, starting for the stairs. "Where is your bedroom?" He was taking the steps two at a time and I barely had the time to wonder just how strong the man was that he could do that while he carried me. Not to mention the fact that he didn't even breathe hard.

"Why are you taking me to my bedroom?"

Micah looked down at my upturned face with a mask of patience that told me he thought of me as some recalcitrant child.

"We must divest you of the burden of

maidenhood, of course." He said it so calmly, so nonchalant.

"Excuse me?" I sputtered. I screwed my face into what I hoped was a mask of disbelief. I've never been so shocked or insulted in my life! "Look, mister, I may be horny as hell, but I'm not about to have sex with a man I don't know!"

He quirked a glossy black brow at me and my face heated.

"Well, okay, I didn't really know Br —"

He gave me another sharp look. Those eyes of his did weird things to me. Sometimes, like now, they scared the crap out of me. Other times, I wanted nothing more than to drown in the dark-chocolate of his heated gaze. Warmth pooled in my middle as I felt the rush of moisture between my legs. I did my best to ignore each of my reactions and looked away.

"Okay, okay." I rolled my eyes. "I didn't really know the incubus," I stressed the unfamiliar word. "But I certainly knew him better than I know you."

I stubbornly crossed my arms in front of me. It wasn't an easy thing to do while being held close against his chest.

"At least he didn't insist that we have sex the day we met."

I purposely left out the part where I attempted to jump Brock's bones that first day. What Micah

didn't know certainly wouldn't hurt him.

His arms tightened around me. Big strong arms too, I might add. My clit twitched with delight. I gritted my teeth and tried to ignore it. I do have a brain in my head and I'm not about to let my nether parts tell me whom to sleep with.

Against my will, my left hand left the confines of my right armpit, where I'd stuck it for protection. It slid sensuously up over his chest and shoulder, before it slowly wrapped itself around his neck.

To my complete surprise and mortification, I buried my hand in his hair and brought my head closer to his.

"Why can't I stop myself?" I asked, just before I pressed my lips against his.

"You find me irresistible," he growled against my mouth. His voice was compelling. The low timber crawled through my body like a living thing. It made me want to do all sorts of interesting things with this man. His tongue dueled with mine, both of us wanted to win a war of dominance.

When our lips met, I felt much as I did with Brock, but with Micah, I felt ... more. I wanted to kiss him, to fondle him. To know I gave satisfaction as much as I was receiving it.

With Brock, it had been different. I had wanted nothing more than to feel his huge cock as it

pounded inside me.

“Stop thinking of other men,” Micah said, against my mouth as he playfully nipped at my lips.

I looked around and noticed, for the first time, that I was lying on my bed. Either I hadn’t paid attention while he searched the upstairs for my room, or he had a great sense of direction. I’m pretty sure it was the former.

I pulled away and fought for my next breath. I needed space. I needed to get away from him to think. I couldn’t concentrate when he was so close, when I could feel the heat from his body as it seeped into mine. It sent little licks of flame through my blood.

It wasn’t normal that he could read my mind. Sure, I’ve heard of telepathy but I’ve never met anyone with it. The whole idea was absurd. If I believe that, the next thing he’ll tell me is that we can communicate without talking. It was all I could do, not to snort.

He ran his hand through my hair and pushed my bangs back from my face to look into my eyes.

“You must rid yourself of your virginity. It is a weakness - a weapon that can be held against you.”

“Now I’ve heard it all,” I laughed derisively and pushed at his chest. “All of my life, my father, my grandmother and the church have told me to

abstain. Then suddenly you come along and tell me that I have to have sex to save my life? Puhleeze!”

This is too much!

I slid out from under him and tried to avoid his roaming hands. Then I stood up, walked to the window and looked out through the darkness. I wrapped my arms around my churning middle and wondered how many more impossible things I was expected to face in one day.

“Do you have any idea how crazy this all sounds?”

He sighed and stepped up behind me. “Of course I realize how it sounds.” He ran his fingers through his hair and it stood up in adorable spikes.

I watched his reflection in the window and refused to smile. I couldn’t afford to be weak now, no matter how cute and approachable those little spikes made him seem.

“I blame your father for this. I told him your innocence would make you an easy target. Still, he wouldn’t listen to me. I could feel your power, even as a child. He should have prepared you for this.”

I could feel the anger as it radiated from him and it scared me.

“You need never fear me, little one.”

“Will you stop that?” I snarled and turned to

face him. "Can't you at least give me the illusion that you can't read my every thought?"

I stomped from the bedroom and headed back downstairs where it was safe. Where I would be safe.

Why doesn't he just kill me and get it over with? Isn't that what crazy people like him do?

He sighed behind me, as if he wanted to say something, but thought better of it. "You can refuse me, if you wish, but I cannot leave you unprotected. If you don't want me, surely someone as beautiful as you shouldn't have a difficult time if you tried to find someone else to have sex with. If you refuse to allow me to divest you of your maidenhead, I must stay here with you until you're no longer in danger of succumbing to the incubus as a virgin."

I turned and searched his eyes. "Oh, my God. You can't mean to stay here with me indefinitely."

He nodded and raised his brow. "Yes, that's exactly what I mean. If you continue to refuse me I must stay here with you until you submit to someone else."

"Shit."

He inhaled deeply. "I wish you would refrain from speaking like that. It is unseemly."

"Maidenhead? Unseemly? Where in the hell do you come from anyway?" I asked. Then I shook my head and held my hand up. "Never mind. I

don't think I want to know that much about you."

He sighed, crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned against the wall, his face devoid of expression.

I paced between the kitchen and the downstairs bathroom. I needed to regain control of my traitorous body. How could I fear this man, yet still want him with a need that bordered on obsession?

"Are you trying to tell me you're not going to leave until I have sex with you?" Something else he said earlier finally sank in. "What powers? What did you mean earlier when you said you could feel my powers?"

I bit my bottom lip and thought, impossible things, impossible things. My overwrought mind chanted the words like a mantra.

Grandma must be laughing her head off in the afterlife. I frowned and wondered if this was the very thing her constantly repeated speeches about impossible things had been preparing me to accept.

Micah pushed away from the wall, strode into the dining room, sat down at the head of the table and indicated I should join him.

If I could get my libido to stop singing and dancing for a minute, I might be able to pay attention to what he said. I stopped to give my nether parts a short lecture on abstinence before I

prodded Micah to explain.

“Well?”

“You do not have to have sex with me, but you must have sex with someone or you will remain at risk. As to the powers you wield, you are a Guide to the Portes en Cristal of the L’*autre Monde*.”

“Huh?” There I go, being so articulate again.

Micah sighed deeply. He looked more than a bit irritated. “You are a guide to the Crystal Gates. They are the ethereal doorways to the other worlds.” He stood and took a step toward me.

“What in the hell is that?” I snorted then raised my fist in the air. “I swear to God, if you touch me again, mister, I’ll be your guide to the Pearly Gates!”

He just smiled, backed up and lowered himself back into the chair. “You have such a lovely way with words, my dear.” He tilted his head. “And you have a lot of spirit. Your powers as a Guide must be immense.”

Now he was patronizing me and it pissed me off. I bared my teeth in what, I hoped, passed for a grin.

“Ya think?”

I made my way over to the chair in front of my Gram’s old secretary desk and sat down. I didn’t trust myself to sit very close to him and his wandering hands. I bent over, put my head between my knees and took several deep breaths.

I could feel another faint nudge the edge of my consciousness.

"The phrase means you are a ..." He paused as if searching for a relative term. "A sorceress, of sorts."

I inhaled sharply and sucked spit down my windpipe. I choked, tried to clear the moisture from my lungs. "What did you say?" I gasped. I didn't dare to believe what I just heard. A sorceress? The guy's a loon. He's beautiful, but he's a loon.

Micah straightened in his seat. His eyes blazed with anger. "I am not crazy," he bit out between clenched teeth.

"Yeah, right, and I'm the great, great granddaughter of Abraham Lincoln."

"What makes you think you are not?"

Those dark, dark eyes bored into mine again in an attempt to make me believe so many impossible things.

"I'm not touching that remark with a ten foot cattle prod," I mumbled.

"You shouldn't mumble. It doesn't become you."

"Oh, shut up. Who asked you, anyway?" I'll never be able to put up with this crap on a daily basis. He'll drive me nuts! I frowned and resisted the urge to tell my subconscious mind to go take a hike.

I began to wonder if I shouldn't go ahead and have sex with the man just to get him out of my hair. It's not like I haven't been thinking about getting laid, lately. Hell, lately, it's just about all I've thought about. I let my gaze travel up and down his very fine form, and tried not to drool.

Micah shook his head. He looked disgusted. I had the sneaking suspicion he'd eavesdropped on my thoughts again. I really wish he'd stop that. It gives me the creeps.

I stood, approached him slowly and eyed him with no small degree of trepidation. I stuck my tongue out to let it slowly trail over my upper lip and watched as Micah's Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. He may want to look unaffected, but his body told me a story of its own.

When I stepped a bit closer, he just sat there, unmoving. He stared at me with his intense, obsidian gaze while he remained conspicuously still. And waited.

I gradually closed the distance and suddenly felt like a wild thing that slowly, foolishly, trusted the hunter.

He lifted his hand and I took it. He pulled me between his knees. I rested my hands lightly on his shoulders and leaned down, pressing my mouth to his. I wanted to experiment a little.

I suppose, if I really wanted to divest myself of my virginity, Micah was as good a candidate as

any. I frowned against his skillful lips. When did I become such a slut?

I tried to pull away from him, but he held me close, his mouth burned a trail down to my collarbone. He suckled on it for a minute before his tongue danced back up to my ear. "Oh, my," I breathed, when the velvet of his mouth made contact with the outer shell.

He drew the lobe into his mouth and suckled. How could anything feel so good? Heat pooled low in my middle and I felt a rush of warmth between my legs. I barely realized it when he lowered me to the sky blue comforter on my bed.

I gave little thought to the fact that we were back in my room and didn't even question how we'd gotten there.

Micah took both of my wrists in one hand and raised them over my head. He brushed his other hand up my waist. His talented fingers played over my sensitized breasts. It was an agonizing torture, even through my shirt and bra. Ruthlessly, he squeezed and plucked at the now hardened tips. Then he quickly removed my tee shirt and made short work of my front-clasp bra and jeans.

I almost shot off the bed when his mouth closed over my extended nipple. I'd never felt anything like that before in my life. I fisted my hands in the comforter, grabbed at anything I

could. I tried valiantly to fight my growing desire toward this man, torn between wanting him and wanting to be rid of him. I knew if I grabbed onto his head and pulled him closer to me, it would be a sign of surrender. It was one thing I still wasn't certain I wanted to do.

To surrender to him, to a stranger, was little better than prostituting myself on the street.

CHAPTER FOUR

You didn't know Brock. A little voice reminded me.

What if what this man says is true? The stimulation became too much then, and I could barely think, let alone argue with myself. Micah reached down between my legs, thrust his hand under the waistband of my embarrassing, cotton, granny panties and thrummed my clit.

"Oh, God, Micah," I mewled against his neck as he brought me closer to the edge of some previously unknown precipice. "I've never felt anything like this before, in my life." If I hadn't been a virgin, I don't think there would have been any fight in me, after that.

Micah released my breast and blew across the turgid peak. My nipple grew tighter against the cool air. It jutted toward the ceiling and begged for the return of his warm, wet-velvet mouth.

Heat rushed to my face as I realized, with growing horror, that my body, the brazen hussy

that it had become, had changed sides on me. The traitor had warmed toward Micah. It waited, practically begging, for his touch.

“Dammit, you bastard, stop teasing me!”

He chuckled as his kisses delved lower, then even lower, until his head was poised above my newly assaulted pussy. He pulled my panties down over my legs, threw them over his shoulder and looked up with a lopsided grin.

“I hope this changes your mind if nothing else has,” he said, just before he lowered his head to my quivering flesh. His tongue pushed apart the folds of skin between my legs, and I whimpered.

My face blazed with embarrassment, even as my legs drew further apart and made room for him, inviting him to impale me. He threw my legs over his shoulders and easily lifted my hips from the bed.

He took my clit into his mouth and sucked, hard. My head thrashed on the pillow as I reached my limit and I screamed. I fisted my hands in his hair and squeezed my thighs around him, holding his head to me until I climaxed.

After that, I lay on the bed, spent. I was nothing more than a writhing, quivering, ball of sensitive flesh that still hadn’t had enough.

Micah knew he had me at that moment. He knew there would be no going back. Still, he asked, “Would you like me to stop?”

"Stop?" Oh, god, if he stopped now, I'd die. I had to know. What was next? What followed something so earth-shatteringly wonderful? "If you stop now, I'll kill you," I panted, as he chuckled and crawled up my inert form and licked his way back up my quivering body. I was too weak to protest the feel of his bare skin sliding against mine.

When did he undress? I pushed the thought aside and deemed it unimportant. The length of his erection pressed between my legs and I reached down to grasp him in my hand.

"Oh, my God," I gasped. "It's huge, it will never fit!"

Even Brock's hadn't been that big. I tried to censor the thought. Somehow, Micah seemed to be able to read my mind. I don't know why I didn't find that as strange as I did before. I gave a mental shrug. Maybe I'd just gotten used to the idea.

He dipped his head and lapped at my nipples again, first one, then the other, he gave each one equal attention. My mind swirled down into the dark sensual abyss it had just left, and my legs drew even further apart as my body prepared for his entry.

"Would you like me to stop?" he asked again. His breath brushed my sensitive flesh, and raised goose bumps. He kissed me behind the ear and his lips did wonderful things to my neck and

collarbone.

“N—no. I want you to fuck me, Micah. I want your cock buried so deep within me we’ll never get it out.” I closed my eyes, with shame. How could I want this man more than I have ever wanted anything in my life? He was a complete stranger.

“No more a stranger than the incubus,” he reminded me.

“That wasn’t nice,” I bit out, then pushed ruthlessly at his chest. I started to sit up. “I have enough problems without taking your abuse.” I slapped at his hand on my breast and glared at him. “Leave that alone!”

“I’m sorry, Tasha.” He moved back to my ear and suckled on the lobe. It didn’t take long to have me crazy with need once again.

“That feels so good,” I sighed, totally forgetting my anger. “Don’t stop.”

I swallowed thickly as he placed his body between my thighs. His hips nestled between my legs and his huge cock pressed against me.

“It’s not going to fit.” I moaned.

Every fiber of my being wanted to feel him inside me. But the little spear of doubt that crept inside my head, made me want to sob with fear.

His hand caressed my face, brushed the sweat-dampened hair off my forehead. “It will only hurt for a moment, little one.” He whispered in my ear.

"I would never tell you so, if I did not believe it to be true."

I nodded and screwed my eyes shut tight, I said, "Okay, go ahead."

He chuckled. "I will, but only when you are ready, when you are aroused beyond reason. I will enter you, only then. Then you will scream, but not with pain. You will scream with ecstasy." His mouth began to work its magic on me again. My little niggle of doubt slowly eased as the fire began to blaze anew.

His hands followed the path his mouth had taken before. They burned a trail down to the golden curls nestled between my thighs. His fingers eased inside. They stretched and prepared me for the entry of his enormous erection. All the while, his thumb expertly thrummed my clit and worked me into a frenzy of mindless lust.

I barely realized when he stopped massaging the little bud, which I would never view as merely functional ever again. I barely even felt it when he slowly slid inside of my virginal pussy. Until he hit the barrier that proclaimed me still untouched. That thing I should be proud to possess but was wont for nearly a year to be rid of.

This is it.

His eyes met mine before he dropped his head. He kissed me as he surged forward to the hilt and caught my scream in his mouth. It was a scream of

pain, mixed with one of triumph.

Never again, would I sit with a group of women on the sidelines as they joked about sex, and not know what they meant. So many things came to me then. So much understanding of the things I'd heard over the years. Now I knew.

"Oh, my," I breathed with awe as he eased in and out, slowly, gently. His cock filled me to capacity and then some. Yet it didn't hurt. It just gave me the sensation of fullness as my inner walls stretched to accommodate him. "I didn't know it could be like this. If I had known, I may not have waited so long," I said, yet I realized I still didn't know everything.

Micah gave me a strained smile. His lips were clamped together, his muscles tense. I could tell it was an effort for him to continue his slow, even strokes let alone speak. He looked down at me and grimaced, or was that a smile?

Something near the tip of his penis rubbed the inner wall of my pussy in such a way, I thought I would explode. "Does it hurt?" I didn't think it was supposed to hurt the guy. But he was so big. "Am I too tight?" I moaned. I felt bad that it could feel so wonderful for me and obviously so bad for him.

He shook his head, his blue-black hair falling over his forehead. It covered his eyes and I gave in to the urge to reach up and push it back. He kissed

my hand as it brushed over his cheek.

"No, it doesn't hurt. It feels good, too good, and I want to be sure to bring you pleasure." He ground the words out between his teeth, as he eased himself in and out of me. The veins in his neck bulged with the effort he used to hold back.

I ran my fingers down his smooth muscular back to his ass and lightly ran my nails along the firm muscles beneath my hands. He took me to the edge of another orgasm. Something I didn't think possible my first time out of the gate, so to speak.

Micah lowered his head to my neck and kissed me. He suckled my neck just above my clavicle and nibbled lightly on my skin. The sharpness of his teeth added to the pleasure. He suckled harder, and the pleasure bordered on pain.

"Micah, yes. Please," I panted and held his head to me as he took me over the edge and I came for the second time.

He reached down, grabbed my legs and wrapped them around his waist. It gave him better access to pound into me.

"Tasha," he groaned, "You feel wonderful, so wet, so tight. I can't tell you what it feels like to have our little cunt clasped so tightly around me."

I screamed his name again as he drove his massive cock into me. All pretext of being gentle. He no longer held back. He lowered his head and kissed my chest and his mouth traveled up to my

neck, to the point where he'd suckled earlier. Then his tongue lapped at my collarbone, moving lower to glide over my still hard nipple.

Micah bucked inside me, the muscles of his neck stood out as he drove himself deeper into my womb. I could tell when he neared his climax. He held himself over me, his entire body stiff. My own third orgasm of the night crept closer. Micah looked into my eyes. In that moment, I believed he could look into my soul.

"Now," he urged. "Come for me now, Tasha. Let me feel that little cunt spasm around me. Come for me again, baby." He whispered the words in my ear as he somehow grew larger within me. He stretched me even more, the extra sensation of fullness added to the wonderful feeling of his hard shaft as it moved inside me.

"I'm coming!" I cried as he took me over the edge again, before he came deep inside me. His cock bucked, surging as it released the warmth of his seed into the depths of my womb.

I came down from the apex a bit and tried to catch my breath. I realized absently that we didn't use any protection and I wasn't on the pill. I gave a mental shrug. I didn't really give a damn. There were worse things in life than being a single parent like not having anyone at all.

I came back to my senses when Micah rolled me over and tucked me under the covers next to

him. He lay behind me, spoon fashion and, exhausted, I surrendered myself to sleep.

I woke a little while later, stayed within the comfort of his arms, and listened to his light snores as I contemplated my strange day. I shook my head.

I really am a slut.

I'm more of a loose woman than Trina ever thought of being, and she used to turn tricks for her drug money. At least she'd been honest about it.

Me? For years I've hidden behind my so-called morals, flaunted my virginity until it was no longer useful. No longer useful? When was it ever useful? I brushed the tears away from my eyes. Silent sobs wracked my body as I came to terms with what I had done.

Micah stirred behind me and wrapped an arm around me protectively. He drew me closer to the warmth and protection of his body and somehow knowing, even in his sleep, that I needed comfort.

I thought back to before he arrived. Would I have been able to finish what I started with Brock? I had no idea. I only knew Brock wasn't as handsome, as strong, or as compelling as Micah.

I turned my head and attempted to get a better look at Micah as he slept. His ebony hair fell over his eyes and my fingers itched to push it back. I loved the feel of his soft hair in my hands as it

sifted through my fingers, like black silken threads.

I attempted to remember the exact color of his eyes, but could only remember the dark, chocolate of his aroused state. I rolled over and took the opportunity to look my fill while he slept.

Dark, coffee-colored lashes fanned out over his high cheekbones, the shadowy crescents gave him a vulnerable look. I smiled. He looked so cute while he was asleep. My fingers reached out of their own accord and smoothed the frown that formed on his lips, my fingers traced the fine lines on his face.

Micah's hand snaked up from under the blanket and grabbed my wrist. "I am not cute," he said, with the frown back on his face. "Don't you know that when a woman calls a man my age cute it is the kiss of death?" He shot me a dirty look and his expression made me giggle.

"No, 'I like you and don't want to ruin our friendship' with the kiss of death."

He laced his long fingers through mine and absently caressed the back of my hand with his thumb. "You've heard that one before?" Micah asked. He lifted my hand, pulled it up to his mouth and brushed my knuckles with his lips. He turned my hand over and pressed a kiss into the center of my palm.

I nodded. "Yes, many times." I gave him a

rueful smile. "How do you think I remained a virgin to the ripe old age of twenty eight? Every man I ever contemplated having a serious relationship with had been attracted to either Trina or Darla. Every one of them only wanted to be my friend."

Micah just looked at me with his expressive dark chocolate eyes and said the most beautiful thing I could imagine. "I'm glad I was the first." He kissed my knuckles again and smiled. "That way, I have ruined you for all others and you will not feel the need to cleave unto any other man."

Yeah, like he plans to be around after tomorrow. And what's with that weird speech?

"I will be around, until you tell me to leave, even then, I shall stay to protect you." He frowned after a moment, as obviously deep in thought. "I will have to leave from time to time, but I shall always return. I promised your father I would protect you."

I deliberately ignored the fact that he could read my mind. The need to find out how he did it wasn't worth my sanity. I've met my daily quota. Gram told me I had to believe one impossible thing per day. Well, that was the incubus. I at least believed that Micah believed Brock was some other-dimensional being who wanted to steal some latent psychic power I supposedly possessed. The telepathy bit was another matter

entirely.

“My life has been filled with too many impossible things already.” I wanted to believe he would stick around, but knew he would leave. He would leave on his own or someone would kill him. Either way, he would be gone. Everyone I have ever cared about has died. I think I was meant to live my life alone.

He wrapped his arms around me. “I know,” he sighed onto my neck and his breath fanned my ear, causing gooseflesh to rise on my skin.

I watched his face get closer to me as he lowered his mouth to claim my lips. My eyes closed as his lips met mine. The maelstrom of desire that accompanied his kiss washed away all of my thoughts. My arms circled his neck and I drew him closer, lost in a whirlpool of sensuality.

Would Brock have been better? I doubt it. Did I want to find out?

Not on your life!

CHAPTER FIVE

We slept most of the day away. Sometime around dawn, Micah got out of bed, closed the blinds and the curtains and went down to the kitchen nude.

He brought up a veritable feast of fresh fruit, juice and coffee. He sat beside me on the bed and watched me eat, totally at ease with his bare body.

"Are you sure you don't want some?" I asked and offered him a particularly juicy bite of cantaloupe after I sat up on the bed. My only garment, the flowered sheet tucked modestly around my breasts and under my arms.

Micah shook his head and smiled. "No, thank you. I ate while I was downstairs to get yours." He patted his flat stomach. "I'm stuffed."

He tilted his head to the side and stared at me in an odd manner. It reminded me of a bird of prey.

"I didn't see any meat in your refrigerator. Don't you eat meat?"

“Why didn’t you just pick the information out of my head? It’s not as if you haven’t done it before.”

“I’ve been trying to afford you some privacy since you expressed a certain revulsion to my ability to read your mind.”

“Hmmm ... so you’re not going to do that anymore?”

“I am attempting to refrain, yes.” He tilted his head to the side and eyed the way I popped the fruit into my mouth. “Now, will you answer my question? Do you eat meat?”

I laughed, relieved that he’d finally stopped poking around in my head. “Me, eat meat?” I pushed my hair back with sticky fingers. What the hell, I need a shower anyway. “Of course I eat meat. Give me a nice thick steak any day.” Yeah, a nice thick well-done steak. Blood just creeps me out.

He smiled and for some reason looked relieved. He must be a big meat and potato man, or something.

Micah waited for me to finish, took my plate and pounced on me. He pushed the sheet away from my chest, his head moved directly to the tip of my breast. He captured my nipple in his mouth and suckled. His teeth scraped erotically over the sensitized tip as his hand fondled the other and he rolled the nipple in between his thumb and

forefinger.

I moaned, unsure if I could live through another bout of lovemaking. I was exhausted.

"Mmm," Micah hummed onto my nipple and I squirmed beneath him.

"Micah," I panted. "I don't think I can—"

His hand delved lower, his slender fingers curled into the short, crisp hairs of my pussy and probed deep into my sensitive flesh. Micah plunged his fingers deep within my dripping vagina. Then he shocked me by pulling his fingers from my sex and bringing them to his face. He inhaled deeply and seemed to delight in our mixed scents.

Hmm ... Maybe I could survive another bout. And if not, well ... what a way to go.

I raised my arms, wrapped them around his neck, tunneled my fingers through his silky, black hair and tugged his head down to mine.

A part of me was ashamed that I could be so free, so wanton, with a complete stranger. Another, more slutty, part that I never knew existed, reveled in all of the new sensations I experienced. That part of me enjoyed each and every sensuous act Micah introduced me to.

Can a person die like this? It's a valid question. The French do call it *La petite mort*.

"Aiiiee!" It was the only sound I managed to get passed my lips as Micah flexed his hips and

drove his cock deep into me.

He looked down on me with those expressive eyes and smiled. A smile so filled with happiness, I felt it all of the way down to my toes.

I looked into those dark chocolate pools and wondered absently, how he managed to make them look as if they glowed from within. He blinked slowly, his sooty lashes brushed his cheekbones. When he opened them again, the strange, inner glow was gone.

I chalked it all up to a residual hallucination left over from my inexperienced detoxification. I closed my eyes, attempted to bar other distractions and concentrated on reaching the elusive, orgasm that hung on the outer edge of my consciousness. It hovered just out of reach as Micah plunged his huge cock into me.

I wrapped my legs around his waist as his tempo increased. I was on fire, the slow burn started in my toes, working its way up to my stomach and blossoming out into a fiery conflagration as I finally climaxed.

“Micah,” I screamed, his name forever emblazoned on my mind, in my heart. “I’m coming!”

Again, Micah lowered his head to the crook of my neck and suckled fiercely. The pleasure-pain became so intense, that the sensation was too much for my exhausted body and I lost

consciousness.

I woke to the feel of Micah's lips on my forehead, blinked my eyes open and attempted to look through the growing darkness.

He leaned over and flipped on the light, which was set on the table next to the bed. He relaxed back into a sitting position and smiled sadly. Dressed in the same black turtleneck, black slacks, and shiny, black shoes he'd arrived in he looked good enough to eat.

It's funny how comfortable I'd become watching him move so gracefully around my house without a stitch on. Now the sight of his clothes made me nervous.

"I must go now." He gazed down at me with sad eyes. "If the incubus returns, he will no longer have the ability to steal your untapped power. He will only be able to drain small amounts of it while you are," he paused for a minute. He looked uncomfortable. "While you are engaged in the act," he finished, after swallowing visibly.

I looked up at him, my eyes wide with disbelief. "You're leaving?"

Isn't that what you wanted?

I ignored the annoying inner voice that reminded me that was why I'd slept with him, in the first place. I couldn't admit to myself that I didn't want him to leave. What about the promise he said he'd made to my father to protect me? Was

it all just a line to get into my pants?

I dropped my gaze and looked everywhere but his eyes. I stupidly waved my arm toward the empty half of the bed that had, until just a few minutes ago, held his warm sexy body close to mine.

His warm, virile, sexy body. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Shut up, just shut up. My mind raged at the thought that I fell for his trick.

"After, after ..." I sputtered. My face blazed red with shame. The last thing I'd expected to feel was remorse. "You said you weren't going to leave. You said planned to stay and protect me."

I clamped my lips tight, determined to keep myself from begging him to stay. Tears burned the backs of my eyelids. I blinked furiously. The last thing I wanted was to have the tears spill over onto my cheeks. I'd never been the weepy sort and I refused to cry in front of him. I swallowed hard, trying to dislodge the growing lump in my throat.

The edge of the mattress dipped as he sat down beside me and I scurried to the other side of the bed.

It was a mistake.

His scent, and the unmistakable smell of sex, surrounded me. I squeezed my eyes closed against the onslaught. The stubborn tears wouldn't be held back. They slipped silently from the corners of my eyes. They slid down my cheeks unchecked.

I reached down, grabbed the sheet and ruthlessly tugged it up to cover my bare breasts. I held it against me, my fingers curled around it. My knuckles white, as I held it in a death grip against my chest.

“What have I done?” I whispered to myself. I squeezed my eyes tighter and turned my head away as I felt his fingers slide under my jaw. He pulled on my chin, turned and lifted my face and forced me to meet his gaze.

“You have done what you must to keep the incubus from gaining the power to wreak havoc on mankind.” He leaned down, placed a soft kiss on my lips, then stood. “As I have always done what I must. I have to go now. There are others. I will be here to protect you, but I must help the others as well.”

I looked up at him and thinned my lips. “Others who need your kind of help?” I asked, sarcastically. “Oh, you must really love your job!” I stood, grabbed the sheet from the bed and wrapped it around me like a toga.

“I wonder. How many guys get to bed virgins for a living, claiming it is all for the better good? No fucking wonder you were so patient.” I looked at him scathingly and ignored his wince at my profanity. “Hell, I should feel honored. I’ve just been deflowered by a professional! How many women have you been with?” I held my hand up.

"Never mind. Don't answer that." My voice broke. "I really don't think I want to know."

He looked at me through bleak eyes before he turned his back to me. He tilted his head back and looked toward the ceiling. "It never gets easier, Tasha. Yet it must be done to keep the incubi from overrunning the earth."

"How do they get here?" I asked, disgusted with myself for even giving a damn.

I sat back down on the bed with my back against the headboard, drew my legs up to my chest and wiggled my toes in the wrinkled bottom sheet. Micah sat on the other side of the bed. He made no move to touch me.

"They come through portals opened by the inexperienced or those who would sell their talents for profit. Portals, which can only be closed by one such as you."

"One such as me, huh?" I asked, as I slid from the bed. My feet missed the braided rag rug and made contact with the cold, hardwood floor. I danced back onto the rug and I alternately rubbed my bare feet up and down my legs for warmth.

"If one of them should manage to steal the untapped power from an untouched Guide, he would be able to seal an inter-dimensional door open, thus enabling a multitude of creatures to pass into this world from their own dimension, unchecked."

I dropped the sheet, grabbed my jeans and pulled them on. I walked across the room to my dresser and pulled out a tee shirt and yanked it furiously over my head. I'd worry about underwear later.

"So, let me see if I have this straight. You're a guy who just happens to be some sort of weird superhero-type gigolo sent to defile virgins who have some previously undiscovered abilities to close portals to other dimensions?"

The tone of my voice rose higher and higher with every unbelievable word until it ended in a near squeak. I was sure that either I had suddenly gone mad, or he had.

Micah nodded. A half smile on his too handsome face. "You understand. Good. If you wish, I could return to you between assignments."

By this time, my head pounded so bad, that part of me was afraid I was suffering an aneurysm. I reached up and slapped his face and startled myself with the force of the blow. I stood mouth agape, and watched as the imprint of my hand bloomed red on his cheek.

"Get out," I said softly. I needed to be alone to think. And I wanted him to leave before I started to bawl like an infant. I should have known better. I've known for some time that I was destined to be alone. "Get the hell out," I repeated louder, when he didn't move.

He inclined his head. "As you wish."

I watched as he turned to walk out of my life. I held my arms at my sides and clenched my fingers closed. My hands, balled into fists, rested on my thighs. I refused to rescind my order even though I wanted to do nothing more than beg him to stay. I heard a creak and the muffled thud of the front door as he pulled it closed behind him.

I stumbled down the stairs and into the kitchen in darkness and only turned on the light when I reached my destination. Then I made myself a pot of coffee. The dark, bitter brew had always been Trina's drink, but I'd been addicted to the foul tasting stuff ever since I went through withdrawal. I was afraid to quit now. I feared I would return to the unyielding grip of a harsher stimulant.

I sat down and placed my hands flat on the table. Only the tips of my thumbs and forefingers touched. I wanted to test a theory.

What if Micah had told me the truth? If he was, maybe I could forgive him given enough time. Like a million years or so.

Darla's mother, a Wiccan, and another one of my hordes of dead friends and family, once told me I was the direct descendant of a powerful Mage. She also said it was my destiny to save the world from an all-powerful evil. At the time, I was positive that she'd smoked a bit too much of her smudging stick. Now I wasn't so sure.

I closed my eyes in an attempt to remember what it was she'd tried to teach me all of those years ago. The lessons, still buried deep in my mind, were precious to me, forgotten memories of friends who were gone, but would never be forgotten.

I took a deep breath and opened my mind to all of the possibilities governed by the laws of the Earth as I searched for the open portal. It must be near my home to allow an incubus to visit me. That is, of course, if Micah was telling the truth and Brock really was an incubus.

An unsettling thought hit me. Micah could be the incubus and Brock was what he seemed. After all I was just as attracted to him as I was to Brock, more so.

My eyes flew open at the disturbing thought and I had to work hard to empty my mind again. I relived Linda's lessons and strained to picture my normally quiet neighborhood, as it should be. Suddenly, I felt light, almost airy, as if I left the tight constraints of my body behind to float effortlessly down the street.

A low, unearthly vibration caught my attention and I turned toward it. The sound was grated, like nails on a chalkboard. I floated smoothly into a backyard, three houses down from my own and passed a window. Mrs. Cooper was in her kitchen cooking. How can she not know this gaping hole

is in her back yard? My ethereal mouth fell slack when I saw it. All of this was hard to believe, even as I stood and stared at the proof.

The open portal was just down the street from my house! Strange creatures slipped through, one every few seconds or so. Some of them looked like the demons of legend. They were short, squat and a fiery red orange with small pointed horns on the tops of their heads.

Others were half man, half goat-like creatures. Their four legged frames sported two sets of genitals. One set for the animal and another, similarly sized set, for the man. One of them looked directly at me then grinned and grasped himself suggestively.

Instinct told me this was the true form of an incubus. The body Brock used was nothing more than a borrowed shell. The sight shocked me so much I lost my concentration. My soul, consciousness, whatever, was sucked back into my body. I found myself still at my kitchen table and had to work even harder to clear my mind again.

“At the rate you’re going, a million of those damn things are bound to pour out of that gate,” I snarled at myself.

This time I tried to relax. I didn’t try as hard, and the trip down the block was easier. My return to the portal took almost no time at all. I drew on my memories of Linda’s lessons and imagined a

thick steel door that I closed over the portal.

Immense heat welded it shut forever blocking the doorway. After a few minutes all I could see in the yard, where the portal had been, was a door-sized patch of dry, brown grass.

I breathed a sigh of relief and mentally thanked Linda for the things she taught me before she died. I may have been a surly, smart-assed brat of a teenager, but at least I paid attention.

The gateway was closed, and my powers as a Guide were no longer untapped. I frowned, thinking, as I sat in the chair at my table with my hands still splayed in front of me.

“Why can’t they teach all of the virgin Guides to use their powers, instead of sending someone to screw their brains out and leave them feeling like a cheap tramp?” I chewed on my lip for a minute as I thought that one over. “I bet it was a guy who came up with that solution.” I shook my head. It really wouldn’t surprise me a bit.

I stomped upstairs to put on some underwear and fetch my bag. I still had all of that money I took from Marco’s. The least I could do was use some of the cash to help my fellow Guides.

CHAPTER SIX

I'd been on the road for three days before I would finally admit to myself that I was completely, if not irrevocably, lost.

I pulled into a rest area somewhere in southeast Georgia to get a look at a map. I decided to get out of the car to stretch and use the facilities since they were available. Who knows when I'll see another place to stop on this lonely stretch of highway? Besides, I've found that apparently my bladder and kidneys work much harder while I'm on the road. Who knew?

"Face it, Tasha, you have no idea where in the hell you are," I groused, as I stomped out of the restroom and looked for the usual sign with the big map of the state.

I frowned. Did Micah have some sort of sixth sense that told him where all of the virgin Guides were? Or did he just remember about me?

"Shit! If life were a cartoon, there'd be a friggin' light on over my head, right now," I said,

as the answer popped into my mind.

I hurried over to the nearest picnic table and placed my palms flat on the top, my fingers splayed wide, with the tips of my thumbs and forefingers touching.

I closed my eyes and attempted to zero in on the nearest portal. There was one, but it wasn't very close. I could feel its presence, but I was nowhere near enough to close it, especially alone, and using nothing but my newly discovered mental powers. I concentrated harder and tried to get a direction. Northeast, the portal was somewhere near Pennsylvania.

"Pennsylvania, huh?" I shook my head. "What a hotspot of other-dimensional activity."

"My, my, what have we here, a Guide? Lucky me."

I jumped at the sound of the sinister voice that came from behind me and caused my skin to crawl.

A tremor of fear shot up my spine as I stiffened in my seat. I slowly moved my hands to the edge of the table and began to stand.

Strong, cruel hands pushed down on my shoulders and forced me to sit back down on the bench. Pain shot up my spine as my butt made contact with the hard wooden surface.

I clamped my lips shut, since I've always been prone to being a smart-ass. I didn't want to have

to fight my way out of this. My self-defense classes were very few, and far between, enough to make them almost nonexistent.

“What do you want?” I ground the question out between my clenched teeth. I turned my head. I wanted to keep an eye on him as I sat praying for an opening to escape.

“What do you think I want?” He bent low and breathed the answer in my ear. “Your blood, darling. I want your blood.” His hot breath brushed the side of my neck and I almost jumped with fright. Okay, I was in big trouble now. My eyes darted around the small rest area as I looked for something I could use as a weapon.

I turned and threw first one then the other of my legs over the bench. I needed to face my enemy. Seated, I was at enough of a disadvantage. Besides, this way, it would be easier to run when, and if, the opportunity presented itself.

I blinked, stunned, when I got my first, good look at my aggressor. Why would such a gorgeous guy feel the need to accost women in rest areas? But, from what I understand, it was all about control with guys like him.

“Look, handsome,” I said with a tremulous smile. “You don’t have to force me.” I stood slowly and began to unbutton my blouse. Rapists liked the illusion of power. Take that away and most of them lost interest. I hoped so, anyway. I

loosened another button and struck, what I hoped was a seductive pose.

Will I forever be cursed to jump to the wrong conclusion?

The man shook his head and smiled. "Wrong answer, sweetness." His smile grew broader and I almost fainted at my first glimpse of his lengthening incisors.

"Oh, my God," I gasped. How many impossible things would I be forced to believe? Had Gram drummed that into my head because she knew something like this would happen someday?

I stumbled back against the bench I'd just vacated. I sat down hard and winced at the pain that shot up my spine as it made contact with the sharp edge of the tabletop.

The man stood still for a moment and stared at me. Then he laughed. "Your God can't help you now."

He moved closer and his eyes glowed red. It made him look demonic. He grabbed me roughly by the arms and jerked me up from my seat, his fetid breath hot on my face.

"Expose your neck to me, mortal, that I may take sustenance."

My first thought had been that I was about to be murdered by some insignificant little snot with delusions of vampdom and great special effects.

That is, until I felt myself expose my neck as he'd ordered.

At the same moment that I decided he was real, I remembered what Micah told me earlier about Brock, the incubus.

Call him and he will come.

I grimaced and hoped I wasn't about to make a huge mistake. The last thing I needed was to have to fight the two of them off. The vampire leaned closer, sniffing my neck. "Too bad you aren't still a virgin. Virgin's blood is so sweet. So addictive."

I took a deep breath.

"Brock!" I screamed his name as loud as I could. About two seconds passed and Brock appeared before me, minus the cop uniform. Brock looked mighty handsome in worn blue jeans, pointy toed cowboy boots, and a blue and brown plaid shirt. He looked like I just pulled him from a square dance.

Brock growled at the vampire that had just begun to sink his sharp fangs into my exposed neck, as he held me a foot or so from the ground.

"Get your hands off my woman, scum."

It appeared as though any woman belonged to an incubus when he was near, or so he thought. It was a good thing there wasn't a busload of tanning models here or I may have been in real trouble. Then again, the vamp may have considered them an all you can eat buffet. Me? I'm

just cheese and crackers.

The vampire tilted his head back and laughed. "Such thoughts you have, ma petite."

I fought the urge to tell him that I wasn't his little anything. Instead, I breathed a sigh of relief. At least his teeth were away from my neck at the moment.

He turned toward Brock and scowled. "The woman is mine, incubus. Leave us while you still have your head upon your shoulders." He answered, as he set me on my feet and placed me beside him. He held my wrist in a painful, inescapable grip.

Since I didn't want to draw either of their attention, I fought the urge to raise my hand and clamp it to my neck where the vampire's teeth punctured me. I felt the blood ooze down the front of my chest, inching toward the collar of my favorite silk blouse, threatening to ruin it.

Brock looked at the vamp and laughed. "She called for me, did she not?" He asked the agitated vamp as he paced back and forth.

"Tell me your real name incubus, so I may see to it that your remains are disposed of properly," the vampire bellowed.

He was so preoccupied with Brock that I don't think he realized when he released my arm. I waited a few seconds and inched sideways, away from him. I moved slowly so I wouldn't draw

attention to myself.

"I'm an other-dimensional magical being, I don't have remains, dickhead," Brock scoffed. "I don't even have a corporeal body on this plain of existence." He grinned and held his arms out to his sides. "Sorry to disappoint you, but this is all just an illusion, Rogue."

By this time, both of them had forgotten all about little old me. I took the advantage I'd gained by calling Brock and slipped away while they practiced their male posturing. I made it to my car just before the blows started.

I didn't stick around to see who won me.

* * * *

I drove in the general direction of Pennsylvania and the open portal. Since I had managed to get a tentative lock on it before ole-toothy arrived, I was pretty sure I was headed in the right direction. I stopped once for gas and two other times for a pit stop. Both times I chose well-lit, very populated areas.

"What is it about being on the road that makes you have to pee so much?" I asked myself in the fourth ladies' room in less than seven hours.

Finally, exhausted, I rented a small room on the outskirts of some small town in Ohio that I can't remember the name of. The motel I

remember, it was The Nineteenth Hole. It was a hole, all right, but it had a shower and a bed, and that's all that really mattered.

I'd just stepped out from a nice long shower when there was a knock on the door. This is the time that, in a perfect world, I would grab my Glock from my bag, check its load and sneak toward the door to look out through the little peephole.

Instead, I grabbed two towels from the holder on the wall, wrapped one around my head, and the other around my body, then crept toward the door. I expected certain doom in the form of one very pissed-off vampire.

"Oh God," I whispered as I looked through the tiny peephole on the door. My hands trembled as I reached for the deadbolt, all the while wondering how he'd found me.

I hadn't expected Micah, but there he was, in all his masculine glory, and he was infinitely better than ole-toothy. Certain parts of my traitorous anatomy began to cheer.

"What do you want?" I asked and crossed my arms. I feigned nonchalance when all I wanted to do was jump his miserable, wonderful, bones.

He stood and stared at me from the sidewalk just outside the door. "You, of course," he said with a smile.

That smile was devastating. He was

devastating. I fought the urge to fan myself. Goodness! He looked good enough to eat in those navy blue slacks and cream silk shirt. I licked my lips.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“Why?” I joked, “Are you some sort of vampire and you can’t come in unless I invite you?” After what happened earlier, I may have given that some serious thought if he hadn’t entered my home uninvited a few nights ago.

Micah smiled and shrugged. “Invite me in and find out. Maybe I’m just a gentleman.” He leaned against the doorjamb his tall frame looked sexier than anyone had a right to.

My nether parts twitched out a reminder of what this man could do with that muscular body and I capitulated.

“Come in already, and shut the door behind you.”

Micah did exactly as I instructed, then leaned back against the door, his hands in his pockets.

His heated stare blazed a trail up and down my almost bare torso. He took a deep breath and I wondered, a bit madly, if he could smell my arousal. I pulled the towel from my head, combed my hair with my fingers, and watched him through the mirror over the dresser. I picked up my brush and he was behind me in a blink and removed it from my hand.

Micah gently pushed me into the chair next to the dresser. Then, standing between my legs, he combed the tangles from my long hair. He was so gentle, it almost brought tears to my eyes.

"Why are you here?" he asked. His deep voice caused little ripples of desire to dance through my body. I shivered, even as my blood began to heat.

"I've had an idea to help the others," I answered breathlessly. The slow strokes of the brush were turning me inside out. My body burned, already preparing itself for his possession. "I figured that if someone can teach other Guides to use their powers they won't be at the mercy of the incubus." Or at the mercy of the Cartuotey.

By the time he finished brushing my hair, I was a quivering mass of goose-pimpled flesh. He helped me stand on wobbly legs, then kissed me until my legs gave out completely.

Micah scooped me up in his arms and carried me to the king sized bed. His mouth doing magical things to me as it traveled from my mouth to my neck, down to the edge of the towel covering my breasts then back to my kiss starved lips.

Oh, yes. Micah's mouth was a drug that I was definitely addicted to.

He smiled against my lips and I opened my eyes. It was a slow, satisfied smile. One that told me he'd been eavesdropping on my thoughts

again. I pulled away from him.

"You said you wouldn't do that," I frowned. Besides, I wanted to know how he did it. I scooted away from him, slapping at his wandering hands and put my back against the headboard.

"Do what?"

I shook my head. "Don't give me that innocent look. You know exactly what I'm talking about." I glared at him, drawing my knees up against my chest in an attempt to hinder his view of my exposed body, since my towel had gone missing. I shot a look over the side of the bed, briefly wondering where in the heck it went.

"How do you read my mind?"

Micah looked at me, obviously uncomfortable with his gifts, and sighed. "If you must know, I am Vampyr," he said with a strange accent. He sat up next to me, his arm brushing mine.

I felt my eyes widen and my hand flew to my neck, feeling for the place where he'd suckled it the last time we were together. He'd drawn so hard at the spot just above my collarbone, I was sure I'd have a mark there the next day, but there had been none.

I had to invite him into the room.

"Oh, God!" I jumped off of the bed and whirled around, trying to keep my distance. "Why didn't I have to invite you into my house?" I nervously cast my gaze about, searching for a

weapon.

Micah smiled softly, "You already had. You once told me I would be welcome there anytime, as long as I had orange slices." He dug into his pocket and pulled out two individually wrapped pieces of my favorite childhood treat.

My mind filled to overflowing with memories, memories of my father and his group of friends. One man in particular I once called ... "Meeka?" I asked. My gaze met his in recognition as I spoke that beloved name. I hopped back onto the bed, no longer able to fear him. I wrapped my arms around his neck, resting my head on his shoulder. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you since..."

"Since you realized I wasn't aging," Micah finished for me, gently stroking my hair. "You sat on my lap one day, tracing my features with your chubby little hand," he picked up my hand and kissed my fingers one by one. "You said, "Why don't you get lines like Daddy, Meeka?" That was when I knew I must stop making my visits to you." He turned suddenly sad eyes my way. "Your father had forbidden anyone to tell you of us. I was forced to leave, no matter how much the separation would hurt you."

I hugged him to me, tears running freely down my face. I remembered his earlier comment about feeling my power when I was a child. I thought

he'd been lying, trying to get me to trust him.

I laid my hand against his cheek. "I missed you. Daddy told me you went away and couldn't come back. I assumed you died."

Micah nodded. "As you were meant to. I vowed to your father to keep you safe, no matter the cost." He ran his fingers through my still damp hair, whispering nonsensical things to me as I cried happy tears against his chest.

I pulled back a bit, needing to look into his eyes. "Also meaning, if you had to take my virginity, you had his blessing?"

His hand stilled at my question and I had my answer. I took a deep breath. "Look. I'm over being angry about that, Micah," I rested my hand on his chest. "I just have this problem with sharing, that's all."

"I know. You never did play well with others, even as a child." he grinned.

I chuckled for a minute before turning back to him, serious. "I mean it, Micah. I can get over the fact that you'll never age. I can even deal with the fact that you are, technically, way too old for me." I winked up at him and grinned. "By the way, you've got to be the sexiest geriatric I've ever laid eyes on," I said, giggling at his outraged expression.

"Ow! That hurt," I gasped, when he pinched my ass.

He smiled and waggled his brows at me. "Want me to kiss it and make it better?"

I smiled sadly. "This thing about sharing," I reminded him.

"You won't have to worry about it."

I sat up and scowled at him. "Of course I have to worry about it. If you think, for even a nano-second, that I'll just stand by while you go off and screw every magically inactive Guide in the world, you're out of your fucking mind!"

I started to pull away, but Micah took my hand and pulled me toward him. He smiled and held my trembling hand in his.

"Such language, Tasha. What would your grandmother think?" he deliberately reminded me of her hatred of profanity.

"This may sound crude, but every Cartuotey knows when he has met the woman he wants to spend his life with. It's usually a Guide. We don't know who he or she is, until we have been close to them for some time or have been intimate. That is the main reason we do what we do. We don't do it for our egos or because we want a — a piece of ass." He said the last softly, as if he felt uncomfortable saying it. Perhaps it did make him uncomfortable. He never pretended to like my use of foul language. Maybe I'd humor him and try to clean it up.

"My mother was a vampire?" I asked

incredulous. As usual, I concentrated on the most irrelevant thought that popped into my mind.

He shook his head. "No, a Guide can find love anywhere. They are born mortal and find love where they will. With one of my kind, it is different. We must find a person we are completely compatible with – a mate – to find the unconditional love we crave. It seems that only our mates are mentally strong enough to overcome the shock of knowing the truth of what we are."

"Let me see if I understand this." I pulled my hand free and sat up to better look at him. "All Cartuoteys are vampires, and all Guides are mortals?"

He nodded. "Then there is a Guardian of the Gate, this is the child of two Guides. They have more power than that of a regular Guide, but less power than that of a vampire."

I tried to absorb all of this and it took me a minute to catch up.

"If I wanted to, I could go out and find any man to love, marry and have a life with?"

He nodded.

But if I do that ... what?" I asked. "What does it do to the vampire? To – to you?"

"It leaves them alone until another is born who is compatible. For some that never happens. But, to be honest, for most it is usually a few hundred

years before we are given a second chance. Otherwise he or she can relieve the sexual tensions of their body, but they will never find unconditional love and they will never be able to procreate." He shrugged. "Unless they turn humans, but that isn't true procreation."

"So you've been dancing around the globe having sex with as many women as you can?" I bit my lip, deep in thought, still not sure how to take all of this. My head was ready to spin from my shoulders after all of the crap I'd learned over the last few days.

"Pretty much," Micah agreed with my assessment.

I looked up at him. For the first time, I wondered about his age. He obviously wasn't the thirty-five or so years I'd originally believed him to be. He still looked the same as I remembered him and he'd been gone from my life for at least twenty years.

"Eleven-hundred and thirty-six," he answered before I could ask.

"Yep, you're way too old for me," I said with a grin. Another thought barely formed in my head when he said,

"I was born in the year eight-hundred and seventy. And yes, I have seen much."

"Oh, my God." Once again my mind latched onto the most irrelevant fact. "And you and your

... your libido have been globetrotting since ...
when –? The year eight-hundred and ninety, or
so?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

I hit the road again early the next morning. Micah left me to my own devices, after a night of mind-blowing sex, with the promise to find me later that night. He said he had some sort of business to attend to and I wasn't inclined to argue. I enjoy a bit of solitude, to a certain extent. I am used to being alone, after all.

Besides, I understood his motives. I just didn't agree with them. He, in his infinite stupidity, thought it was better for the two of us to remain separated as much as possible in case one or the other of us — namely me — needed backup. My argument was I wouldn't need backup if he was with me.

He promised to leave the deflowering of virgins to the other vamps who hadn't found their mates, from now on. It wasn't hard to wring the promise out of him, especially after I threatened to call Brock and have sex with him while Micah watched. I wouldn't have, of course, but a girl has

to do what a girl – well, I'll just leave it at that.

I drove down the interstate with a newly marked map. Micah didn't want me to get lost again. Especially after I told him about the grander-than-thou vamp I'd run into. He'd highlighted the route with a bright pink pen and even told me what hotel to go to.

I started to get a little peeved at his bossiness. But I tried to make allowances. He had been raised when women were to be protected and all. And besides, I think I'm beginning to like it.

I followed his directions and ensconced myself into the motel of his choice before nightfall. Apparently vamps can come out in the daylight, but they're weak and without power until sundown. That's why most of them chose to sleep during the day. I can't say that I blame them. I'm more of a night person myself. I still wondered where Micah went when the sun was up though. It wasn't as if he could do much, apparently.

I showered and ordered a pizza while I waited. I wasn't about to miss dinner again. If I have to keep feeding Micah, I need to keep up my strength. A small pizza ought to do the trick.

I checked the peephole when someone knocked on the door later. It was my small pepperoni and onion pizza. I paid the guy, tipped him a five, and apologetically closed the door in his acne-covered face.

An hour later, I had finished my dinner and started to pace the floor. It was long since dark and I needed to know where Micah was.

“Good grief, I hope I haven’t turned into one of those clingy women who can’t be without their man for a day.”

I shuddered at the thought. Daddy always taught me to be independent. I wondered, a bit briefly, why he never thought to teach me to use my powers, as well.

I never really knew Daddy as well as I should have. He always left me at Gram’s and went off with his friends. He remained almost as much of a stranger as they were. Micah was the only one of his friends who ever came around a lot. Then, suddenly, he’d stopped his frequent visits. At least now I know why.

It felt good to know that there was still someone around who had a connection with my youth. I haven’t lost everyone after all.

It was a wonderful thought.

I have to assume that Gram had known what Micah was. She was Daddy’s mother after all, even if she was a ... mortal. God, using that word in that context sticks in my throat. And she had been a Guide.

Gram died just after I turned eighteen. She held on just long enough so I could inherit her house, and live there by myself, without fear of

the authorities sticking me in a foster home.

Daddy still visited me infrequently over the next few years. Until one day, about five years ago, he left and never came back. I always assumed he died on the road somewhere. I wonder if Micah knows what happened.

Maybe I should ask him.

I finally worked off most, if not all, of my nervous energy and sat down on the bed to wait. I turned on the TV and wondered where in the hell Micah could be.

* * * *

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“What the hell?” I sat up abruptly and pushed my fingers through my sleep-tousled hair. I glanced at the clock on the bedside table. The large digital display blinked three forty-five a.m. at me in bright green numbers. I reached over to the nightstand and switched on the lamp.

“This better be good,” I grumbled as I crawled out of the bed and stumbled to the door. Since I knew it could only be one person, I decided to forgo the peephole so I could immediately commence with some serious bitching. I unlocked it and slung the door wide.

“It’s about damn time you showed up,” I snarled. “I’ve been worried sick. Get your ass ...”

My voice trailed off as I stared with horror at the very pissed off vamp in the doorway.

I quickly stepped back with a squeal before he could reach in and grab me. So, I was safe for the moment. But, the door still hung wide open and he glared in at me, a very hungry expression on his face.

Leave it to me to find myself in a situation where I was stuck in a hotel room with a vicious vampire just outside the door. One who could trick me into inviting him in at any minute.

"Why me?" I shook my head. "Go away," I made a shooing motion with my hands, while I wiggled my fingers, hoping he'd get the idea. But he didn't budge. "I don't want any. I'm quite happy with my own vamp."

He just stood there and stared at me, a terrifying smile on his face. One that said he knew something that I didn't.

"Your friend is not coming," he lisped, past his lengthened incisors.

My mouth fell open as I watched them grow and I stepped back a few more feet when his eyes did that funny glowing thing I've seen Micah's do on occasion. It scared me when this guy did it. He wasn't horny. Well, at least I was pretty sure he wasn't horny, not that I would have accommodated him, if he had been.

I looked around the room for an object that I

could use as a weapon. The desk held a pad of paper, three envelopes and a pen. The table next to the bed wielded the more substantial weapon. A four inch thick phone book and the telephone. I shook my head. I just didn't think it would do much good against an assailant of his caliber.

"Invite me in."

I pinched my lips together between my teeth to keep my mouth shut. The voice attempted a compulsion and I chalked my resistance up to my being a Guide. I closed my eyes, trying to shake off the absurdity of my previous thought.

Am I really going to buy into all of this?

"Invite me in. Now."

I ignored him and continued with my inventory of the room. The dresser held my bag of money, suitcase, and purse. All of which were totally useless at the moment.

Behind me on the vanity, which was set just outside the bathroom, were my mousse, brush and blow dryer. No weapon there, unless I could style him to death. Then my eyes lit on the bathroom door.

"Invite me in," he repeated. The voice held a heavy compulsion that I found nearly impossible to resist.

My body turned leaden as I moved to face him. My mouth actually opened to utter the words he needed to hear to be able to enter the room, which

was mine for the evening.

I clamped my hand over my mouth and bolted into the bathroom, and locked the door behind me. I turned the water on in the tub to block the dreadful sound of his beautiful voice as he attempted to compel me to invite him in. I didn't mind being Micah's dinner once in a while but I drew the line at becoming an all night, all-you-can-eat buffet.

Where was Micah? I needed him and he was nowhere to be found. He knew there was a possibility that this could happen. How could he leave me? I sat down on the floor, drew my knees up to my chest and prayed. I prayed that whatever magic bound the vampire from this room, without invitation, would hold, at least, until Micah finally arrived.

That was how Micah found me. Huddled in the corner, tears staining my cheeks and my arms wrapped around my knees. I jumped when he touched me, screaming hysterically, until I realized who it was. I cried on his shoulder when he lifted me in his arms and carried me to the bed.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he whispered against my temple. "I had to prove to the others that Camen had turned Rogue. It had to appear as though you were alone, without protection, so he would act." Micah wrapped his arms around me and cradled me against the warmth of his chest.

"I'm so cold." My teeth chattered as he took my frozen hands in his and rubbed them together.

"He can't harm you now. The others have taken him for punishment."

I shuddered at the word knowing what he meant. But, I rationalized, if anyone deserved a death sentence it was the vamp who had attempted to kill me twice. He was no better than Marco had been.

I finally relaxed in Micah's arms, and wrapped my own around him. I let him hold me and absorbed his heat. I snuggled closer to his warmth, inhaling his scent as if I could never get enough. I ignored the little voice in my head that proclaimed I would never get enough of him and buried my face in his neck.

After I calmed down, I pulled back a bit and looked up at him. "Why didn't I have to invite you in?" I worried my lower lip. What if the other vamp had found that he could just waltz in here uninvited? My eyes widened. Would I ever be safe anywhere?

Micah smiled. "I made the reservation, remember?"

"Oh, yes, now that you mention it," I nodded. I'm sure my relief showed in my sagging shoulders. He had insisted on it, now that I recall. It was a good thing too. Otherwise I'd still be huddled on the bathroom floor in a heap.

At least now I knew why he'd been so adamant about why he should make the reservation. I rested my head on his shoulder, and thought about how nice it felt to snuggle up to him on the bed. I couldn't remember the last time I was able to just revel in the sense of being close to someone. I had the sneaking suspicion it had been with Micah, though.

I turned my head a bit and buried my nose in the vee of his shirt. Goodness, he smells good enough to eat.

Micah's hand stilled where he'd been smoothing my hair and I felt a bulge in the general vicinity of his crotch.

I cleared my throat, "Well, either you've taken to packing lead, or you're really happy to see me." I half joked, this time I didn't care that he'd read my mind. All I cared about was that I was still alive and he was with me.

Micah clenched his teeth together, fisted his hand in my hair, and tugged. My head tipped back and I looked directly into his fathomless, ebony eyes.

"I'm extremely happy to see you," he growled, just before his lips lowered to mine.

I thought of reprimanding him for bullying me around, for a split second. But, I gave a mental shrug and decided I liked it.

Micah's hands were all over me. His fingers

bunched in my hair, feathered down my back and over my bottom. My arms wound around his neck, and I pulled his head to me as his tongue traced a fiery trail down between my breasts.

My nightshirt was no longer on my body, even though I had no memory of removing it. We were skin-to-skin, chest-to-chest. Micah cradled me in his arms as his mouth moved sensuously over my breasts. The feel of his unshaven jaw added to the decadent sensations as the short hairs prickled my skin. It made me tingle and burn as he scraped his cheek over my hardened nipples.

“Ooh, yessss. I like that,” I moaned.

He lifted me easily, effortlessly, and lowered me to the comforter. I placed my hands on his smooth chest, then let them wander lower, across his flat stomach, to the part of his anatomy that was so happy to see me.

“Ah, Tasha,” he hissed between clenched teeth. “You’ll be the death of me.”

I looked up at him and grinned. “Maybe, but what a way to go,” I said, before I lowered my head to wrap my lips around the tip of his cock.

Micah groaned. He buried his fingers in my hair and held my head in place as he moved his hips, and drove his thick length into my mouth.

I never would have believed I would like this. But somehow, as his mind filled mine with the pleasure I gave him, I knew I could never imagine

doing this for another living soul. But with Micah, it felt right.

I ran my tongue down around the base of his engorged shaft, while I squeezed his sac and ran my nails over his upper thighs. His hips bucked, driving him deeper. I fisted my hand around the base of his cock, and squeezed. My hand milked his hard shaft, as I drove him closer to the edge.

I pulled my head back, and ran my tongue around the head, and felt the ridge around the crown. Then I plunged my mouth down over his length, using my teeth to scrape lightly over his cock. It nearly drove him wild.

Micah cupped my cheeks and lifted my head before I could give him the ultimate pleasure. His cock bucked wildly, impatient for its moment of ecstasy.

I felt him shudder beneath my hands as he fought to regain control of the need to come. He closed his eyes, breathing heavily and held me against him with a strength no mortal could possibly possess.

He pulled me to a sitting position, cupped the cheeks of my ass in his hands, raised me up over his engorged erection, and lowered me slowly onto him.

I cried out with my first orgasm as soon as his thumb thrummed the engorged nub at the apex of my thighs. I bounced up and down on his lap

wildly, until he rolled us over to regain control.

I had none. My control had vanished the moment he lowered me onto his massive staff.

“Fuck me, dammit!” I bit his lower lip, drawing it into my mouth.

He grinned. “I like that kind of language in the bedroom. It shows me what a hellcat you are.” He raised himself up and pulled his cock out of me. He flipped me over onto my stomach, wrapped his fist around his bucking member and caressed its length. “Raise your ass into the air.”

I groaned when he gave my rear a playful slap. I never knew how erotic something like that could be. The light sting added to the fire that Micah built within me. He positioned himself behind me and rammed his cock into my tight cunt.

“Ah, that feels so good, you prick.”

I needed this. After everything I’d been through earlier, I needed this with everything in me. More than anything, tonight, I needed to feel alive.

Micah answered the urgency within me. He drove deep inside my tight channel, he pistoned his cock into the moist warmth of my body. He thrust hard, moving his blood-engorged length in and out, faster and faster.

He pulled out and rolled me back over.

“I want to see you when you come,” he said, his breathing rough.

I knew when he neared the edge. I felt it, even as he brought me to another climax. I saw the burning need in his eyes and the familiar glow that accompanied both his lust, and bloodlust. I reached up, wrapped my arms around his neck and drew his head down to me. He buried his face in my neck when I turned my head and opened myself up to his need.

A moment of pain gave way to a pleasure so intense I climaxed again. The warm, wet velvet of my cunt milked his engorged shaft as it plunged in and out of me.

He pulled his mouth from my skin and called my name in a hoarse growl. A sound so primitive, it barely sounded human.

I retained my consciousness, this time. I stayed within the circle of his arms, beside him, my fingers threading through the sable silk of his hair. I held his head to me and drifted to sleep.

* * * *

The morning sun beat through the windows. It cast a golden glow through the open curtains onto the empty side of the bed. Micah was gone. He'd written a note on the hotel stationary and left it on the desk.

Dearest Tasha,

*The room is paid through another night.
The portal is near. Please forgive my
absence, I shall return tonight.*

*Yours,
Micah*

“Now what in the hell do I do?” I asked my reflection, as I crumpled his note and threw it into the trash. I looked in the mirror and shrugged.

Well, with my gold-blond hair I wasn't beautiful, but I haven't seen anyone throw up when they look at me yet. So I suppose that's a plus.

Trina always said my eyes were too blue and too big for my face. I frowned at my reflection critically. Maybe she'd been right. I examined my neck where Micah bit me. There was still no mark. I wondered if he had some sort of healing power. It was just as well if he did. The last thing I want is to run around while I look like some demented pincushion.

I turned back to survey the room and did a mental inventory. I had a few options. I could hang around here in this hotel room twiddling my thumbs while I wait for Micah to have all of the fun. Or I could try to find the open portal and close it myself. I am supposed to be some sort of

sorceress, after all, aren't I?

A hot shower and an hour and a half later, I was in the diner down the street eating breakfast. I have my priorities and the first one is staying well fed and hydrated. I never know when Micah is going to show up and want a snack.

I sat in a booth near the window and slurped down my fourth cup of coffee while I read the local paper. The front-page story told of a serial killer at large who had slit the throats of eligible young misses. The murderer had also drained their blood into some type of container. At least that's what the authorities thought, since there was never any blood left at the scene. I, of course, had my own theory. But I couldn't tell that to the police, not without getting locked in the loony bin, anyway.

My breakfast passed in silence, the only noise was the chink of my silverware against the cheap, china plate as I ate a western omelet and a side of hash browns. I informed my waitress of my addiction to coffee, upon my arrival and she frequently passed by to top off my cup with a smile. I stayed for a while and happily slurped my coffee in between her visits.

An hour later, I stepped out into the bright sunshine and wondered where Micah was and, what it was, exactly, he did in daylight hours. He'd already informed me that he didn't

necessarily have to hide from the sunlight. He wasn't the kind of vampire from legends. Those vampires, the ones like Camen, had turned Rogue and would kill anyone, where and when the mood struck. Even one of their own kind. Micah informed me that type of vampire was very rare. Thank God!

I stepped from the sidewalk, crossed the street, and peeked in the window of the nearest dress shop. I looked down at my worn jeans and grubby sneakers.

"I want new clothes."

Five years of addiction had me wearing nearly worn out everything. I looked down at my slovenly appearance and wondered exactly what it was Micah saw in me. I puffed out my cheeks and blew a stray lock of hair out of my eyes with a sigh.

I definitely needed to do some shopping. A homeless person I am not, and it was time I stopped dressing like one. The virgin Guides and murderous Rogues will just have to be patient and wait another day.

Two hours and a thousand dollars later, I stepped from the shop dressed to the nines. I held four bags and a business card for the hair salon down the street. The note the manager wrote on the back read: Help her, please!

I wasn't sure whether I should feel insulted or

flattered. I opted for blind ignorance and limped down the street in my newly acquired three-inch pumps.

When I finally arrived at the salon—after three rest stops at various points in between – I'd where I removed my shoes to rub my aching feet – I found that there had been a hidden message in that short note. The hidden message being, give her the works, spare no expense and wax her everywhere she has the hair of an Australian bushman.

It was a lot to fit on the back of a card, so, apparently they'd worked out this little code ...

I was snipped, waxed, manicured and given a pedicure before they gooped up my face and stuck me under a hair-dryer. I looked at myself in the mirror behind the chair across from me and nearly screamed with fright.

Who was that creature that stared back at me with bits of tin foil stuck in her hair and green goop on her face? I shook my head. That couldn't possibly be me. I looked like an advertisement for a UFO buff convention.

I sat back in the chair with my magazine. I might as well relax and enjoy it. My plans to save the world from creatures that come through open portals to other dimensions, was just going to have to wait another day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Every bit of the torture I went through earlier was worth it. Just for that one moment when Micah got his first glimpse of my newly-styled self.

He knocked on the door before he walked in. He used the key I'd given him the night before. His first glimpse of me as I lay on the bed in my new sheer emerald-green negligee had obviously been a surprise. His mouth fell open with shock.

Imagine mine, when he'd finally managed to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth to tell me I had to get dressed so we could go apprehend an incubus and close the open portal.

"Damn it," I snarled, stumbling a bit as I stuck my legs into my almost worn out jeans. "The one time I try to look nice for you you want me to dress like a slob to close a damned portal."

"I did not say you should dress like a slob. I merely suggested that a silk dress and high heels were not necessarily the best choice for incubus

hunting," Micah said with a smile. He sat on the bed and watched me dress with no small degree of interest.

I wiggled into my jeans, then noticed the path of Micah's stare. "Get your eyes off my ass. We have work to do," I growled. "And it's not fair. Stop looking at me like that. You're going to make me horny."

He continued to watch me and raised his sculpted brow. His dark chocolate eyes took in every move I made.

"I'd say, by the way you're acting, it's too late already."

"Oh shut up, you, you vampire," I snapped when I couldn't think of a more scathing retort. I stalked into the bathroom to put the rest of my clothes on. I so didn't want to see the smug, male look of satisfaction he kept throwing my way.

* * * *

"Nice car," I whistled, when he led me to a sleek black limo parked down the street from the hotel. "Why didn't you just have him pick us up?" I asked, before I got a glimpse of the driver. "Oh. Why didn't you have her pick us up?"

He probably doesn't want his hottie of a driver to know he's been hopping in the sack with you. Can't say that I blame him. She's gorgeous.

We settled ourselves into the back seat and Micah grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips.

“You are beautiful. If I have not told you this before, I apologize.” He kissed each and every one of my fingers slowly, reverently, before he pressed another opened mouth kiss onto my palm.

My mouth went dry as I went all girly inside at his blatant show of affection in front of his gorgeous female driver. I looked up into his eyes, and curled my fingers around my palm, in an attempt to hold the sensation of his kiss against my flesh.

I leaned my head against his shoulder and relaxed, as the driver eased the car out onto the road.

“Thank you,” I whispered into his neck. I didn’t trust myself to say much more without saying something sappy and, therefore, embarrassing.

“For what?” he asked aloud. He gently probed my mind when I clamped my lips tight. I slammed my mind’s door closed, barring his intrusion. I think the move shocked him. I remembered the exercise from when I was younger and stayed over at Darla’s house a lot. It was another lesson Linda insisted I sit through. She said it was to bar psychic vampires from sapping my energy. She’d never mentioned the blood drinking type. I wonder if she’d known about them.

What happens to a guy when you tell him he's perfect? I was afraid it would go to his head. So I opted for silence.

Micah gently withdrew his mind from mine and gave me a small smile. He wrapped his arm around me and we settled back into the comfortable seat. I reveled in our closeness and enjoyed the warmth of his body seeping into mine as we sped toward the open portal.

The car drew to a smooth stop in the parking lot of a Catholic Church. I gaped through the window for a moment before I turned my stunned gaze to Micah.

"This is where the open portal is?"

Micah shook his head. "No, but It is easier to open them near areas of great spiritual power. The stronger the energy, the longer the portal can draw from it, allowing it to stay open."

He looked through the window; out into the darkness. He was obviously able to see much more than I could, with my very human, very limited night vision.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Are you telling me a portal opened near a church can stay open indefinitely?" Isn't that just great news? The one I'd closed down the street from my house released six other-dimensional creatures before I'd closed it and those were just the ones I'd actually seen. There was no way to be sure how many creatures

had made it through before I found it.

“Correct.” Micah nodded. He looked out into the darkness and drummed his fingers on his knee impatiently. I wondered what he was waiting for.

“How do they keep people from seeing them?” I asked with a frown. “I mean, I think I’d remember seeing a green and orange spotted half man, half goat-like animal roaming the streets of my city.”

“Only the gifted can see them.”

“The gifted?”

“People like you,” he answered absently, while he looked out into the darkness.

“People like me?” I scowled. “Listen, bubba, I don’t want to be the one who rains on your parade, but this is a curse, not a gift.”

“As you wish,” he shrugged. “According to my calculations, this portal has been open for nearly two months.”

“Two months? What are we waiting for, then? Shouldn’t we close it?”

The words had barely left my mouth when I saw something move in the shadows. Micah leapt from the car and pounced into the inky blackness before I could even blink.

I scrambled through the door to join him.

“Bro—” I started to say the name of the incubus.

“Do not!”

I fisted my hands on my hips and scowled at Micah.

“What was that for?” I asked and waved my hand toward the, seemingly humanoid, creature Micah held in a chokehold. “He’s already here.”

The creature sneered at me and sniffed the air around us as if we smelled bad. I fought the ridiculous urge to sniff at my armpits even though I’d had a shower less than two hours ago.

“I am not Brock, you weak, sniveling mortal.” He spat the last, as if mortal was a dirty word.

Micah slammed him up against the brick wall at his back. The incubus grunted in pain as a network of spider-webbed cracks formed on the wall behind him.

Micah’s eyes glowed red. They were the same strange, iridescent-orange as when he’d come to save me from the incubus at my home.

“Quit while you are ahead, incubus. Do not think to insult my mate,” he growled in a voice that wasn’t quite human. “You will not survive it.” Micah enunciated each word carefully.

I put my hand on Micah’s arm. “Why have you captured this poor, ignorant – not to mention ugly creature? What possible use can it serve?” I flicked it a glance. “It’s not like he’s important, or anything.” Unless, of course, Micah wanted the pleasure of sending the thing back to whatever dimension it came from. What do I know?

I was under the impression that it would automatically happen when the portal closed. I refused to think of all of the creatures there could be roaming the Earth, if they weren't returned when the portal was sealed.

"Don't you think our first priority should be to close the big gaping hole to whatever dimension has spewed forth these demonic looking creatures? In other words," I waved my hand in the Brock look-a-like's direction. "Hideous Hank's home?"

The incubus snarled at the insult. He looked at Micah, then smirked with his superior knowledge.

"She knows nothing of her own world. Do you see? Human. Pathetic. The words are synonymous." The last of his sentence was garbled as Micah's temper peaked and he tightened his grip.

"Do not!" Micah's teeth lengthened and his eyes glowed blood red. He turned toward me. He still held it a foot or so from the ground, by its neck.

"We need a magical being to close the portal. There is a ritual we must perform." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Your father should have taught you this years ago. So you could protect yourself. I told him; but he would not listen. He felt if you were ignorant, you would be safe."

He turned his attention back to the creature as it began to struggle again. "There is a banishing ritual we must perform. It will send all those that have used this portal back and will close the gate forever."

I looked at Micah, completely confused.

"Why can't I just close it the way I closed the other one?"

"What other one?" Micah asked. He turned to look at me, his eyes wide.

"The one Br – the other incubus came through. It was only a few houses down from my home."

Micah looked at me through narrowed eyes.

"You closed it? How?"

"It was easy," I shrugged. "I just imagined this big steel door closing over the big, shaft to ..." I waved my hand. "Whatever dimension it is, Hank comes from," I said and indicated the incubus. "And it closed."

"Try it again." Micah's eyes were wide with disbelief.

"Okaaaay." I don't know why he thought I couldn't close the friggin' thing. He was the one who told me I was some sort of witch, to begin with. I shook my head. "Men!"

I walked to the nearest bench, knelt down on the cool, damp grass in front of it, and placed my palms flat. The tips of my thumbs and forefingers touched on the seat. What had Darla's mother

called it? Oh, Yes. The pyramid. How could I have forgotten that?

I closed my eyes and followed the psychic link that I discovered I had with these harbingers of evil and found the open portal.

It was three blocks away, in the parking lot of a Chinese restaurant. I didn't see any other-dimensional creatures about. They were all probably inside the restaurant, I know I would be. I love Chinese.

I imagined the steel door closing over the hole. Again, the heat from the other side sealed the door shut. I sagged to the ground, barely able to hold my head up.

Closing this portal had taken a bit more out of me than the first. Either that or I was weaker this time than I was before. I had been giving a lot of blood lately.

Maybe I should start taking multi-vitamins. I think I'm becoming anemic.

By the time I gathered enough energy to pry myself off the ground, Micah was on his knees before me and the incubus was nowhere in sight.

"You are the Chosen One." He stared at me through eyes filled with awe. "I never dreamt the legends could be true. They must be."

"What?"

I gaped at Micah who was still on his knees in supplication before me. I stepped closer, reached

down and dragged him to his feet.

"The legend tells of a unique Guide. One who can seal the portals with the power of his or her mind alone, one who will lead all vampires from darkness. This guide will save us from the destruction of our race. Only death awaits those being led by the Rogues."

"Huh?" I asked stupidly. I should be used to this weird shit happening by now. Can I help it if crap like prophecies and legends still shake me up a bit?

I stumbled over to the bench and sat down hard. I missed the seat and landed with a thump on the ground. I looked around for a minute and wondered how in the world I'd ended up on my ass on the pavement.

Micah strode over and helped me back onto the seat. "The Rogues are doing something that will endanger us all. You are the one who stops them. And in so doing, you save our race."

My thoughts tripped wildly through my head as I stood in his arms. I thought back to what I'd read earlier that morning.

Of course.

"The Rogues are the serial killers," I whispered. My mind filled with the horror of what their victims must have gone through.

"Serial killers?" Micah asked. He supported my weight since I couldn't seem to stand on my

own. He sat down on the bench, holding me on his lap.

“I read about them in the paper. They’re killing people here in this town, leaving their drained bodies to be found by the authorities.”

“You read about this in the paper?”

I nodded. “Yes. I read about it over breakfast. Alone, I might add.”

Micah ran an agitated hand through his hair. “I can’t believe they are going out of their way to draw so much attention to themselves. The council was bound to find them.”

I darted an accusing glare his way. “You could stick around one of these days and learn these things on your own, you know. I’m getting tired of you showing up at night, screwing my brains out, and then disappearing for the day. After all, if the sun won’t harm you ...” I let my words trail off to see what he would say.

Micah put his hands on my shoulders and I tipped my head back and looked into the dark chocolate of his eyes.

“I never said the sun wouldn’t harm me. It harms you every time you’re out in it. Why wouldn’t it harm me?”

Okay, so I’d misunderstood. I decided to ask him straight out to avoid any future misunderstandings.

“Can you, or can’t you go out in the daylight?”

I asked him with narrowed my eyes.

He inclined his head. "I can, but I must take certain precautions."

"What kind of precautions?"

He shrugged. "The same kinds of precautions you should take. I wear long sleeves, SPF thirty or better sunscreen and dark glasses with UV protection."

"Can you eat real food?" If he kept answering, I was damn sure going to keep asking until he answered every one of my questions. Or until he clammed up again.

Micah nodded. "Yes, I can eat real food." He grinned. "It just that most of us choose not to, it has ... inconvenient side effects. I can even drink coffee. Although, caffeine has its own set of side effects as well."

"What do you mean by that?"

"If I drink more than half of a cup, the caffeine acts as an aphrodisiac." He wagged his eyebrows at me suggestively.

That was an interesting tidbit. I pushed the thought aside. Maybe one day when I felt a bit adventurous ...

"Will you eat breakfast with me?"

"When?"

I shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Sometime in the very near future." I leaned into him and looked up into his eyes. "Will you spend the day

with me tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" He looked a bit taken aback. "Why tomorrow?"

"Why not?" Now it was my turn to look surprised. Why didn't he want to spend the day with me? I shrugged and tried to make it appear as though it didn't matter. But it did. It mattered a lot.

"If you don't want to ..." I trailed off, hurt that he avoided me during the day.

"It's not you, little one." He cupped my chin and attempted to compel me to look up at him.

I kept my head down, slammed a door shut in my mind and refused his compulsion.

"Stop calling me that," I snapped. "I'm almost as tall as you are. I haven't been little since I was twelve. If you would have stuck around, you'd know that."

He moved his hand to cup my cheek, tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear and offered me his arm. "Come," he said softly, resigned. "We will go back to the hotel and I shall spend the day with you tomorrow."

I jerked away. "Don't inconvenience yourself. I'll manage to get along fine all by myself. Just take me back to my room." I said my room, not our room, and he got the message.

I cried myself to sleep in my empty bed. I knew we couldn't go on as a couple if we both

kept secrets. I'd killed a man and for some reason Micah hadn't plucked that information from my head. I was too damned scared of what he'd think of me, to tell him. Not to mention the fact, it seemed that Micah had a few secrets of his own.

I checked out of the hotel the next morning and drove west. I'd never taken a real vacation and I figured it was about damn time I did. I needed to get away and I needed to think. I knew if Micah showed up on my doorstep, I'd take him in again. In a heartbeat. I also knew I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for it. So I ran.

Yes, I'm a coward. It's kept me alive so far.

I knew he would look for me to head for the closest portal. That had been to the east. I headed west, instead, hoping to avoid him for a few days at least.

Besides, I figured California had more than its fair share of gateways and someone had to close them. Why not me?

Part of me felt guilty about not sticking around to nail the people responsible for murdering the locals in that small community. Something told me Micah would take care of that before he started to search for me again. I sensed a deep-seated moral code within him. It was at the courtesy of my newfound abilities, no doubt.

I stopped for breakfast at a big truck stop along the highway. Breakfast was good. The price was

even better. And the fact that I could take a shower without renting a room was awesome.

I showered after breakfast, using a towel and wash cloth I'd swiped from the hotel at a weak moment. Then I shopped around the attached convenience store and bought two new CD's before I was on my way again.

I could sleep here and there, in my car. The back seat folded down, so I slept in a reclined position with my feet in the trunk.

I could live like this indefinitely. From now on, I would sleep in my car and shower in full service truck stops. I needed time to myself and I knew if I stayed in one place for too long, Micah would find me. I just hoped a vamp couldn't enter my car uninvited if I used it as my dwelling.

I took my time as I drove through states I'd never been to before. I even went out of my way a few times. Just to see certain landmarks and wonders of the world. I passed up the opportunity to get a look at the world's largest ball of string and opted for The Grand Canyon instead, since it was number-one on my list.

CHAPTER NINE

I'd been away from Micah for nearly a week when I found myself in Colorado staring out at a particularly beautiful scenic overlook. Strong hands landed heavily on my shoulders. I jumped and screamed.

"Have you been enjoying yourself while you've avoided me, this last week?" Micah asked when I turned to glare at him for scaring me half to death.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have been," I spat. "Do you enjoy sneaking up on people? You scared the crap out of me, you know."

I smacked him on the arm for good measure and tried to ignore the fact that, as usual, he looked good enough to eat.

Dressed in black leather pants, which hugged his long legs like a second skin, he exuded masculinity. The pants framed his toned muscles like they were made for him. I wanted to reach out, cup those magnificent cheeks, and squeeze for

all I was worth.

“We need to talk.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” I commented, in my ever so eloquent manner. “You first. Where do you go during the day?” I had to know. Did he spend his days with another woman, a vamp woman?

Micah chuckled and shook his head. “If it were only that simple.”

I ignored the obvious fact that he’d been poking around inside my head again. “Well, what is it, then?”

I couldn’t help sounding snide. His whole manner was uppity as if I had no business knowing what he was up to everyday. Well, damn it. If he wanted a relationship, he had just better learn to deal with my petty jealousies. I’d picked that thought out of his head. How, I’m not quite sure.

“Come, let’s sit in the car. We can talk and travel, can we not?”

I conceded the point and allowed him to escort me to the driver’s seat. I fastened my seatbelt and waited for him to settle in beside me and fasten his. When he buckled his seat belt, I started the car and headed farther west.

“You must go home.”

“Why?” I asked and made a little moue with my lips. “I’m on vacation.” I failed to add that it was the first vacation I’d been on since Gram died.

I didn't want, nor need, his pity.

I refused to look at him and used the excuse of having to keep my eyes on the road. I didn't trust myself to even glance his way. The man had a way about him. He could get me to agree to almost anything.

"The police are investigating the death of your roommate and a drug dealer. Since you can't be found, you are their primary suspect."

My grip tightened on the wheel and my knuckles turned white. I knew they would eventually draw that conclusion. So why was I so surprised?

Here goes nothing.

I pulled off of the road and into the grass then I put the car in park and turned to look at him.

"I did it. I killed him." I felt unwanted tears stream down my face. Tears I wouldn't allow myself, until now. "He'd already killed Trina. She was dying. He'd crushed her windpipe and I found him grunting over her nearly lifeless body like some insane, sex-starved pig."

I turned to look him in the eyes. "I killed the bastard and I'd do it again." More tears ran down my face, fell from my chin, and hit my shirt like raindrops. "What was I supposed to do, let him kill me too?" I choked the last out, barely able to speak around my sobs.

Micah got out of the car, walked around to pull

me from behind the wheel and held me in his arms.

“I know.” He rubbed my back soothingly. “I was waiting, hoping you would come to trust me enough to tell me.” I pulled away to look into his eyes.

“What do I do now, go back and confess?” I didn’t have to tell him I was frightened. He read it in my eyes and my trembling body.

His arms tightened around me. “No.” He raised his hands, cupped my face and thumbed my tears away. “We will continue on to Las Vegas, where we will be married.” He bent to kiss me lightly. “We will then return to Grand Rapids, with all haste, to inform the authorities we had no previous knowledge of Trina’s murder.”

I gaped at him. “We can’t get married! Never mind the fact that you’re suggesting we falsify a police report.” I frowned. “Can’t you get into big trouble for that?” Hell, I’d already killed a man. I was in enough trouble as it is.

“Why shouldn’t we marry?” he ignored my previous question. “We are two consenting adults who are very much in love. It is the next most logical step.”

Aside from the fact that it was exactly what I’d dreamed of ...

“I barely know you.” I refused to dwell on the fact that I couldn’t deny that I loved him.

Micah's eyes widened with shock. "You have known me a good portion of your life, Tasha. There is no one on this Earth who knows you better than I." He stepped away and appeared hurt. "Are you saying jail is preferable to marriage to me?"

I grabbed his arm and thumped his chest as he turned toward me. "You know damn well that's not what I meant. I'm not sure I even want to marry anyone. Ever."

He just stood and stared at me with those emotionless eyes of his. "Then I hope you have a good story for leaving a paper trail all of the way to the last motel you registered at. I've already suggested the only one I have. And yes, we both can get into a lot of trouble for falsifying a police report." He said, then grinned. "If we get caught, that is." He turned away from me and strode back to the car.

It was up to me, now. Did we drive further west to Reno and marriage, or back east to the police and jail?

What a choice.

* * * *

"I can't believe it," I whispered. "In less than an hour, I'll be married to a vampire."

A very handsome, virile, well-endowed

vampire, but a vampire, just the same.

I shot a glowering glance toward Micah. Why did he always seem so cool and collected? I thinned my lips. And what was that smile about? I frowned. Good God, I hope didn't read my mind again. That well-endowed thought would put a smile on any man's face.

We stood in front of the podium, of the Golden Hearts Chapel of Love and Adult Bookstore and waited for our witnesses to arrive so we could say our vows.

I scowled at Micah. "I'm sure we could have found a more suitable, and romantic, place, had we tried," I whispered.

He grinned at me and winked. The ceremony was short, sweet, and to the point. Our rented witnesses signed the papers and took their payment next door, to the casino. To feed the slot machines, no doubt.

I didn't feel any different as Micah led me back up the aisle as he held my hand in his larger, warmer one. We stepped from the seedy chapel and he lifted my hand to his mouth, kissing the back of my fingers. He looked into my eyes.

"What next, my beloved?"

I yanked my hand back and wiped the sweat from my palm onto the leg of my worn jeans. This wasn't a real wedding and I refused to dress for it. Especially since it had taken place in such a

rundown, ramshackle chapel as this.

"I am not your beloved," I snapped. More because I wanted to be, and knew I wasn't, than for any other reason.

He'd only done what he'd promised my father he would do. He was only protecting me. If he really loved me, he would have at least insisted on a real wedding or at the very least, a real chapel.

Micah winked at me and grinned again. He gripped our copy of the marriage certificate in his hands. He read over the print and a perverse pleasure filled his face. He folded the paper carefully and stuck it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"As long as you bear my name, you are my beloved. My love, mi amore ..." He'd laid his hand over his heart and tried for a sappy lovesick look.

"Oh, stop with the beloved, life-mate, we were meant to be together forever crap, will ya?" I snarled.

I started to walk back to the hotel we'd agreed to stay at with Micah close at my heels. I looked up at the bright lights of the busy city, barely able to tell it was dark.

I still hadn't forgotten that Micah never revealed what he did in the daytime. I planned to find that out as soon as we got back to the hotel. I smiled grimly as a plan formulated in my mind.

Micah stepped up beside me and recaptured

my hand. "Slow down. It's a beautiful night. You should enjoy it."

His grip wasn't painful, but it was unyielding. He tugged on my arm and urged me to slow down. We strolled toward the hotel, at a more leisurely pace. I'm sure we looked like the happy newlyweds we were supposed to be.

He carried me over the threshold and promised to do the same with every new dwelling we entered. How could I not think that was romantic? He carried me into the room. His lips never left mine. I let myself enjoy it for a moment while I buried my fingers in his coal black hair and wound my arms around his neck. My breath caught in my throat when I realized this was my wedding night. My clit twitched with anticipation.

He settled me on the bed and lowered himself over my body. I reveled in his attention, loved the feel of his lips trailing over my eyelids, cheeks, and the sensitive places on my neck. It didn't take long to have me panting with need beneath him.

He wasn't in much better shape. I reached down between his legs and fondled his growing member through his slacks. It leaped eagerly to my ministrations, and I smiled. I pulled my hand away and pushed him from me.

Micah groaned. "Are you trying to kill me, woman?"

He dipped his head and pulled the hardened

peak of my breast into the warmth of his mouth. I clutched his head to me for a moment while he suckled me through my shirt and bra before I determinedly pushed him away again.

"Oh, no, you don't," I panted and rolled out from under him. "If you want any semblance of a wedding night, you'd damn well better tell me where you go during the day. Like you promised."

Micah sat up, straightened his clothes, and gave me a puzzled glance. "I don't remember making a promise."

I stood, crossed my arms over my chest and scowled. My foot tapped impatiently against the black-veined marble floor.

"Oh, all right," Micah said and looked resigned. He gave me a pleading look. "I didn't want to frighten you, but if you insist, I have no choice."

"I insist. I can handle something frightening better than not knowing." Or imagining you doing horrible things.

At first, I thought he'd lied about his ability to go out in the sunlight. However, the last couple of days had proven him no liar about that. I still needed to know what it was he did during the hours he spent away from me.

I'm not the clingy, I-have-to-know-where-you-are-every-moment type. But I did need to know I

was the only woman in his life, or at the very least, the only one in his bed.

“There are some among us, who believe they can turn humans anytime they wish. For fun or profit.”

I gave him a blank look.

That can’t possibly mean what I think it means. Can it?

Micah nodded. “Yes, it means exactly that.” He continued a bit faster at my sharply drawn breath. “You don’t have to die to become one of us,” he laughed nervously, fidgeting.

That worried me. It wasn’t like him.

“We are not the undead. That is just an old wives tale.”

He ran a hand through his hair and looked so tired, that I almost wanted to let him stop. I made him continue because I needed to know.

“When a person is changed, they must learn to feed. They must learn to control the bloodlust, and their teeth. It’s hard to blend with humans when your teeth lengthen at the least provocation.” He stared at me, his expression grim. “Those who aren’t taught ...kill. They know no other way. They are like wild animals. If they kill enough, they don’t want to change. Or they can’t, I’m not sure which. The adrenaline in the blood of their victims is like a drug habit, one that cannot be broken.”

Well, if anyone could understand that analogy,

I could. "They become like the one who tried to kill me?"

Micah nodded. "They have to be put down like the rabid animals they have become. They aren't evil. It's similar to a drug addict who needs a fix."

"So, you hunt these ... others, who kill, when it's light out?" I guessed.

"No. Well, yes, but not in the daytime. During the light of day, I help train those who were turned and abandoned by their makers. I help them learn to control themselves when they first experience the blood lust. We care for them and help them learn to feed without acquiring a taste for the tainted adrenaline laced blood."

"Oh."

If I thought him nothing short of a hero before, he was definitely one in my eyes now. I hoped I deserved him. Everything in me wished our marriage had been a real one, instead of what it really was. It was little more than a marriage of convenience.

I bent down and kissed him then and hoped to pick up where we'd left off earlier. I knew in my heart, it was lust on his part. But with my burgeoning affection for him, I would take whatever I could get. I knew it was stupid to fall in love with a vampire. I just didn't know how to stop myself. And to be honest, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

CHAPTER TEN

I groaned when he wrapped his arms around me. His tongue waltzed into my mouth and invited mine to play. He pulled me to him with such force that we slammed together and the bed quivered beneath us.

I wrapped myself around him like a warm, human blanket. If I could, I would have happily crawled inside him. I wanted to be closer to this man than I ever wanted to be with any other person. I craved him. I hungered for him, just as certainly as he hungered for my blood.

My body burned everywhere he touched me. His hands skimmed lightly over my skin and I shivered. Gooseflesh raised on my skin and warmth pooled between my legs.

Our tongues danced together as I rode him, my legs wrapped around his waist. The pleasure was intense, even through the layers of clothing we both still wore.

I wished we were naked, with our bare skin

sliding together sensuously. Soon we were both skin to skin and I wondered, however briefly, where my clothes had gone. Micah rolled over and pinned me beneath him and kissed his way down my quivering body.

“Micah, please,” I begged. “Fuck me, now!”

But he had ideas of his own. He shook his head and grinned. “Tonight you are finally my mate.” He dipped his tongue into my belly button and I squirmed. “Tonight you will know what it is like to truly be mine.”

He said the last with so much possession that I reveled in the knowledge that he wanted me so much. At least for now.

Forever. You are mine, forever.

The words shimmered in my mind for a split second. It made me wonder if it was something I’d picked up from his mind, or if it was just my imagination.

He dipped his head between my legs and his lips caressed the warm folds of my nether lips. He drew my clit into his mouth and I screamed out a release so strong, I’m not entirely sure it was real.

Again, Micah brought me to a fevered pitch. The warm, slightly rough pad of his tongue slid over my engorged bud and I sobbed out my ecstasy. “Yes. Oh, God, Micah, yes!”

His tongue drove inside me, lapped at the warm cream that ran from my clenching vagina.

He suckled my hardened nub once more and I nearly flew off of the bed. Over and over I climaxed, until I lay beneath him like a limp, wet rag.

“Now, you are mine,” he said, his face an implacable mask.

He crawled up my body and kissed me. I tasted the essence of my own arousal on his lips. He rolled me over onto my stomach and, using his massive strength, he wrapped one arm around my waist and lifted me into the air. He placed one of the thick pillows beneath my hips.

Apprehension rushed through me at the thought that he may want anal sex, but I was still too weak to move. To protest.

“Please,” I whimpered. I was too inexperienced and I was afraid he would enter me there.

“You are mine,” he growled.

He positioned his body behind me as he repeated the words. I felt the heat from his body against my butt and the tip of his cock brushed my cheeks.

My rear was in the air and my legs spread wide. I felt the cool air in the room as it caressed my most private parts. I scrunched my eyes closed, expecting pain when he placed his hands on my ass, massaging my cheeks. His fingers slid around my hips. He lifted me and positioned me

for his entrance. A tear slipped from my eye as I waited for his possession.

Then without warning, he pushed himself inside me. Up to the hilt and I cried out. Not with the tearing pain I had expected, but with ecstasy. Micah drove inside my hungry channel. My vaginal walls clasped around his huge organ as he moved within its tight confines. He moved into me so deep, I'm sure he touched my womb.

At that moment, I opened myself up to him. He hadn't abused my trust and I let my newfound love for him flow from my heart and mind.

"Yes! Fuck me," I sobbed.

Micah groaned and increased his tempo he pulled me back toward him with such force our bodies slapped together with a strange sucking sound.

"Yes, please." It was all I could manage to say between my screams of pleasure. I found the strength to push back, wanting to heighten our pleasure. I needed to feel him drive into me harder, faster.

He bent forward and blanketed my body with his. I felt him nuzzling the crook of my neck and turned my head to the side to give him better access.

When he growled in my ear, he sounded more like an animal than the gentle man I knew him to be.

“Now you are mine,” he vowed, right before he sank his teeth deep into the crook of my shoulder. His mind filled mine with the ecstasy he felt as he sated himself with my body and my blood.

An intense pleasure flooded through me as he shared his mind. I screamed his name as I came again. His thickness pulsed inside me, as he emptied his seed deep within my womb. For one moment, I had the wonderful thought of what it would be like to have his child growing safe within my body and to live beside him always and I felt at peace.

“Oh, baby,” he groaned and rested his forehead on my heaving back as I panted and tried to catch my breath. “You don’t know what you’ve just done.” He pulled his now flaccid cock from my body and rolled me onto my side and held me in his arms.

I rested my head on his shoulder. My fingers lazily traced random patterns on his chest as I listened contentedly to his even breathing. I’ve never been so relaxed, so content, in my life.

That’s when I decided that I was going to enjoy every minute of my faux marriage to this man. I snuggled closer to him and knew that if I ever chose to marry for real, I could never choose a better man than the one asleep beside me. I drifted off with the knowledge that in this moment in

time, I was truly happy.

I woke to the incessant buzzing of the alarm. I rolled over, slapped the snooze and buried my head under the downy pillow and froze. I reached my arm over to the other side of the bed. It was empty.

“Damn it!”

I sat up, let the sheet fall to my waist and pushed the hair out of my eyes.

“He promised,” I whined.

My gaze fell on the closed bathroom door across the room. It was closed. I got out of bed to look, even though I knew he wouldn't be in there. It's not as if he ever needed to use it.

“The hell with it,” I said and stood up. “I need to go anyway.”

I padded across the cold marble floor, pushed the door open and was greeted by puffs of steam spiraling up from the tub. Micah, his back to me, had just added bath salts to the steaming water.

My eyes filled as I watched him test the water and I deliberately rattled the knob.

He turned toward me and his eyes devoured my bare body. I fought the urge to cover myself. I'd thought I was alone, so I didn't bother to drag the sheet with me.

“I thought you'd gone.”

“I'm sorry.” He straightened and strode my way. “It certainly wasn't my intention to make

you think so. I'd planned to wake you with a surprise." He smiled softly and gave me a look so hot, I was afraid the hotel would spontaneously combust. "I knew exactly how to wake you, too."

"How do you get so tan?" I asked, deliberately changing the subject. "I never would have imagined a vampire could get tan."

"It doesn't take long." He flashed his white teeth at me again and my nipples tightened at the memory of his use of them to heighten our ecstasy.

I glanced over at the toilet. "Do you mind? I really need to ... you know," I asked, waving my hand in its general direction.

"Oh, yes, of course," he said and turned to leave. Then, as an afterthought, he went to the tub and turned off the water. "Let me know when you're ready."

Micah must have heard the water splash when I climbed into the tub. He knocked on the door and waited for my permission to enter.

I lowered myself into the soothing water. I didn't want to reveal any more of my body than I had to. But that didn't stop me from enjoying the view as Micah approached dressed in nothing but a smile. He was obviously a lot more comfortable in his skin, than I am in mine. But, then again, he's had centuries to get there, too.

My eyes darted down and I admired his

already hard cock. I licked my lips. I couldn't wait to wrap them around the thick length of his engorged penis again.

He stepped into the tub and I inspected the smooth, high arch of his feet. I reached out and ran my hand up his leg. I loved the feel of the soft hair that dusted his calf and thigh. I frowned. The man even had gorgeous knees! Micah was, in a word, perfect.

He slowly lowered himself into the tub and pulled me between his legs. "Lay back."

I relaxed and let him lower me into the warm, scented water. He wet my hair, sat me back up and I leaned my back against his chest. He reached for the bottle of shampoo, squirted some in his hand and began to massage my scalp.

"Mmm. That feels so good, Micah," I said on a sigh. After the workout he'd given me last night, his pampering felt wonderful. He lowered me back into the water with gentle hands.

"Let me rinse the soap from your hair."

"Mmm hmm," I nodded.

He set me from him after rinsing the soap from my hair. He waggled his brows and leered at me. "Now, for the fun part," he said and reached for the body wash.

* * * *

An hour and a half later, we both collapsed on the

bed exhausted. Sated to within an inch of my life, I could do nothing but lie on the comforter like a quivering heap of flesh colored gelatin.

Micah rolled me onto my stomach and I groaned, cursing his vampire strength and stamina. I couldn't possibly move any of my tired aching muscles.

So much for feeling adventurous and giving him a couple of cups of coffee. Uh, uh, no way. He'd kill me!

I didn't complain, though. I asked for this, after all. An entire day of Micah's undivided attention, I must have been crazy! I only hoped I could live through it.

I moaned softly when I felt his long lean fingers mold the sore muscles of my neck and shoulders.

"Not again, Micah. I'll never survive it."

He chuckled and kissed the back of my neck tenderly. My eyelids flickered. There wasn't even a hint of sensuality in that kiss. His hands moved down my arms and back and he splayed his fingers on the twin globes of my behind. By the time he'd gotten to my feet, I was in heaven.

Micah's talented hands worked magic on my tired, aching muscles. He rejuvenated me so quickly, I felt like I could do nearly anything.

"More vampire magic?"

I rolled over, looked into his eyes and smiled. I

reached up to brush a lock of hair from his forehead.

Micah shrugged. "You learn much, when you have lived as long as I have."

I snorted. "I'll say. And quit reminding me of your age. Do you think I want to remember the part about you being so much older than I am when we're having sex, or something?" I rolled my eyes. "You know, you are a serious geriatric."

Micah smiled. His mouth was a white slash in the tanned lower half of his face. He looked over his shoulder to the window.

"Would you care to go for a walk, dear wife?" He stood and held out his hand.

I sat up and giggled. "If we go out like this, we'll get arrested."

Micah looked down at himself. "So we shall."

He pulled me from the bed and held me against him. The few coarse hairs on his chest teased my sensitive nipples. I stood within his embrace, enjoying the feel of my body pressed so intimately against his.

He released me long enough to get dressed. We left the confines of our room hand in hand, enjoying each other, like true newlyweds.

Thirty minutes later, I scowled and darted another surreptitious glance Micah's way.

He grinned and lifted one perfectly arched, glossy, black brow. "I won't turn to dust, you

know." His eyes bored into mine. "Why do I detect a hint of disappointment?" He straightened and looked away. I wasn't sure, but I could have sworn he'd looked hurt there for a minute.

No matter how long we spent in the sun over the last few days, the only thing that ever happened to him was that he got a tan - all over - despite the SPF 30 sunscreen. I'd hoped to find a weakness and all I got was a tanned vampire.

I looked away and shrugged. I felt a bit guilty. Even though it wasn't him I wanted to have turned to dust in the sunlight. I bit my lip, feeling bad anyway.

"I was looking for a weakness." I hurried to add, "Not because I want anything to happen to you." I looked away, unable to meet his hurt stare. "I was hoping to ..."

"Find a weakness in me that could be exploited in another?"

I nodded and bit my lip. Why lie about it? "Yes, I wanted to know how to protect myself if I'm confronted by another of your counterparts. I never want to go through that again."

Even if they are what they considered weak during the day, they were still just as strong as a mortal man would be. I needed to know how to protect myself the next time he left me alone.

Micah held my hand in a loose grip as we passed a crowd of cheering people. I heard the

sound of bells ringing in the distance. Apparently, someone had just won a sizable jackpot. The cheering crowd washed around us as I felt a heavy hand on my arm.

“Ow!”

I tried to shrug the hand off, but it wouldn't budge. The fingers dug deep into my shoulder. The long nails bit painfully into my tender flesh.

“Lemme go!”

Micah's hand shot out, grabbed the offending appendage, and squeezed. I grimaced at the sickening sound of bones cracking beneath his iron grip.

The humanoid creature squealed. It sounded more like an animal than anything else. It resembled a man. It had two arms and two legs. It even looked like it had once been human, but was now something else, something entirely different.

Sunglasses blocked the sight of the two black pits where its eyes should have been, until Micah knocked them off with a strong right hook to its jaw. And that was definitely a jaw. As evidenced by the hinging motion it made, as it opened the big gaping maw that I assumed was its mouth.

Micah's punch caused its head to jerk back. I heard the gruesome sound of the bones snapping in its neck.

I swallowed convulsively, in an attempt to hold down the bitter bile that rose to the back of

my throat. My body attempted to empty itself of the breakfast I'd eaten.

People screamed and ran from us. They hurried back into the casino and scurried down the street.

"Run." Micah gave me a push before he rushed one of them and knocked it down. "Run, Tasha, it is you they are after!"

I stared at him stupidly for a second. It was the first time he'd ever raised his voice to me. Then his words sank in and I looked around. Four more of the creatures headed our way. All of them, dressed in black suits, wore cheap, black sunglasses. Like some sort of weird retro rock group.

They all plodded toward me slowly, one step after another. Slowly, surely. With one purpose on their one-track minds. Getting to me.

That knowledge put wings on my feet and I ran, as far and as fast as I could. I never once looked back, at least until I couldn't run anymore. When I finally turned to look behind me, I realized I was alone. Micah had stayed behind to buy me time. I hoped the brave action hadn't cost him his life.

"No." The sound came out just a whisper. A mere thread of nearly, inaudible sound muttered through my trembling lips. I was alone again, as I most certainly was destined to be.

I trudged back to the hotel, constantly looking over my shoulder. I was torn between staying another night to wait for Micah and moving on so those ... things, couldn't find me.

What were they, and what in the hell did they want with me?

There was only one person whom I would trust to answer that question honestly and I was afraid I would never see him again. No matter how much I may want to.

Self-preservation won out. I knew Micah could find me if he needed to. If he was alive. God, it's so hard for me to believe how much I need for him to be alive.

I packed my bags and left a twenty for the maid and another twenty for the pillow I filched. I couldn't bear to leave it behind. It still bore Micah's scent.

I hoped he survived his encounter with those creatures. It was hell not to know what happened to him, and I scarcely dared to hope that he was okay. I could only need, and want. God, it was hard to believe how much I needed Micah.

I drove on auto-pilot. My subconscious mind seemed to know the way home. I tried to keep my thoughts from dwelling on my recent losses. Trina's death had been such a blow. But there was a place deep inside me that feared Micah's loss would kill me. Or if it didn't, I would want to be

dead.

I drove four hundred miles and stopped. I hoped it would be far enough that those things would at least leave me alone for the night.

What were they? The questions plagued me. What did they want with me? I paced the confines of the small, square room. I hoped Micah was okay and would knock on the door any minute. His knock never came, and I feared the worst.

I filled the tub with hot water and bubble bath, and stripped my clothes off. I needed a good, hot soak. What the hell, if I fell asleep from exhaustion and drowned, who's to say I wouldn't be better off?

I sat down in the warm water, brought my knees to my chest and cried. I cried for Trina. Tears I should have spent weeks ago flowed freely, as I finally allowed myself to grieve for my best friend.

Funny how so much time had passed and I'd somehow avoided thinking about her, of how much she'd meant to me. We had been sisters of the heart. We weren't related by blood, but we had been sisters, just the same. We had laughed, cried, and lived together. Sometimes I wondered if we should have died together, as well.

Part of me wished it had been me who had died that night. It was so difficult to be the one left behind. Why was I the one who must learn to

cope, to live with the loss and the consuming guilt that accompanies outliving a loved one? I couldn't help but think it should have been me that Marco had raped and killed. And another part of me was selfishly glad that it wasn't.

I felt the sensation of a hand in my hair and jumped. I whirled around in the tub, splashing water everywhere. I was alone, yet the touch had felt so real.

Then I heard Micah's voice.

It is always more difficult for those of us left behind. We find it hard to deal with the passing of loved ones. Yet we must continue. To realize that without the pain, there can be no real joy. And that those who dwell within our hearts will remain with us forever.

"Micah," I cried.

My tears flowed unchecked down my cheeks. I realized then how much I'd grown to care for him. I rocked in the tub, the water sloshing around me. I made a huge mess, but I just didn't give a damn.

Much later, after a good cry, I came to my senses. I pulled myself from the now cold water and went to bed. I hugged my stolen pillow close. I inhaled deeply, taking in Micah's scent, and cried myself to sleep.

I woke before dawn the next morning, determined to stay on the run. Micah had sacrificed himself for me and I wasn't about to let

him down by letting those things catch up with me again. I thought briefly about going home to confess to the police. I wanted to tell them what really happened. The coward in me, however, wouldn't allow it.

I didn't want to go to jail. Nothing would convince me I wouldn't go to prison for shooting an unarmed man. The man had been raping and strangling my best friend. If I wouldn't have shot him, she would have died and he would have continued to violate her corpse.

Instead, I decided to stick to the plan Micah formulated. I sat locked in my car and clutched our marriage certificate to my chest. I wished I'd told Micah, just once, that I loved him.

How could I have? I hadn't even known myself. Why is it that most of us never see what's right in front of our faces before it's too late?

I closed my eyes. "I do love you, Micah. Please come back to me. I don't think I could survive your death."

"It's nice to see you've finally figured that out."

I jumped, turned at the sound of Micah's whiskey smooth voice, and gaped at him as he finished solidifying on the seat next to me.

I tried to speak, but nothing would come out. My mouth flapped, like a fish gasping for water.

Holy shit!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I mean it, Micah, spill. I want to know how you did that,” I grumbled, as he made good on his earlier promise and carried me into our new room.

I ignored the tingling sensation in my breasts and the way my vagina clenched at the sight of the bed. He was in big trouble and I wasn't about to succumb to my base needs. Well, not until he gave in and told me just what he and his kind were capable of, anyway.

My shock and happiness at seeing him alive and well had prevented me from interrogating him until we'd checked into the hotel. Now I wanted answers and I wasn't above using sex as a tool, or a weapon.

All's fair in love and all that jazz. Like it or not. Tease or not. The only way I could think of to get information from him was with sex. Or to be more specific, the threat of no sex. I'd done a good job of it too, until we'd gotten into the damned room.

I set my bag on the floor at the foot of the king-sized bed. I tried not to look at it—the bed—not my bag. I turned away from the large piece of furniture when my gaze fell on it, with longing.

I swallowed convulsively, my body had already begun to hum with desire. And he hadn't even touched me yet! I tried not to think of how wonderful Micah would make me feel later, on that huge bed.

Much later.

After he explained what it was he'd done earlier and what else he could do. And what the hell were those things that were coming after me last night? He knew. I steeled myself against the sexual hunger rising within me.

I turned away from the bed and paced to the window and looked out through the darkness. Micah stepped behind me, put his hands on my shoulders and kissed the back of my neck.

"Come to bed, Tasha," he whispered in my ear.

My traitorous nipples pebbled at the brush of his breath against the back of my ear. They juttied against the emerald green silk of my shirt, obviously uncaring that they were about to surrender a battle I was determined to win. My hands clenched and unclenched at my sides.

If we were to have any type of a relationship, Micah needed to give more of himself than just his body.

That's when I realized I knew nearly nothing about the man I'd just married. I was upset that he didn't trust me. I turned to him with tears in my eyes.

"I can't do this anymore, Micah. A relationship is give and take. You never give." I pushed past him and snatched my bag up off the floor. "You want me to trust you. And I do. I have trusted you, with my life. Yet you still do nothing to earn that trust."

He saved your life in Nevada, don't forget that, my conscience reminded me.

"And what in the hell were those things back there?" I asked, waving my hand toward the west. "I know you know what they were, so don't even try to deny it," I said, when he started to shake his head.

My shoulders slumped with defeat when I realized why he didn't want to tell me things. I could never be a permanent part of his world. He was so different. So magical, and wonderful, and I'm just plain old ... me.

Micah grabbed my shoulders in a painful grip and I winced. His grip loosened immediately and I looked up into his eyes, which had darkened to a near black.

"What do you know of trust?" he spat. "You accept my help, accept my body and do nothing to make our union a real one."

My eyes widened at his words. He wanted a real union, a real marriage? Then why wouldn't he trust me with the knowledge I'd asked him for?

"Because, if you were truly committed to this union, you would be able to sift through my mind. You could search my memories and retrieve those answers for yourself." He scowled at me. "We do have a mental bond, you know. You have the ability to read me, just as I can read you." He released me and I stepped back rubbing my arms.

"How?" I wondered aloud. I know I love him. At least I'm willing to admit that to myself now. So why couldn't I read him? "Maybe I'm not the soul-mate you've been waiting for. I may be a Guide and you a Cartuotey, but that doesn't mean that we were fated to be together, does it?"

My voice hitched as I thought of that possibility. What if he belonged to someone else?

His eyes began to glow and his teeth exploded in his mouth and forced his lips to bulge out a bit.

"You are mine. And no one will take you from me. Anyone one who tries will have to go through me. And they will die."

He paced away from me and I had the sense that he wanted to regain control of his temper.

"Those who tried to take you yesterday were revenants."

"Revenants?"

"Yes, they are humans who are partially

turned by the Rogues to do their bidding. The Rogues do not bother to tell the humans that they cannot become one of us by drinking our blood." He grimaced. "When they drink our blood, they become nothing more than zombies driven to carrying out the commands of their makers. I will find out who sent them for you," he growled. The sound came from deep within him and made him sound almost animalistic.

I stepped back slowly, scared of him for the first time. I swallowed around the lump in my throat and my mind searched frantically for a way to run. To leave this thing that I didn't know existed within him. I chewed on my lip thoughtfully as I danced from foot to foot. I needed to run, yet wanted to stay. I bit down a bit too hard and a drop of blood beaded on my lip. Micah was on me in a second, growling in triumph. I screamed and tried to fight him off, afraid that he was out of control.

His arms locked around me like iron bands and I could barely move. His lips lowered to mine and his tongue darted out to savor the drop of blood on my lower lip. He sucked my lip into his mouth and I was lost.

Micah's mind filled me with such a maelstrom of lust I could barely stand, let alone think. I wouldn't have known my own name, at that point, had he asked. My arms snaked around his

neck, pulling him closer, as I lost myself in his kiss.

Flames licked at my skin and I could almost feel my blood moving slowly through my veins like lava. I burned for him, as surely as his body burned for my blood.

Micah's hands were all over me, he tore the clothes from my body as he inflamed my skin. He took me to a place I'd never been before. Oh, yes, Micah was out of control, but in a way that only endangered the clothes I wore.

Our clothes disappeared and I picked the information from his brain that he'd simply wished them away and they were gone.

He lifted me in his arms. "Wrap your legs around me," he growled into my ear as he lowered me onto his massive erection.

"Aiiieee!" I screamed my first orgasm when he filled me and shared the sensation of the wet velvet walls of my pussy clutching and milking him. "I think I can feel you hitting my tonsils," I groaned, when he rammed himself deep inside me. "Yesss. Don't stop." I mewled into his shoulder and nipped at his neck.

"You are mine," he said as he drove into me. His hands on my hips, he lifted me and dropped me back down on his member as it pulsed in and out of my drenched pussy.

"Yes," I gasped. "I'm yours." I meant it too. I

realized that I didn't want to live my life without him in it. I couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

I felt it then. Something stirred deep within me, and I felt a painful wrench in the vicinity of my heart. Micah was in my mind as a slightly younger man dressed in glossy, black knee-high boots, tight tan breeches and white shirt. He wore black leather gloves and carried a riding crop as he walked purposely through an ancient castle.

Then the vision was gone, replaced with Micah in a British Army uniform. He stormed through enemy lines, draining people as he went. She couldn't fault the use of his unique talents to help his country. I heard the whine of a bullet just before it slammed into him and I gasped. The sharp pain overwhelmed me.

"Enough," Micah said while he stood still holding me in his arms. His still hard cock still buried deep within me. "I will share my mind, but you will only feel what I feel now." His eyes bored into mine and I felt the push of compulsion.

I let him compel me, because I knew that I could revisit his memories later. Now, I just wanted this other torment to end. I had been on the verge of another orgasm when his memories assaulted me.

I opened myself to him, reveling in the sensation of his body invading mine. He picked up the tempo, surging deeper, until he finally

shouted his release as I tumbled over yet another precipice.

I cried out his name, screamed my love to him and the heavens as he poured his seed into my womb. I collapsed and my legs dropped from around his waist. I hung from his arms like a limp rag-doll as he carried me to the bed and placed me under the covers.

I smiled with my eyes closed and ran my fingers through his silky hair. I felt him kiss my forehead before he climbed into bed behind me and pulled me back into his comforting embrace.

* * * *

Two days later, I was ready to hit the road again, before I started to walk funny.

“I mean it, Micah. I can’t stay here another day.” I opened the trunk of my car and dumped my bag in it. “Besides, you’re the one who said I needed to get my butt back to Grand Rapids before I get arrested.” I felt silly using the word butt, but Micah didn’t like me to swear unless we were in bed, so I made an attempt to tone down my language. “Isn’t it better that I go to them and—and turn myself in, instead of them finding me?”

Micah nodded, put his arm around me and gave me another toe curling kiss. “Yes, but it

doesn't mean I have to like it."

He put me down slowly. I was back on my feet before I even realized I'd been off of them. I shook my head. The man can kiss, that's for sure.

I had to concede his point. I really didn't really want to turn myself in, either. But what else could we do?

Nada.

I made an abrupt about face to walk to the driver's side of the car. Micah stepped in front of me and held his hand out.

"My turn." He wiggled his fingers.

I looked up and tried to figure out if he was serious, but his eyes were covered with dark sunglasses and the lower half of his face was a blank mask.

"Huh?" I put my hands behind my back, pretending not to know what he wanted.

"Hand me the keys, Natasha. It's my turn to drive."

"You are so not driving my car, mister. And no one calls me Natasha anymore." Only Gram and he had. It brought back bittersweet childhood memories that I refused to dwell on.

I tried to walk around him, but no matter what I did, he was there blocking the way.

"The keys, Tasha." He wiggled his fingers again.

"Why?" I asked as I fisted the keys in my hand

and crossed my arms over my chest. "Does Mr. Big, Bad Vampire get nervous when I drive?"

"Well, now that you mention it," he said, then rubbed the back of his neck.

"Don't even go there, bud. I'm not about to let you drive my baby." My hands made their way to my hips as I glared up at him.

Micah sighed and shook his head.

"This is not a baby, Tasha," he said, then rested his hand on the roof of my car. "A baby," he leaned closer to whisper in my ear, as he placed his hand on my stomach. "Is what you have growing inside of you, right here."

I dropped my keys.

Micah scooped them up from the pavement so quickly it barely registered what I'd done.

"Hey! That wasn't fair," I groused, as I fought him for my keys. "And I don't have a baby in me."

"As you wish." He bowed slightly and then climbed behind the wheel.

I hurried to the other side of the car. "Do you even have a driver's license?" I snapped the seatbelt securely around me. "Probably not, he probably would rather ride horses and be stuck in the dark ages where women were chattel." I mumbled, pissed that I let him trick me like that.

Me pregnant? Yeah, right. Like he would know, anyway.

Micah turned toward me and gave me a look

that could melt pavement.

"You are pregnant, little one, never doubt that." He gave me a blinding smile. "And it is my pleasure to be the one to give you this wonderful, yet surprising news."

My hand covered my stomach and I frowned. Could I be? I bit my lip and wondered. I had to admit that I could be, that is of course, if vampires can get a girl pregnant.

"My God, Tasha. It's not as if we are a different species. Think of us more like a different breed. A German Shepherd can breed with a wolf, can it not?"

I glared at him. "You had better not be calling me a dog, buddy." I crossed my arms over my chest and turned to look out the window.

He shook his head and started the car. "How many miles would you like to cover today?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. At least a couple of hundred, I guess. Why?"

He shrugged. "Just asking."

Three hours later I had to admit he was a damn good driver. It was either that or pee my pants, because he wouldn't stop unless I did.

"You're a damn good driver, you're a damn good driver," I chanted it like a mantra. "Now stop the goddamn car!"

When he finally pulled off the road into a gas station, I climbed out of the car and rushed to the

bathroom. Only to find, much to my consternation, the damn thing was out of order.

“What have I done to deserve this?” I whined and stomped back to my Stratus, which was really a feat since my bladder was about to burst.

I glared at Micah like it was his fault.

“Use some of your magic and fix the toilet. The damn thing is out of order.”

He just looked at me and shook his head.

“Then use the men’s room. I’m a vampire, not a plumber.”

“Look, Dr. McCoy, I have to take a piss.” I was deliberately crude because I knew he didn’t like it. “And if I don’t go soon, I’m going to spring a fucking leak!”

“The things I do for you,” Micah sighed and shook his head. He got out of the car, stalked to the ladies room and pushed the door open so forcefully, it banged against the wall.

The noise was so loud it drew the attention of the two old women at the gas pumps filling an old, baby blue Cadillac. They both watched him enter the women’s restroom and giggled behind their hands.

I fought the urge to glare at them and wondered if one of them was responsible for the condition of the toilet.

When I heard the sound of the toilet flushing, I hurried to the open door. Micah stepped out and

walked toward the car. He did his best to look like a big, bad dude as he walked toward my Stratus. His dark sunglasses hid his eyes and his black leather pants hugging his rear. The man was six-foot-six of total male perfection. I had to admit he did look cool. I gave him a slow once over and grinned.

“Hey, honey?” I called after him.

He turned toward me all tall, dark, good looks and testosterone. “Yes?” He bit the word out, clearly peeved that I made him use his powers for something so nasty.

“Could you fill the car up while I’m in here?” I asked as I slowly backed away from him. I was in the restroom now, with the door almost closed.

He nodded once. “I intended to.” He turned and started to walk toward the car again.

“One other thing, honey,” I said, to draw his attention once again. When he turned, I was glad those dark glasses prevented me from seeing his eyes. Otherwise, I might not have had the nerve to go on.

“Yes?” He bit the word out from between clenched teeth.

I coughed. “You have toilet paper stuck to your shoe.” I slammed the door just as he looked down to discover the little rider he had attached to his boot and shook it off. His expression was priceless.

My amusement was short lived, however. When I returned to the car, Micah gave me the silent treatment for the next hour. He pulled off of the highway at four, to gas up, and I noticed a restaurant and hotel across the street.

“Why don’t we stay there for the night?” The hotel looked good and appeared to be relatively new, and clean. “I bet they have real nice, comfy rooms and we can even eat at the restaurant.” I said, when I climbed out of the car to stretch.

I got a horrible pain in my stomach as soon as I stood. “I don’t feel too good. Maybe that strawberry ice cream was bad.” I wrapped my arms around my middle.

Micah snorted and shook his head and looked disgusted. “It’s probably a mixture of the ice cream, the bag of chips, two hot dogs and four bottles of cola you drank.”

“I mean it,” I said, as I leaned against the front fender. Sweat beaded my brow and upper lip. “I really don’t feel good.” I got another horrible pain, just then, and it doubled me over.

Micah was at my side in a heartbeat. He’d removed the dark glasses and his eyes were filled with concern.

“Tell me what it feels like.”

“It hurts,” I groaned. Tears ran down my face. I’ve never felt a pain so intense in my life. Withdrawal had been a picnic compared to this.

"It feels like someone is stabbing me and cooking my insides with a blow torch."

"Open your mind, little one. Let me in."

I tried to relax. I imagined the door in my mind – the one I recently locked to the outside world – open just a crack to let him past the barrier.

He could have stormed past that barrier, of course. But he apparently respected my privacy enough to stay out of my mind. I wondered absently how long that would last.

"A large portal has just been opened. Since you have been using your mental powers more, your susceptibility has been increased and you feel it more intensely. Before, when a portal was opened, you probably just thought you had gas."

"Great." I muttered, through clenched teeth. At least that explains most of those cramps I'd been worried about. "How long is this going to last?" I leaned over as another cramp stabbed through me, and made me groan.

"Not long. I will continue to attempt to block the pain for you while we wait for it to settle and become a constant. At that time, your brain will ignore the warning, as it has already been received."

I marveled that he could do that for me, even as I felt him stir within my mind. He took most of the pain and shouldered it himself. It slowly receded in waves, almost like a tide and I began to

relax slowly, relieved.

“We must stay here tonight.” He turned to look at me, his eyes unreadable. “We must close this portal quickly. It was not opened by demons, but by those who worship the Dark Lord.”

“The Dark Lord?” I looked up at Micah’s knowing stare and gasped. “Not the devil? You mean these people are Sa —”

“Do not!” Micah grabbed my arm in an unyielding grip and put his warm hand over my mouth.

“Names have power. For an innocent with power to say his name, out loud, so close to a portal could draw him from his home. He is not the fallen angel that so many of your people believe, but he does exist.”

“So this portal is opened to a different dimension than the one Bro—er Hideous Hank and his cohorts are from?”

“Yes,” he nodded, as he led me back to the car and tucked me back into the passenger seat. He slid behind the wheel and gave me a grave look. “We must close this portal tonight. There is no time to waste.”

“Why, what’s so different about this portal?” I had to know. Just because devil worshippers opened it didn’t mean it was more powerful, did it?

“The people who opened it are planning a

sacrifice to the Dark Lord, tonight. The sacrifice will allow him to walk the earth in human form. They must be stopped, of course."

I barely even noticed he'd put the car in gear, so I was rather surprised to see that we were already just outside of the hotel lobby.

"Excuse me?" I said, my eyes wide. "Did you just say that they're going to sacrifice someone?"

Micah turned to me, his eyes did that strange, glowing thing again. "Yes. They plan to sacrifice a Guide. Who better to house the dark one's spirit than one who can open or close the gates at will?"

"A Guide?" I fought the ridiculous urge to look around and search my surroundings for another person like me. "There's another Guide in this area?"

Micah peered into my eyes. His own were a blood red and lit from within.

"No." His fangs extended again and made me afraid to hear the rest of his answer. "The Guide they plan to sacrifice is you. These are the people who sent the revenants for you. They have included a Rogue within their ranks. He is making more revenants as we speak."

"Oh, He-shit."

I don't want to say the H-word if another stupid portal is open. That word could have a power all its own and I sure as He—dang it! Anyway, I didn't want to find out what kind of

power it wielded.

I shook my head in denial. "There is no way I am going to become anyone's sacrifice." I put my seatbelt back on and looked over at him. "What are you waiting for? Let's get our asses out of here."

Micah shook his head. The expression on his face was scary. Almost as if I was already dead, my body tied to the slab, or altar, or whatever they intended to do to me for this thing.

"We cannot leave this portal open. Even if they cannot release him, they can release other, stronger beings than the incubus, or succubus."

Shit!

"So we have to close it and I may get sacrificed while we're at it?"

Doesn't this just sound like a blast?

Not!

He shook his head. "It will not come to that, little one. I will not allow it." He smiled a cold evil smile that I did not want aimed at me. Ever. "They do not know I am your mate. I will be a complete surprise to them. They cannot kill you without killing me first. And they cannot kill me. They do not know how."

I shuddered and turned away from the terrifying smile that promised death to anyone who laid a finger on me. I almost pitied those poor people, duped into thinking that the guy

downstairs was some sort of trapped god who needed to be released.

Almost.

I turned to him and smiled and tried to keep the overwhelming fear at bay. I said I trusted Micah with my life. This was my chance to prove it.

“Okay. What’s the plan?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

We sat at the best table in the restaurant, an exceptionally nice table for two overlooking the river that was the boon of the economy.

The locals boasted the river was the best around to fish, canoe, and tube down. Further down the wide fast moving stream, were rapids they claimed to be one of the best to raft down. I took their word for it. I don't have any aspirations for white-water rafting. Not in this lifetime, anyway.

I picked at my dinner. I knew we were about to embark on a quest that may end my existence. I never dreamed I would ever be involved in the kind of crap that I found myself involved in.

Sometimes I wondered if I'd made a mistake when I killed Marco. Perhaps I should have just turned the gun on myself and done the world a favor.

Micah glared at me. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and eat. Were you feeling sorry for

yourself when you pulled the trigger?" he asked, his voice low.

"No," I scowled. "I only felt overwhelming rage and self-righteousness that I'd killed the asshole who was capable of such a thing." Then I smiled. "It was my distinct pleasure to wipe his contemptible presence from the face of the Earth."

"Then you should feel the same about this." Micah leaned across the table and covered my hand with his. "It should be your distinct pleasure to free these people from this world, as well. They are wholly evil and nothing you can say or do will change them."

I took a deep breath, unsure if I could kill anyone else. Once was more than enough for me.

"You won't have to kill anyone, baby." Micah picked up on my thoughts. His eyes gleamed. "It will, most assuredly, be my distinct pleasure."

"Yeah, like that's supposed to make me want to eat," I remarked as I played with my food. I mentally checked my mind's barrier and wondered how in the world he was still able to read my mind but was too pre-occupied to really care.

"The weaker you are, the more susceptible you will be to their power. And the more ineffective your own powers will be. You must not engage them in a weakened state. Yet you will engage them tonight. They are on their way here, as we

speak.”

I started to shovel my salad into my mouth.

“God, I hope I don’t get sick.”

“You may wish to pray more often, and better than that, my dear. You must believe He can help you. Or at least believe someone can.”

“I believe you will help me, Micah,” I said, around a mouthful of buttered bread. I crammed a bite of steak in with it and chewed. “I stopped asking God for favors when my grandmother died and my dad disappeared.”

The candle-flame flickered, and I noticed a commotion behind us. An ominous breeze brushed over me as a large group of people entered. The hostess escorted them to the banquet room on the other side of the restaurant. I turned and caught the eye of one in the group who grinned evilly at me.

“They have arrived.” Micah set his fork down and covered my trembling hand with his, once more. “Do not fear them, my love. They may have powers but they do not realize who I am.”

“You mean what you are,” I corrected absently, as I watched them steadily file through the room. Every one of them looked our way.

Micah shook his head. “No, Tasha. I meant exactly what I said. They know of my kind, and they know of me. If they knew you were my mate, they never would have begun this foolish quest.”

He turned his gaze from the group and looked at me with confidence.

I peered into his eyes. I wanted to know what he meant. The information zinged into my mind. I had the distinct impression that this was how information passed between computers as I had the sensation of downloading Micah's memories into my brain.

"You aren't like the others."

He shook his head. "No, I am not. My kind was marooned here years ago, destined to remain for all eternity. Or until inter-galactic space travel develops enough to take us back to our home. We can survive here, but our technology fails in this atmosphere. We cannot even signal our own kind."

"You're an alien?" I almost swallowed my fork. I pulled it out of my mouth and gulped down my mashed potatoes before I choked on them. "Oh, my God! I'm married to an alien?"

"Can you say that a little louder? I don't think they heard you in Canada," he groused and looked around to see if anyone overheard.

"I'm sorry," I said. My voice pitched lower, now that the initial shock had passed. "Vampires are aliens?"

I couldn't seem to grasp it. In the last few weeks, I'd lost my friend and killed her murderer in the same day. I quit using drugs. I was almost

screwed senseless by an incubus, if his boasting was anything to go by.

Then, of course, there's everything else that's happened since then. Not the least of which being that I was and hopefully would continue to be screwed senseless by one gorgeous alien vampire.

I giggled hysterically. "I don't think I can handle anymore," I said. Then promptly fainted.

* * * *

It was dark when I woke up. At least it was dark where I was. Stuffed in the trunk of someone's car headed to who knew where.

Geeze. For someone who never fainted before the age of twenty-eight, I sure have started to make up for lost time. And where in the world is Micah?

I felt around the close confines of the musty trunk.

Well, he isn't in here with me, that's for sure.

"Shit!"

I quickly covered my mouth, thinking it may be to my advantage to let my kidnappers believe that I was still unconscious.

At least they hadn't tied me. Although what good that was to me, I hadn't figured out yet. I was still stuck in the dank, smelly trunk of someone's car and it wasn't mine.

I felt around the small compartment and searched for something I could use as a weapon. The people who had kidnapped me may be psychotic, but they weren't stupid. There wasn't any form of weapon anywhere in the trunk. Not even a screwdriver.

Well, hell.

I covered my mouth at the thought and almost giggled. At least I hadn't drawn the attention of the denizens of that place by my thoughts. It was bad enough I'd been kidnapped by people who – if Micah had his way – would soon be residents of that nether world.

If it even existed.

If Satan isn't really a fallen angel, then is hell really hell? I have to stop trying to figure it out. The whole thing gives me a headache.

I tried to stay in one position through the trip even though my muscles had started to get cramped and stiff. I didn't want them to know I was awake.

How long would a good faint last? Would it be too much to still be unconscious when we arrived at wherever it was we were going? Since I had no frame of reference I was going to have to wing it.

I put my fist in my mouth to quell the scream of anguish I felt building within me. Micah said they would have to kill him to hurt me.

Where is he? I screamed in my mind.

I'm following behind you at a discreet distance. It heartens me to know you care so deeply for me, my love.

I sighed with relief.

Micah? Thank God! I was afraid they'd killed you.

He chuckled mirthlessly. The sound brushed my mind and comforted me.

They think they have killed me, but it takes a bit more than a bullet to the heart to stop my kind.

A bullet to the heart? I swallowed thickly and wondered if he meant his kind as in all vamps, or just the ones that came here from wherever it is they were from.

All of us, Tasha.

I could feel his laughter as well as hear it. It went a long way toward alleviating my fears. It also helped make me feel a bit more positive about my situation.

I'm glad you think this is funny. It's not like the resident vampire in my life has been very forthcoming with loads of knowledge, you know.

I wanted to seem angry, but I was too relieved to pull it off.

You have seen into my mind. You have the ability to get any information you require. You only need to look within me and yourself for it.

By then I'd had enough of the conversation and his attitude and longed for a bad connection. I

felt his chuckle brush my mind again and made a face.

The car I was held captive in slowed, and turned right. I could tell that well enough, unless they were driving in reverse, which I highly doubt.

They are coming to a halt. You must pretend to be unconscious.

I already deduced that, Sherlock. Anything else?

No matter what may happen or what you may hear, you must believe that I am very close. Do not open your eyes at any cost. They must believe you to be asleep. Your first priority must be to close the portal.

Close an inter-dimensional gateway and ignore whatever horrific noises I may hear, while I kept my eyes closed. Plus, feign unconsciousness while I do something I've only done twice before in my life, with the use of a hard flat surface as a prop?

You don't ask for much, do you?

I ask only for the thing you were born to do.

I was born to shop, Vlad. Not close portals to hell using only my mind and the musty air in the trunk of a car. I grimaced. It smells like feet in here.

They come.

I caught that one last thought from him before someone opened the trunk lid and the cool night

air kissed my cheeks. I tried not to take too deep of a gulp of the refreshing air, while still breathing in all of the fresh oxygen I'd missed from being confined. I am a bit claustrophobic. I was barely able to keep myself still. Everything in me wanted to climb from that trunk and bound into the night. But I knew that would have ruined Micah's plan. Whatever it was.

Someone reached in and grabbed my arm. Then I heard a blood-curdling scream. My eyelids fluttered wildly and I almost opened my eyes. But Micah told me to keep them closed. So I did. Even though it was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, in my life.

I attempted to find the portal and kept my eyes shut as I concentrated on only that. Perhaps I'd hoped it would keep my mind off whatever it was going on outside the trunk, as well.

My stomach ached and I pressed my hands to my middle before I made the pyramid with my thumbs and forefingers to get a location on the portal. It was right here. I could feel it. If I got out of the trunk, I could see it. Walk to it, feel the energy that poured from it. I could draw energy from it to make myself stronger.

It's the glamour of the Dark One, my love. Do not allow it to entice you. You must close the portal.

Micah's voice in my head was a soothing balm.

The smooth, rich baritone helped me to ignore the screams of terror outside of the trunk. My lids fluttered again but I was able to keep them closed. My mind centered solely on closing the open gate.

I visualized a steel door over the portal and mentally tried to slam it closed. It didn't want to budge. I concentrated harder, unable to understand why I couldn't force this one to shut. I took a deep breath and tried to convince myself I could do it.

I'm a friggin' Guide, I can do this.

Use me.

Micah's voice startled me. I wasn't sure what he meant. He forced a bit of his energy into me and it clicked. I opened myself up to him and drew more energy from him. I could feel his massive strength ebb as he shared it with me.

Again, I visualized the door. This time it slid closed. I still had to force it, but it did finally slam with such force, I heard a loud bang.

The kidnappers screamed in protest as the door hurled shut and welded itself tight, as the portals seemed wont to do when they were finally sealed.

The terrifying noises became almost too much for me to bear. A part of me almost wished someone would close the trunk lid on me again. I didn't want whatever it was to get the idea that I was a bad guy, too.

A part of me suspected that the very thing I feared was Micah. That it was a side of him I still haven't seen. His silence told me I was right.

Suddenly everything became quiet. Eerily so. I wondered if I should open my eyes. I was just about to open them, when strong arms lifted me from my makeshift cage.

Do not open your eyes yet. Please, little one, listen to me without argument, just this once. These men were the ones who sent the revenants after you. Their leader was a Rogue. You have no reason to fear any of them any longer. They are no longer of this world.

Micah's thoughts caressed my mind, even as I felt the illusion of his voice in my ears and his warm breath upon my neck.

I decided quickly to relax and settle myself within his embrace. By then I knew if I couldn't trust him, I couldn't trust anyone.

Your confidence humbles me.

Oh shut up.

I waited silently, patiently, as he carried me through the dense underbrush that surrounded the area where the portal had been. I rested my head on his shoulder, tired. I'd been through so much in the last few days, a part of me wanted nothing more than to sleep. I kept my eyes tight, and finally relaxed, I was lulled into dreams by Micah's gentle embrace and the sultry breeze of

the warm, midsummer night.

* * * *

I woke some time later in the hotel. Micah had placed me on the king-sized bed. He sat on the edge of the bed, his back to me and held his head in his hands.

I reached out and placed my hand on his back. "What's the matter?"

"I fear our relationship is doomed to end before we truly begin it."

I peered up at him through the veil of my hair before I pushed it out of my face. "I thought we had already begun it."

"That is only because you are so young." He turned toward me and I glimpsed his near perfect profile. "You have not been taught our ways. A fault that lies with your father, he should have told you of the blood ties."

I bit my lip. Blood ties?

"Perhaps he should have told me, but you're just as bad. You've had several opportunities to enlighten me on all things vampiric, yet you continue to choose to leave me ignorant." I sat up and threw my legs over the side of the bed. "You say the information is there, and mine for the taking, yet a part of you holds something back."

I stood, walked around the foot of the bed and

paced in front of him. "Have you given any thought at all, to the fact that I can't read you all of the time? And it's not because I don't want to."

My sore body protested as I knelt down in front of him, I rested my hands on his knees and looked into his eyes. "I've tried to read you, several times, Micah. I think you block me somehow because you don't want me to see that part of you. Just like you didn't want me to see that part of you tonight, when you told me to keep my eyes closed." I tilted my head and looked into his eyes. "I think you're afraid to let me see what you really are. What you can do."

Micah looked up, so obviously startled, that I had to smile. "The idea never occurred to you, huh?"

He shook his head. "I never thought to question whether or not I allowed you access." He sighed. "But now that you mention it ..." His voice trailed off and his eyes took on a faraway look.

My lips thinned. I tried not to be angry. I really did. A part of me resented the fact that Micah didn't trust me enough to show me who he really was.

Disgusted, I turned and walked into the bathroom. I needed a shower and I needed to think. I closed the door behind me and locked it. I knew the thin wooden door wouldn't keep him out if he truly wanted to be with me. But I trusted

him to respect my privacy. Even if he didn't trust me enough to accept him for who, and what, he was.

Micah knocked on the door and I almost ignored him but then I thought better of it. I leaned against the door as I answered, resting my hand against the smooth, lacquered surface.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk, Tasha."

"Yes, we do." I rested my head against the cool wood. "But as long as you keep things from me, talking will get us nowhere."

Why couldn't we trust each other and put our differences and our secrets behind us? As long as Micah refused to air his, there was just nothing to say.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“**W**hat do you want, Tasha, blood?”
I almost made the mistake of saying something crude about his eating habits but I bit my tongue instead.

“I want the truth. All of it. What you are, exactly what you can do. Everything.”

I felt him sigh on the other side of the door more than I heard it. “I will try.”

I shook my head. “No, you will not try. You will do,” I said, grimly. “If you try, it gives you an out and I refuse to give you one in this instance. Either you will or you won’t. That is all.”

Too many others had gotten around me that way. It wouldn’t happen again. Not this time and not with Micah.

“As you wish,” he sighed.

I heard the knob rattle and looked down to see it jiggle back and forth.

“The door is locked.”

“Of course it’s locked. I want some privacy.” I

glowered at the door then paced away from it. "And don't you dare use your...your...powers or whatever you call it, to get in here, either. I'm trusting you to respect my wishes and stay the hell out of here while I'm taking a bath."

Another sigh. "As you wish, little one."

God, how I wished he'd quit saying that. He wasn't my slave and I damn sure didn't need everything I wished for. I just wanted honesty from the man I shared my bed with. I don't think that's too much to ask.

I turned and stomped over to the whirlpool bath and smiled to myself. I had to hand it to him though. The man sure knew how to pick a good hotel. The dives I'd landed myself in on my own were little more than no-tell motels. A few of them were so bad I think I was lucky to have my own bathroom.

Warm spirals of steam filtered up as I climbed into the large tub filled with jasmine scented hot water and turned on the jets. I lowered my abused body into the soothing hot water with a sigh. The warmth of the water soothed me as I relaxed into the pleasant spray of the Jacuzzi's jets and closed my eyes.

I know I dozed for a while. I'm not sure how long before Micah's frantic knocks on the door rudely awakened me. I sat up with a splash as a thin column of smoke made its way through the

crack under the door.

No wonder Micah had been so frantic. The hotel is on fire!

Water splashed everywhere as I stood quickly. It sloshed on the cream tile floor and thick green rug beside the tub. I hopped out of the bath, reaching for the towel I laid out, and watched entranced as the smoke thickened into a column, and stacked itself into a shape.

My mouth fell open when the column of smoke suddenly appeared as Micah. His face was a mask of utter fury as he stood before me clenching and unclenching his hands at his sides.

“Why didn’t you answer me?” he growled. His eyes glittered dangerously as he advanced on me slowly.

A couple of minutes passed while I stood and gaped before I finally came to my senses and clamped my mouth shut.

“I was sleeping.”

“In the tub?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yes, in the tub.” I glanced toward it. The jets still bubbled merrily. “I was tired.” I stated the obvious.

Heat suffused my face when I became aware of my nakedness. It was amazing that I could still be modest with him. Intellectually, I knew that he knew my body better than I did myself. But I still grabbed the nearest towel and wrapped it around

myself. I looked up into his heated gaze, drew the towel around myself just a bit tighter and held it to me like a talisman.

Something different smoldered in Micah's eyes now. He advanced on me slowly. He matched each of my backward steps with a forward step of his own.

"I was worried when you didn't answer. I thought perhaps you'd drowned."

I shook my head and backed up a few more steps. "I'm fine, really."

I nervously wet my lips. My tongue darted out from between them to run the length of my bottom lip.

The action drew Micah's attention and I could actually feel the temperature in the room rise several degrees. I felt the heat of his gaze almost like a touch.

Goosebumps rose on my arms and legs. I put my hand out in front of me in an attempt to stop his purposeful advance.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Micah," I said, nervously backing away. I tried to put a little more distance between us, my right hand held out in front of me. "We just had an argument. I don't think we should just jump in the sack like nothing happened. We need to work this out."

Micah leered, then moved closer. "What better way to make up?"

The fire in his eyes was enough to warm me to my toes. I was almost tempted to drop my towel. But I steeled my resolve. I wasn't sure that it was even my own urge. I knew Micah could have easily put the desire deep within me. When I gave myself over to him, I wanted to be sure it was my idea.

My towel disappeared. I looked down at myself in wonder. When I looked up to Micah, I watched, wide eyed, as his clothes followed my towel into oblivion.

He arched one finely sculpted brow.

"Well, you wanted to know what I could do. Would you care to see more?" He wagged his brows playfully.

I looked down the long lean length of him and paused when I reached the part most worthy of my attention. I licked my lips and his cock jumped with anticipation.

"Oh, yes." I wanted to see much more, and I couldn't wait.

* * * *

Why do you always seem to have so much power over me?" I asked him much later.

He shrugged. "It is the same for me with you."

He trailed his hand down my back and rinsed off the soap that he'd lathered on me for the

umpteenth time. I looked at my fingers and decided it was time to get out of the water. They were all wrinkly. I'd definitely been in the tub far too long.

Now I just needed to dry off and get some much-needed rest. I was so tired I could sleep the clock around.

"We'll never make it back to Grand Rapids, at this rate. Not that I want to be interrogated by the police." Micah held my hand as I stepped out of the tub.

My stomach grumbled. "What's for dinner, count? I know you can get yours off the hoof, so to speak, but I prefer mine a bit more done."

Micah heaved a mock, exasperated sigh as he stood to climb out of the tub. I could tell he wasn't really upset with me, mostly because a part of his anatomy was still extremely happy to see me.

"Would you like to enjoy your food a bit more ... rare?"

"Eew, yuck! Me eat rare meat?" I shook my head, my hand over my mouth and suppressed a gag. "Don't make me sick."

I left the bathroom and shuddered at the thought. I walked toward the bed and my bag when an entirely new change of clothes appeared on the bed. I stopped and stared at the expensive-looking floor length gown.

Hmm. Not bad. That might be a handy trick to

be able to pull off.

“Um, thanks, Micah, but it’s not quite my style.”

More clothes appeared, until the bed was covered with a wide assortment of expensive-looking clothes and under garments.

The clothes were lovely. Prettier even, than the new things I’d just bought. There were no brand names on them, but the silk suit and blouse had the look of a familiar designer’s style.

I smiled inwardly. It could prove to be interesting to have a ... lover who had such extraordinary powers. I deliberately ignored the word husband as the word danced around inside my head.

What if you could have those powers for yourself? The thought came unbidden and unexpected. I turned, frowning, and wondered if the thought had even been mine at all.

I dressed in silence as Micah watched. My shyness, while still not gone, had abated somewhat. At least my self-consciousness had subsided enough that I felt relatively comfortable in Micah’s presence.

I pulled the decadent stockings up my calves, reveling in the feel of the smooth silk as it caressed my legs. The shoes were gorgeous three-inch pumps that put my head at Micah’s chin when I wore them. I never felt so small, or so feminine, in

all of my life.

"Come, let us find a good place to eat," Micah said as he took my arm and led me from the room.

He gathered my things and carried them easily in one hand as we left the hotel. He deposited me in the passenger seat of a sleek, black Jaguar with dark tinted windows. I looked over to the spot where I'd left my car and gasped.

"My car is gone!"

"Yes, it is," Micah agreed, slanting a glance at me from the corner of his eye. "I had Veronica, my driver, take it back to your home. It was only a matter of time before the police stopped you, you know."

I settled back into the seat. I knew he was right. I just didn't want to be without my car. My car was my sense of independence.

"You may use this car as your own. Any of my vehicles are now yours to drive."

He turned toward me and I wished I could see his eyes. They were hidden behind a pair of extremely dark glasses. I couldn't tell a thing from the lower half of his face, which he held in an expressionless mask.

I thought about his offer for a moment as I looked around the gray leather interior. Me, drive a Jag?

I closed my eyes and shook my head. Stranger things were known to happen. Hell, stranger

things drove Jaguars. I quickly censored the thought and shot a glance toward Micah.

If he'd picked up on my last thought, it hadn't insulted him. If anything, it had amused him. He drove silently, a half smile on his face.

"Okay. It's time for a few lessons." I figured if we had to be stuck in the car for a while, he could teach me a little about all of the other dimensions.

"Lessons?"

"Yes. It's time you brought me up to speed on inter-dimensional gateways one-oh-one."

"Oh, that. What do you want to know?"

"First of all, how many dimensions are there, does anyone know?"

Micah took a deep breath. "There were three-hundred and sixty, at last count."

"Three-hundred and sixty?" I gasped. My mouth hung agape for a minute before I clamped it shut with a sharp clack of my teeth. I sat and tried to digest that for a while before my next question.

"Are all of the dimensions filled with evil entities?"

He shook his head. "No. As a matter of fact, most dimensions are filled with people, humans, much like yourself."

Well, that was a relief. "So I guess I'm just lucky that the only open portals I've found are to the bad places, huh?"

Micah pressed his lips together. I decided not to push him. What I'd just learned was enough to think about for a while.

* * * *

"Where are we going?" I finally asked about an hour and a half later. I wanted to eat. My stomach had grumbled its protest for an hour or more and we didn't seem any closer to a pit stop now, than we did before.

"I told you, to get something to eat."

Micah kept both eyes on the road and I sighed with exasperation.

"I realize that physical hunger isn't really a problem for you. Besides, you had that snack I gave you last night. But it is a problem for me." I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and tried to fight down the nausea brought on by my too low blood sugar. "I have to eat something soon or I'm going to be sick."

Micah sighed and made a U-turn.

"There was a convenience store back this way about five minutes. I'll stop there and get you a coffee and a doughnut. Will that be enough to hold you for another hour or so?"

I nodded gratefully. Glad that he'd seen it. I was too far into a hypoglycemic episode to have noticed.

Twenty minutes later, I sighed with happiness. My stomach, while still not full, was no longer attempting to digest itself, at least, and I sipped my twenty-four ounce cup of coffee happily.

“So,” I said, in between sips. “Where are you taking me?”

Just looking at Micah made me hot and I squirmed in my seat. I admired his perfect profile. How I’d gotten so lucky as to attract such a perfect male specimen as him, I’ll never know. But I will be eternally grateful. I frowned at the thought.

Eternity.

Micah had that. In twenty or thirty years, if I’m lucky enough to live that long, I’ll be an old woman. And Micah will still appear as young and as vital as he was now. Anyone who saw us together would think I’m his mother.

What would Micah do after I was gone? Would he find another mate? Could he? Or would he spend the rest of eternity alone?

That was a good question and I sipped my coffee and wondered about it, ignoring the scenery we passed as we continued to head east, toward Michigan. Back to the life I’d been so desperate to leave behind.

We stopped at a small restaurant somewhere just outside of Chicago. The name was a bit odd. The sign over the door read: The Lone Wolfe Café. The owners were friends of Micah’s. Apparently,

he'd arranged to eat and rest here for a while, or longer if need be.

He helped me out of the car and held my arm in the way, as I realized, he did when he wanted others to know I belonged to him.

"Tasha, this is my good friend Damien Wolfe. Damien, my mate, Tasha."

His friend grinned at me. It was an open, likable grin and I found myself returning it.

"Your mate, huh?" He slapped Micah on the shoulder. "You didn't tell us you'd met your mate," he grinned. "Shay will be thrilled." He turned the wattage up on his grin and aimed it at me. "Shay is my mate."

My mouth fell open and I quickly snapped it shut.

"Your mate? Are you saying that you're a ..." I looked at Micah, not sure how much I should say.

He laughed. "Oh, this is great. You're a neophyte." He winked at me conspiratorially. "Just what Micah needs to loosen up. He's always been a bit too serious."

Damien turned, led me into the building and invited Micah in, so he wouldn't be stuck outside.

"You and Shay are going to get along great."

"Who and Shay are going to get along great?" asked a beautiful, young, very pregnant woman.

Damien leaned down, kissed the woman on the top of the head and smiled. He put his hand

on her rounded stomach.

“How’s the baby?”

She pushed his hand away with a grin. “You know very well, the baby is just fine.” She looked over at me with interest. “Who’s your friend?” She asked Micah.

“My mate.”

“Your mate?” she squealed and danced over to give us both hugs. “I’m so happy for you, Micah. It’s about time.” She smiled at us and her almond shaped eyes crinkled at the corners giving her an exotic look.

“Grandfather did say you would find your mate. I’m so glad he was right.”

“He usually is,” Damien said, nuzzling her neck.

She looked from Micah to myself. “Oh, my goodness, you both must be famished. Come. Let’s get you something to eat. You both look rather weak.”

Well, I had to admit to feeling more than a bit peckish, but I wondered how they could be the same as Micah and not realize he wouldn’t need food.

They took us into the kitchen and I understood. Shay reached into the refrigerator and pulled out four sixteen-ounce bottles filled with blood. She handed one to her mate, then one to Micah and she turned to me, her hand extended. I

just gaped at the blood with horror.

Micah, Bless him, stepped up and took the bottle. "She hasn't Chosen."

"Oh, my." Shay turned stricken eyes toward me. "I'm sorry. I just assumed ..." Her face turned red, she took the extra bottle from Micah and returned it to the refrigerator.

She bent and pulled a packaged sandwich from another shelf and held it out. "I hope you like chicken salad."

My mind reeled. What had Micah meant when he said I haven't chosen yet?

"Chosen what?" I asked, turning to Micah. "What haven't I chosen?"

"You haven't chosen to accept The Gift."

"The Gift? What gift?" I frowned, wondered if I'd finally lost my mind.

Damien took Shay's arm. "Lets leave them for a minute, Baby. I think I know why Micah brought her here."

I turned toward Micah and asked, "Why did you bring me here?"

He shrugged. "For help, support? Hell, Tasha, I don't know. I guess I thought if you saw Shay, still so young and beautiful, it would help you choose."

"Choose what?"

I had a horrible suspicion of what this was about to lead to, but nothing, and I repeat, nothing

could have prepared me to hear what he was about to say.

“Remember what I told you about people who had been turned?”

I nodded. Of course I remembered. How could I forget something as terrifying as that?

Micah took a deep breath and looked at me, his gaze almost pleading. “They chose to accept The Gift when it was offered to them.”

I swallowed thickly. When had my life turned into a bad Twilight Zone episode?

My first thought was that it had to be more like a curse. What would it be like to be doomed to live forever, always alone? But then again, if I accepted The Gift, I wouldn't be alone, I'd have Micah. And he would never be left alone again either.

I turned away from him and tried to think. “I don't know if I can, Micah.”

He reached out and ran his hand down my back, his touch meant to soothe. “You do not have to make the decision, now. You can wait. Think about it. Think of all of the wonderful things you could do. Things you've never even dreamed of.”

The thought of staying young forever and to never be sick again, were both potent lures. They were even more of a lure than being able to fashion my own designer knock-offs in the blink of an eye.

I was tempted, for about a split second, until I

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thought of Camen and his lack of control.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“No, I’d only have to worry about whether or not I would become addicted to adrenaline laced blood,” I said as I neared hysterics at the thought of becoming like the vampire who had tried to kill me.

“I would never allow that to happen to you. You must know by now that I would never abandon you to that fate. I would teach you as I have taught countless others.”

Well, there was that. I bit my lip deep in thought. I looked down at his hand, to the small plastic bottle he still held and I wondered what it was like.

Micah smiled sadly. “For you it is abhorrent. For me, it is better than chocolate.”

I shook my head. As a certified chocoholic myself, I just knew that couldn’t be right.

He stepped closer, reached up with his free hand and tucked a stray lock of my hair behind my ear.

I closed my eyes. God, I was so tempted to accept his offer to live forever young. More than anything, I never wanted to be alone again. Micah stepped closer. He cupped my cheek, looked into my eyes then kissed me on the forehead.

"No pressure, Tasha. Just consider it. Please?"

What could I say? I just looked at him and nodded, thinking of Shay's ethereal beauty. And I wondered if being a vamp would enhance my looks at all. So far, all the vamps I'd met were stunning. Did that mean I would be, too?

Then it struck me and I looked at him, my eyes wide. "Shay is pregnant."

Micah nodded slowly. "Yes, this will be her third child."

So, I could still have kids. That was another plus.

"How long before I can't have children?"

Micah shrugged, "Our kind can only get pregnant when we choose to. There isn't a female alive who has tried to have a child and failed."

I glared at him. "That is not an answer."

"I'm sorry, little one. It is the only one I have. Patrice is one of our oldest females. Her youngest child is twenty three."

"Oh." I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth, thinking. "How many children does this Patrice have?"

He looked a bit uncomfortable. "Remember, I

have told you, you cannot get pregnant unless you wish it," he warned.

"How many, Micah?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I want a house full, Micah. I always have."

"Seventeen."

My eyes rounded at the number. Even I didn't want that many kids. I cleared my throat. "Did you just say seventeen?" I croaked. It was a wonder I could talk at all, considering the fact that my tongue was attached to the roof of my mouth.

Micah smiled, obviously pleased to give me news about being a vampire that I could see in a positive light.

"She is nearly one thousand years old, Tasha. She wanted to be sure that our race would not die." He leaned against the wall and shoved his hands in his pockets. "There are many of us who have not found mates. Or they have lost them. Some of us decide to end our existence after they've lived so long with no one to love them."

I watched him as he clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides. He had it bad. I could tell he wanted to take me into his arms, but he didn't want to coerce me in any way. Thankfully, he wanted to let me make this decision on my own and I could only respect him for that.

"So this Patrice took it upon herself to populate an entire race?" I knew that was stretching it a bit,

but seventeen kids was a lot by anyone's standards.

"She vowed to have one child every fifty years and her mate agreed."

Have a child once every fifty years? Did I want to make that kind of commitment? Could I have six children, one after the other and take three hundred years off after that?

Micah shook his head. He'd obviously read my mind again. "There is no rule which states each couple must have a child every fifty years. It is totally up to the couple." He laid his hands on my shoulders and I looked up into his eyes.

"We don't even have to have more children if you don't want to."

What?

"Did I just hear you right?" I asked him. I bent over and put my head between my knees because I felt faint. "Did you just say I wouldn't have to have any more?"

Micah looked nervous. He moved his fingers around inside his pocket and I heard the muffled sound of jingling coins. He cast his gaze around the immaculate kitchen. I followed the path of his gaze for the most part, as it darted from the butcher-block island in the middle of the room, to the stainless steel appliances, everywhere but my face.

"Well?" I prompted.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"The other night, when we were ... when you thought.... Damn it!" He released my shoulder and paced away from me.

I have to admit that I was at least a little intrigued. I'd never seen Micah so nervous before. And he'd never cursed in front of me before, either. A part of me wanted to prod him a bit more, but I wanted answers, not an argument. So, I waited. Albeit a bit impatiently, but I waited just the same.

"Oh, hell," he ranted, as he turned and paced back toward me. "The other night, when we made love, you expressed a small desire to have my child."

I nodded, "Yeah. So?"

"When a Guide expresses such a desire during intercourse with their Cartuotey mate, it releases an egg in the female and primes the male's semen to be fertile."

I rolled my eyes and he scowled, leaning close to look into my eyes.

"Just because you don't know much about your power, does not mean it does not exist, Tasha."

He pinned me with a dark stare and I found myself waiting, almost breathlessly, for him to continue.

"Your powers surge at that time. It produces

an extremely fertile egg, which allows you to become pregnant if my sperm reaches its destination."

"You said if," I pointed out. I wasn't sure what the feeling in my stomach was yet. Was it relief or disappointment?

"We won't know for a few more weeks."

Micah's eyes never left me as he shook his head. "It is early, but it has a heartbeat. I can hear it." He smiled. "Do you want to know what it sounds like? It is very strong. This child is stubborn, just like its mother."

I slapped my hand onto the top of the counter next to me as my knees buckled with shock. He rushed to me, wrapped his arm around me and helped me to one of the stools next to the island.

"Then y – you weren't joking earlier?"

"No. I wasn't. I would never joke about something as important as my child."

"I'm really pregnant?" I'm not sure what my garbled, high-pitched question sounded like, but that's what I tried to say, at any rate.

Micah nodded. He slowly released me when he realized I wasn't going to faint and fall off the tall stool and hurt myself. I sat with my eyes closed and took slow, deep breaths and wondered whether it was a boy or girl. I was sure Micah couldn't know the answer to that.

I rested my hands over my stomach. I would

never be alone again. Well, not as long as I carried this child.

My eyes flew open and I scowled at him and dropped my hands from my waist before I fisted them on my hips. "That's not fair." I accused, then glared at him through narrowed eyes.

Micah watched me for a minute, his brows drew together and he looked confused. "What is not fair?" he finally asked with a frown.

"That you can hear its heartbeat already." I glowered at him. "I won't be able to hear it for weeks, but you," I said, with no little measure of disgust. "You can hear it and it's only a few days old." I crossed my arms and scowled at him. "You make me sick."

"You can choose to not have it, if that is your wish."

Where in the heck did that come from? How did he come to the conclusion that I didn't want this baby from that outburst?

"What? Me kill an innocent baby? My innocent baby?" I asked, outraged that he could even think that I was capable of such a thing. My arms slid down over my still flat stomach and covered it as if the action alone would protect my unborn child.

Personally, I'd always been against ending the life of a fetus. To me, the conception itself was a miracle. Yet, I'd never believed it was my right to force my views on others. Who am I to force

someone to bring an unwanted child into the world? There were too many unwanted children already.

Apparently, Micah took my reaction as a good sign. He sat down on the stool next to me and covered my hand with his much larger one. The warmth seeped through to my stomach and caused a fluttering sensation in my middle that I knew had nothing to do with a baby.

"You must be sure, little one. I will not abandon my child, nor will I force you to give it up. If you choose to keep this child, know this, you also choose to honor our wedding vows. Till death do us part, and for my kind, that is a very long time."

I cast my gaze to my lap and stared at his large hand covering mine. I couldn't bring myself to look at his face, at least not yet.

"But I'm not your kind, Micah," I replied, softly. I blinked my eyes fast. I refused to cry over something as insignificant as my being mortal like the other ninety-nine point nine percent of the people on this rock. And I wondered whether or not I would be forced to become one of them.

Micah shook his head. "No one will force you to become one of The Chosen. That is a decision only you, yourself can make."

He shifted in his seat and reached up to cup my chin in his hand. He turned my head toward

him, and I looked up into his eyes. They burned with an intensity that I'd never seen before.

"I will, however, hold you to our marriage vows, so long as you are the mother of our child."

I closed my eyes for a minute. I needed to think. It was just too much.

"I'll age, Micah," I said, and stared into his glittering black eyes. "I'll age, and then I'll die. Do you really want to watch me die?"

He shook his head. "No, I do not. I do not want to watch my child die, either, as he or she eventually must if you do not choose to become one of us, but I will not settle for less. The child deserves to know both of us." He smiled tightly. "Now you have more than one decision to make. Please, choose wisely."

Micah stood and left the room, leaving me to my quiet brooding as I tried to make up my mind about such an uncertain future.

An hour and a half later, I still paced the kitchen.

"It just isn't fair!"

Whoever said life was fair?

I ignored the question in my mind and continued to pace. I turned with my eyes on my feet and almost ran into Shay.

I brought myself to an abrupt halt before I mowed the smaller woman down and I brought my hand to my chest as my heart slammed against

my ribs.

"I'm so sorry," I sidled around her, and thought it was about time I went and found my errant husband. I smiled slightly at the mental use of those words. My husband. It was almost laughable. If anyone would have asked me a month or so ago, I would have been certain I would never be in a situation where I would use those two words together. And me and wife were two more words that had never previously struck me as being synonymous.

Shay smiled, rubbed one small hand over her rounded belly and took my hand with the other.

"Come, sit down. I think we should have a chat and get to know each other. We have much in common."

I snorted, "Yeah, right."

She grinned. "I'm serious." She looked at me thoughtfully. "I think I know why Micah brought you here."

Curious, I let her pull me to the breakfast bar and shot her a look. "Why?" I slid onto the stool I'd vacated a while ago when I started to pace and waited for her to continue.

"Why do I think we have much in common, or why did Micah bring you here?"

"Both."

I was becoming a bit irritated with Micah and his friends. It seemed none of them could give me

a straight answer about anything. I hate it when people answer my questions with more questions. It irritates the hell out of me. If I want to be psychoanalyzed I'll go find myself a shrink.

Shay looked at me and tilted her head. "I used to be just like you, you know." Then she blushed. "Well, obvious physical characteristics aside." She indicated my height and hair color.

"I used to be human too," she blurted out. It was almost as if she was afraid to admit it.

I gaped at her. I wasn't sure what it was I thought she had been about to say, but it hadn't been that.

"Excuse me?"

Shay laughed. It was a light infectious sound that I was sure entranced prey easily. I shook my head to clear it.

"I met Damien a long, long time ago. He was sent to—well, you know," she blushed again.

I watched her, a bit bemused. What a feat it was to be her age and still be able to blush over losing her virginity.

Shay took a deep breath. "Any hoo, I couldn't resist him. He was so..." She shook her head and gave a half shrug. "Compelling or something. He still is truth to tell." She sighed, a far away look in her eyes.

"Look, Shay, I'm really not trying to be rude, but, this is relevant to me ... how?"

"Don't you see?" she asked. Her voice was pitched a bit high and I fought the urge to grimace at the perky sound. "I had to make the same choice."

Okay, so I had to concede the point that we did indeed have that one small item in common. But it was still just the one thing.

"Ah, but had you seen your best friend defiled by a dirt-bag drug dealer just before she died? Then killed the aforementioned jerk for raping and killing your friend? Then did you torture yourself by giving up addictive drugs cold turkey, only to almost be deflowered by a power hungry, life sucking, demon from hell?" I said it all in one breath, putting my hand out in front me. I forgot for a minute that Micah had explained that the incubus wasn't really a demon, but an evil other-dimensional being with magical powers. It still sounds like a demon to me.

"Uh, uh, sister. Aside from the fact that you used to be human—three hundred and fifty years ago, I might add—we don't have one thing in common at all."

"But you're wrong, Tasha." Shay said, taking my hand. She frowned and rubbed it between her two warmer ones. "You're hands are frozen!"

I shrugged, "It's just my nerves. My hands and feet get really cold when I'm nervous, I don't know why." I pulled my hand from hers and

smiled politely. Another woman — especially one I don't know — holding my hand, makes me feel kind of creepy.

Shay waved away my apologetic look. "Don't say a word, sweetie, I understand." She patted my arm lightly. "What I wanted to say is, that we've both had to face the same thing, make this same decision." She looked into my eyes. "Is your situation different? Of course it is. You're a different person." She waved her arm. "These are different times." She stood, walked around the island and stopped to face me.

"The question I want to ask you, what I need to know is what do you think Micah's life will be like, once you're gone?" She looked into my eyes and I had the strange thought that she was looking into my soul. "After you die, I mean. Which could be tomorrow, by the way, human bodies are so frail. You could be hit by a car and leave him alone tomorrow. He has no guarantee how long you will live as a human. When that happens, he could be alone for the rest of his considerably long life." She gave me a sad look. "But, the chances are, he'll follow you, rather than stay and continue to live an empty existence, knowing you are forever gone from this earth."

I felt my eyes widen with the horror of that statement. "Follow me?"

Shay nodded. "He'll open a vein or something

and kill himself rather than choose to live through eternity without you."

"Oh, my God."

I'd never thought of that. I mentally turned back time and remembered how I felt when I'd first lost Trina. Suicide had crossed my mind more than once, because I didn't want to go back to my solitary existence.

"And you think he does?"

"Hey," I gasped. "Quit reading my mind. I swear, that's so rude."

Shay giggled. "I couldn't read your mind right now if I tried. Not without a blood bond anyway. You just said all of that out loud."

I shook my head. "Figures." I put my head in my hands and rubbed my temples. "I'm getting a headache." Don't I have enough crap on my mind already without being saddled with a friggin' guilt trip from hell?

Shay reached over and patted me on the back. "It doesn't hurt, you know." Then she smiled and shrugged. "Well, not much, anyway. Then afterwards it feels wonderful. Just think, you'll never have another headache unless, of course, someone bonks you on the head. You'll never be sick, never have another period, and it will be centuries before you get your first gray hair." Then she blushed. "And the ritual can be so ..."

I nodded sagely and smiled. I wanted to see if

she could turn any redder.

“So, it has to do with sex, huh?”

Shay’s face blazed. “How did you know?”

“You’re blushing again.” I pointed out.

She covered her face with her hands. “I can’t help it, it’s my upbringing.”

“And three hundred and fifty years hasn’t made a difference?”

Shay scowled. “I swear I’m gonna smack that man if he doesn’t stop telling everyone how old I am. Just you watch.” She looked at me and gave me a conspiratorial grin. “He’s positively ancient.” Then she looked up and smiled, “Speak of the devil.”

I turned to see Micah in the doorway and he looked very nervous.

“What’s the matter?” I slid out of my seat and headed toward him. I tried not to give much thought to the fact that my first reaction had been to comfort him.

He looked down at me, his expression unreadable, his usually tanned face pale.

“There was a news report on the television. The police have released an All Points Bulletin on your whereabouts. We have no more time to waste. We must head back to Grand Rapids today, before they find you. It is imperative that you turn yourself in. Your cooperation helps establish the absence of guilt.”

"Damn it," I snarled, and stomped from the room.

The other three followed and I heard Shay ask, "Why is there an A.P.B. out for her?"

Damien took her by the arm and stopped to whisper in Shay's ear. No doubt telling her what I'd done.

I brushed the tears from my eyes. Why should I care what she thinks? I never asked for her friendship anyway. If a person can't accept me as I am, they aren't worth my time.

"That was self defense! Surely the police know of the concept. They have to know she would have been next." Shay was so outraged, I could hear her whispered tirade as they followed me into the room.

Damien put his arms around his mate in an attempt to calm her down. "There's nothing we can do, sweetheart." He kissed the side of her neck. "We'll just let them go tell her side of the story and hope for the best."

Shay scowled. "The hell there isn't." She pulled from Damien's arms and stomped closer to me. She shook her finger in my face, ranting, and I knew right then that she would be my friend forever. However long forever turned out to be.

"We're all going to cross that stinking lake and tell those cops what they can do with their suspicions." She breezed past the two men and

hooked her arm around mine.

"It was so good of you to come and stay with me during my pregnancy, Tasha. You're such good company, it's hard to believe you've been here for —" She shot a glance at Micah.

"Four or five weeks should do it."

Shay shook her head. "It's hard to believe you've already been here for almost six weeks." She winked at me.

I shook my head. "I've only been off work for a month." Then I grimaced. "I'm sure I've been fired by now."

She glanced at Damien. "It's good that you had to take the ferry over there last month. What day was it again, sweetie?"

"The thirteenth." Damien said then smiled. He looked like he was coming around to Shay's way of thinking.

Shay looked at me and raised her brow.

"My last day at work was the eleventh and ..." I paused, almost choking on the next words. "Trina was killed on the fifteenth."

"Good, good." Shay rubbed her hands together. "Even if they check our financial records it will show that Damien bought one round trip ticket and a one way from Michigan for an adult to cross. And one was a woman, if anyone should ask the ferry crew." She smiled. "My sister in law, but how are they gonna know?"

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She looked at the two men, who stood and gaped at her as if she'd just grown another head.

“Well, gentlemen, shall we go?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I couldn't believe it. Shay didn't even know me. Not really. And she was about to stick her neck out for me like this?

I shook my head and finally came to my senses. "I can't let you do this, Shay." I almost embarrassed myself by starting to cry, but thankfully, I was able to keep control of my emotions.

Shay rolled her eyes at me. "Honey, at my age, nobody lets me do anything." She marched over to the door and stood in front of it. She looked every bit like the kid she thought I was.

Damien smiled and shook his head. "Once she's set her mind on something, there's just no stopping her."

Then Micah added, "Besides, her idea is a sound one." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I should have thought of that."

I rolled my eyes, tempted to hit him, and I grinned at Shay. "Why do men always seem so

surprised when a woman comes up with a good idea?"

"I don't know," she winked. "You'd think they would have grown used to it by now." Shay turned, opened the door, and I followed her out into the afternoon sunlight.

Damien took one look at Micah's Jag and shook his head. "If you think I'm making the trip in that little thing, you're out of your mind."

Shay leaned over and whispered, "He thinks he's psychic, like his grandfather and is certain the baby is going to be born in a car. He wants to be sure it's the Lincoln," she giggled. "He's even got emergency supplies stashed in the trunk."

Damien reached into his pocket, pulled out a flip phone and pressed a button. "Nelson," he said, after he put the phone to his ear. "Bring the car around, we're taking a trip." He shook his head. "No, no time to pack, Shay and I will provide." He brought the phone from his ear and closed it before he stuck it back into his pocket. "Nelson should be around with the car in a minute or so."

Five minutes later, a white, stretched limousine rounded the corner. I tried not to gape. I looked from Micah's dark good looks to Damien's lighter ones.

It isn't fair. It just isn't fair. They're both so handsome and so friggin' rich, it should be illegal.

Micah chose that moment to smile and wink at me. I felt myself flush and I shuffled my feet in embarrassment. He must have peeked into my mind again. I don't know why it didn't seem to bother me as much as it used to.

Nelson, whom I assumed was the driver, brought the car to a smooth stop in front of us. I could have sworn it was running silent. If it was making any noise, I sure as heck couldn't hear it.

Shay climbed into the car and motioned for me to join her. Then the two men went back inside to inform the staff that the owners would be gone for a few days. Shay and I sat facing each other with me facing toward the back of the limo.

"I hope you don't mind riding backwards, for some reason it makes me sick." She laughed and looked a bit embarrassed. "I get sick even when I'm not expecting."

I smiled, "Don't feel bad, I'm claustrophobic. I don't know why. The doctors said it was most likely a trauma from when I was a child, but I don't remember."

Micah climbed in and sat next to me while we talked. He reached over and laced his fingers with mine as the car began to move smoothly through the parking lot.

"You were accidentally locked in the root cellar one day when you were about five."

I turned a wide-eyed stare on him. "I was?"

Suddenly, the memories of a dark, little room flashed through my mind. The darkness closed in on me, the house creaked and groaned above me and the terrifying sound of mice scurrying through the pitch-black room took me back to that place. I was little again, as the familiar panic took hold of me in an iron grip.

Micah, squeezed my hand and brought me back to the present. He nodded. "You apparently followed your grandmother into the cellar and she left you to follow her back out. She didn't know until much later that the door slid closed, locking you inside of the tiny room because you couldn't reach the latch."

"Oh," I said, and realization struck. "So that was why the door was removed all those years ago?"

"I heard you screaming and ripped the door from its hinges. I carried you out and you clung to me and wouldn't let me put you down. Even when you knew you were safe and when your father wanted to comfort you, you wouldn't let me go."

He released my hand to wrap his arm around me. I leaned into him. I loved the sense of security I felt whenever we were together. Now I understood why I always felt so safe in his arms.

* * * *

“How long before we reach the ferry dock?” Shay asked, Nelson about an hour later. She yawned and blinked the sleep from her eyes.

“We’re almost there, madam,” Nelson answered from the front. He drove the car expertly, never taking his eyes from the road.

“I’m so sorry. I must have dozed off.” Shay said and gave us both a smile, obviously embarrassed. “I seem to nod off quite a bit lately. Can we stop and get something to eat? I’m starving.” She rubbed her rounded belly with a grimace. “I’ve had to eat more often since I became pregnant again.”

Damien leaned over and whispered something in her ear and she nodded enthusiastically.

“Oh, yes. That’s a wonderful idea. It sounds perfect. You know I love their place.” She must have seen my confused look because she leaned forward—as far as her distended belly would allow—and explained loud enough for Nelson to hear. “Damien has just suggested we go to the Blue Moon Café, it is owned by friends of ours. They have been in Europe for the past few months. It will give us the chance to visit for an hour or two.”

Her attention turned to Micah. “And I thought you might like a visit, too. I’m sure they’ll want to meet your mate.”

Micah nodded. "No doubt."

"Oh." I sat back, happy with the idea that my empty stomach was about to be filled. At least I hoped it was. If it was a café, surely they would have regular food, too. After all, Shay had had that chicken salad sandwich stashed in her fridge.

Don't get me wrong, I think Micah and his friends are absolutely wonderful, but they do tend to forget that not only do I need a different form of sustenance, they also forget that I need it more often.

Micah consumed small amounts of blood, generally once daily. I covered the spot on my neck where he usually bit me and it tingled slightly at the sensual memory of when he fed from me. But with Micah being the way he was for all of these years, he tended to forget that I, on the other hand, need to eat several times a day.

You wouldn't have to if you became one of them.

I jerked in my seat as that thought came totally unexpected. I shot Micah a glance from the corner of my eye and wondered if he was responsible for it.

Micah leaned over to whisper in my ear. "Is it so awful to contemplate spending an eternity with me?"

I shot him a surprised stare. Was he kidding? Spending an eternity with him would be

wonderful. I was tempted to say yes, right then, but I thought about the blood. There was just no way I could bring myself to drink it.

“If you were one of us, the act would not seem so repugnant to you.” He smiled, and kissed the back of my fingers. “As a matter of fact, I can assure you that you will find it most enjoyable.”

I turned my head away from his compelling eyes to look out the window at the approaching darkness. Like he’d said before. This was a decision that I needed to make on my own.

But when I turned and looked into his eyes, it was easy to make the decision. The stark need I saw in his inky stare was enough to make me agree. God help me, but I wanted to spend an eternity with him.

The Blue Moon Café was definitely not what I expected. Located in an older section of town, the café was tucked into the bottom floor of an ancient, three-story colonial. The top two stories served as living quarters for the owners.

The huge dark gray painted building boasted a light blue moon mural, which decorated the front. It was expertly painted in such a way that I could almost see the face of a man in it.

A sign on the door read: Welcome to the Blue Moon, where everyone with good in their hearts is welcome. Micah explained that it was a message to all vampires. They could enter without a formal

invitation as long as they did not intend to harm anyone.

Clever.

Inside, the ground floor held tables and chairs set in arcs, or half moons. Several round tables that served as full moons sat in the corners. The ceiling, painted midnight-blue, boasted fiber-optic stars, which twinkled merrily even in the light of day.

I couldn't help but gape when I walked in. The interior was just so much ... more than I expected.

"I love to see a person's first reaction to this place," Shay said with a smile. She leaned closer to whisper in my ear. "If you think this is something, wait till you see the front when we leave. They used glow in the dark paint for the moon and the fiber-optics are mounted outside, too."

I hoped I'd get a chance to look at it before we left. It sounded spectacular.

Damien left us to walk to the crescent shaped bar and rang the large bell that hung from the wall.

I peered around the empty café and wondered where all of the customers were.

Micah wrapped his arm around me and kissed my neck. "The café doesn't open for another hour, yet. Richard must have seen us arrive and buzzed the door for us, either that, or Elisabeth did."

"Oh," I said and wondered if I was going to get

anything to eat after all.

Micah chuckled. "Of course you are. They're probably just getting dressed. I'm sure the kitchen staff is already here preparing for the dinner crowd."

I nodded. "Of course. They wouldn't have expected four early dinner guests."

"There you all are. I started to think you'd fallen from the face of the earth."

I turned at the sound of the voice. Stunned, I stared openly at the incredibly beautiful woman who walked into the room. Were all of these people gorgeous?

I watched the woman as she entered, all six feet of her. Her long hair fell to her waist in ebony waves, framed a heart-shaped face with sky blue eyes, which, I was sure, held Micah's a bit longer than necessary. I stamped down the green one-eyed monster and told myself to behave.

You are not jealous.

My husband released me, to hurry into the woman's embrace.

You're still not jealous.

I stood back and bit my tongue. There's a logical explanation for his behavior, I'm sure. A very tall man, Richard, I assumed, soon joined them. He hugged Shay and shook the men's hands before he pulled them both to him in a hearty embrace.

"It's been awhile, hasn't it?" the man asked.

"Of course it has, Richard. What do you expect when you drag my little sister all over Europe for months on end?" Micah laughed and slapped his brother-in-law on the back.

I looked from my husband, to the woman who now looked me up and down with interest. I blushed. I'd been jealous of his sister?

"Who's your friend?" She circled around me and I fought the urge to turn with her to watch her every move. She was every bit as compelling as her brother was.

Micah stepped back to my side and smiled apologetically. He wrapped his arm around me in a belated show of support.

"I am sorry, Tasha." He drew me closer, then turned toward his sister. "Elisabeth, Tasha is my mate."

I watched, nearly enthralled as a smile brightened her face and she rushed over to hug me.

"Welcome to the family, little sister. I believe we will get along famously."

I swallowed thickly at her welcoming attitude. A month ago, I had been alone. Now, it seemed I had friends and a family again. I looked over at Micah with tears in my eyes. I have him to thank for it.

My stomach picked that time to grumble a

loud protest of its deplorable lack of sustenance and I blushed when five sets of eyes turned my way.

“Sorry,” I excused myself. “But I do have to eat every five hours or so and it’s been at least six since that sandwich I had at your house.” I looked at Shay, hoping for a bit of help.

Elisabeth stepped up. “Of course, you must be famished. All of you.” She handed me a menu, “Order whatever you like, it’s on the house.” She giggled and leaned over to squeeze my hand. “Why wouldn’t it be? You’re my new sister.”

I blinked back some pesky tears, overwhelmed at her unconditional acceptance. After I composed myself, I perused the menu for a moment, before I chose the bacon cheeseburger and fries. I planned to chase it down with a coke since anything stronger was out of the question, now that I’m pregnant.

“Anyone else?” Elisabeth asked before she left for the kitchen.

“A cheeseburger does sound good,” Micah said with a thoughtful look on his face. “I’d bet it’s been at least a year since I had one.”

Elisabeth looked toward Shay and Damien. “Shall I make it four, with the works?”

The others nodded and we moved to sit at one of the round tables for eight.

An hour later I had to admit, the food was

great and the hospitality even better. The small restaurant opened before we'd finished and the full dinner crowd poured in. Elisabeth and Richard greeted their regulars like family and even toasted an older couple on the arrival of their new grandchild.

"How do you do it?" I leaned over, to ask Elisabeth.

"Do what?" she smiled, encouraging me to continue.

"How do you keep people from realizing you don't age?" I whispered, sure that, sooner or later, the multitude of people who frequented this place would realize that the two owners never got any older.

"Oh." The smile left her face and she looked a bit melancholy. "We don't. In fact, in a few years, we'll have to close down or sell." She gazed lovingly around her. "To tell you the truth, I'd almost rather just close down. If we sold it, it just wouldn't be the same."

I nodded. "You're right. I think you and Richard make it what it is."

Elisabeth leaned toward me and looked deep into my eyes. "Have you told him yet?"

I frowned then looked from her to her brother. "Told him what?" I asked, not sure I even knew what she meant.

"Have you told him that you have Chosen?"

I pulled away and looked at her. I wondered if she could read my mind because of the blood bond I shared with her brother.

Elisabeth laughed and shook her head. “No, I cannot read your mind. I know what you’re thinking because it’s written all over your face when you look at him.”

“Oh.” I bit my lip and fiddled with my napkin. What more was there to say?

“You’re welcome to do it here,” she smiled and blinked back tears. “I would be honored to be able to attend and preside over your hand-fasting.”

That word got Micah’s attention and he turned to look from me to his sister.

“Who’s hand-fasting?” Micah’s eyes met mine and I felt him touch the outer edges of my mind, but he waited for an invitation.

I smiled, opened my mind to him and poured all of my love into his consciousness. He needed to know I was ready to make the commitment he wanted from me.

Micah took a deep breath. His eyes shining, he took my hand in his and kissed my palm reverently. “You will never regret it. This I swear to you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We left the ground floor, climbing the kitchen service stairs to the upper level and living quarters. Their home was just as conservative as the café was whimsical.

The parlor held a baby grand piano with a pair of wing chairs that faced each other in three of the four-corners of the room. A fireplace sat against the far wall, its huge mantle boasted a beautiful seascape above it.

The glossy, blonde, hardwood floor was covered by a massive Oriental rug in the center. Round tables were set under each tall window, a vase of flowers on each one, seemed to invite the outdoors in.

"I hope this will do." Elisabeth said apologetically. "It's too bad we aren't in England. The cottage there would have been a better choice for a hand-fasting." She sighed dreamily. "It's so old fashioned. I swear it was built for a ceremony like this."

I peered around the room, trying not to stare at the fireplace that dominated one wall. A long sofa in front of it, invited me to sit and soak up the warmth of the non-existent fire. The faux bearskin rug on the hearth added a bit of old fashioned charm.

“Do for what?” I was curious, now. The house was a showplace. I couldn’t imagine it not doing for anything.

“For your hand-fasting, of course.” She tilted her head at me. “You did say you wanted to do it here, did you not?”

I frowned. Actually, I didn’t say that. Or at least if I did, I couldn’t remember it. But, as I looked around, I realized that this was as good a place as any. Actually, it was probably better, since his family and friends would be here for him.

“Well, I suppose ...”

Micah smiled softly and took my hand at my hesitant reply.

“You do not have to do this if it is not your wish, sweetheart.” His black eyes bored into mine and I felt his resolve not to force me into anything that would make me uncomfortable.

I bit my lip.

How can I turn a guy down who constantly puts my comfort and needs before his own?

I couldn’t.

I turned and looked up at Micah with tears in my eyes and finally said it. "I have Chosen, Micah."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled his head down to mine, not caring that we had an audience. After an eternity, or at least what seemed like one, someone, I think it was Richard, cleared their throat and I pulled from his arms, my face hot with embarrassment.

We followed his sister and her husband to the fireplace and watched curiously as Elisabeth pulled a small, intricately carved wooden case down from the tall mantle.

She opened the box and pulled out a wide, blood red cloth and a small, clean white-handled knife. The cloth, a shimmering scarf of crimson silk was about a yard long. Gold thread fringed each end and the three-inch long tassels gleamed in the bright light.

Elisabeth held it up and gazed at her brother with tears in her beautiful blue eyes. "I made this for your hand-fasting years ago." She looked down at the cloth and fingered it reverently. "I hoped you would find your mate and I would be honored to have you use it one day."

Elisabeth stepped in front of me and smiled apologetically.

"I must cut your palm, and you must repeat the ritual words as I say them. Then," she turned

toward her brother. "Micah will say his words and I will cut his palm. I will then bind your hands together with this cloth and the blood exchange will be made. Tomorrow you will be one of us. Your life force will be bound to Micah's if you were truly meant to be my brother's mate." She looked into my eyes. "Do you agree?"

"Yes." I nodded and swallowed around the lump in my throat that formed when she mentioned the possibility that I could not be Micah's mate. I looked up into his eyes and knew what my life would be like without him. It would be Hell. I'd already been there and was certainly in no hurry to return.

I have to belong to him, that's all there is to it.

Elisabeth took my trembling hand in hers and held it palm up. She looked up at me and smiled.

"Tasha is your full, given name?"

I shook my head. "Natasha is my given name. Natasha Katarina."

She smiled slightly. "What a beautiful name. Were you named after someone?"

"My grandmother. My father named me after his mother."

Elisabeth straightened and became a bit more serious. "Natasha Katarina, you have made your choice?"

She seemed to expect some sort of answer, so I nodded.

She gave me an encouraging smile. "Now that you have made your choice, you must recite the vows of The Chosen."

I nodded, unsure of whether or not I should say anything. "You must repeat these words as I say them."

She grasped my hand in a firm grip, pulled my fingers back and stretched my palm out.

"My blood to your blood. With the gift of my blood, I offer my life into your safekeeping. By taking your blood, I accept the offer of your life. Our blood blends, mixes and changes us. It creates one life in the place of two. We shall become one new, complete being with one heart and one soul. Together we are one. I have chosen Micah Maximillian Dartrazinski."

I felt a little jolt of fear as she positioned the knife over my exposed palm. I hoped it was a sharp one. Experience told me that getting cut with a dull knife was very painful. I winced as the blade approached my skin.

Micah made a small sound and I looked up into his eyes. The fear suddenly left me and I couldn't look away. I'm sure he compelled me to help me with my fear.

My smile wobbled a bit, before I began to repeat the ritual words. "My blood to your blood. With the gift of my blood, I offer my life into your safekeeping."

With those words I felt the pressure of the knife blade slide across my skin. I felt no pain and I wondered, however briefly, if Micah somehow held me enthralled so I wouldn't feel the bite of the blade against my hand. "By taking your blood, I accept the offer of your life. Our blood blends, mixes and changes us. It creates one life in the place of two. We shall become one new, complete being with one heart and one soul. Together we are one. I have chosen Micah Maximillian Dartrazinski."

Elisabeth turned to her brother. She released my blood-covered hand to hold the knife poised over his large square palm. He smiled at me and winked.

"My blood to your blood. With the gift of my blood, I offer my life into your safekeeping," he recited the words as his sister took the knife and dragged the blade across his palm.

She took our hands in hers and pressed them together. Elisabeth bound them tightly with the red cloth.

"By taking your blood, I accept the offer of your life. Our blood blends, mixes and changes us. It creates one life in the place of two. We shall become one new, complete being with one heart and one soul." He paused for a moment and smiled again. "Together we are one. I have chosen Natasha Katerina Hinkey."

My eyes gazed deeply into his darker ones and I reveled in the love I saw reflected in the dark chocolate depths.

I looked down at our joined palms tied together with the blood red cloth. A tingling, itching sensation crawled up my arm, radiating up from my palm. Then I felt strangely lightheaded and my knees gave out.

“Hey,” I said to no one in particular. “I thought this would make me stronger, like you guys.” My words slurred together drunkenly, as I felt Micah’s blood go to my head like a pint of Bacardi.

At some point, and I’m not sure when, Shay helped Micah support me as they half carried me down a long hallway with Elisabeth in the lead.

I knew Micah was there, even though I couldn’t see him. I felt his hand still bound to mine, our blood flowed between us. Micah’s blood crawled through my body like a living thing, it changed me as it went.

They left us alone, in a huge bedroom. The California king-sized bed, dressed in blue, invited me to fall into it. I wiggled my toes in the thick pad of cream carpeting beneath my feet and frowned. When had I taken off my shoes?

I looked up at Micah, admiring his physique. I reveled in all of his six and a half feet of pure male perfection. Suddenly, I thought we were wearing entirely too many clothes. Then just as suddenly,

our clothing disappeared and I stood before Micah naked and wanting. A new hunger consumed me as flames licked at my skin. How could just a touch make me quiver with such need? Were my senses already more pronounced?

His lips branded mine with hot, fevered kisses that I'd never felt the likes of before. His tongue danced around the line of my lips and I opened my mouth for him, longing to feel him inside of me. All of him. I opened my mind. I needed him, begged him to crawl within me and finally make me whole.

Micah groaned and fondled my breasts, giving each one equal attention with his free hand. The other was still bound to mine. Our blood mixed together, binding us to one another for eternity.

"I can't wait this time, Micah. Please don't make me wait. Fuck me," I gasped as he licked my neck, moving higher to kiss me behind my ear.

He pushed me back onto the bed and I raised my knees, spreading my legs in invitation as he came down between them. He read my mind and thrust his cock inside me. I was already wet with desire and needed him inside me more than I had ever wanted anyone or anything before in my life.

He pushed into me slowly and I savored every second of his thorough possession. He alternately suckled my breasts, his mouth and free hand everywhere on my fevered skin, brought me to the

edge of ecstasy.

He rocked within me, thrusting his hips against mine, over and over, and I whimpered with the pure pleasure of having his massive cock deep inside me.

“God, Micah. I’m going to come.” I keened, as he picked up the tempo, his hips slapping roughly into mine. “Please,” I needed the release that he held tantalizingly out of my reach.

He looked down at me, his eyes aglow with passion and the blood lust I’d grown to expect from him while we made love. I saw his incisors lengthen just before he lowered his head and sank his teeth into my neck.

I screamed his name. My orgasm was so intense that I screamed out my delight. Every muscle tensed and bunched as Micah finally took me over the edge. The orgasm and his taking of my blood became a mixture of pleasure-pain that bordered on pure ecstasy. I’m sure I died there, for a moment and touched heaven, before he called me back to life, to him.

Micah rolled us over and I straddled his still erect staff. I’d never been on top. I grinned and rode him like I’d never done before. I leaned down, kissing his neck, his perfect chest, lapping at one flat brown nipple. I raised my head and kissed him, nuzzling his neck. My eyes widened as I felt him grow even larger within me. He

turned his head and exposed his neck. His strong arms lifted and lowered me onto his engorged organ and I felt another orgasm grip me.

Micah turned and looked into my eyes. "Feed," he growled, his teeth clenched, the corded muscles of his neck bulged and his eyes were glazed over with passion. "Feed, Tasha."

I lowered my head to him, my incisors lengthened and I sank my teeth deep into the thick muscles of his chest. Memories, everything that was Micah assaulted me. They slammed into my head with such force I nearly lost consciousness.

He must have realized what happened and shut the memories out. It left only the sensation of our two bodies joined together and the exquisite pleasure we both felt as I fed from him.

He was right, it is better than chocolate. I pulled my teeth from his neck and smiled as I gazed down at the two small marks my incisors made and waited for his amazing recuperative powers to repair the damaged tissue. I swiped my tongue across the tiny holes and watched amazed as the pinpricks closed before my eyes.

Micah rolled us over and I was on my back again. He threw my legs over his shoulders, pounding into me with abandon, completely out of control. He'd ever been so out of control. Not once had he ever taken me to this height of ecstasy.

"Tasha," he whispered into my ear, suckling on the lobe. "I'm getting close." He pulled back a bit, then took my left nipple into his mouth, and suckled fiercely. "I've never felt this with another. Your tight little pussy grips my cock until I can think of nothing but shooting my come deep inside you."

I was caught in a seemingly endless cycle. One glorious orgasm followed another as I accepted his thrusts, mindless.

I keened Micah's name, my love for him, and my pleasure over and over. "Micah, I'm coming!"

When Micah's eyes began to glow again. I knew his climax was finally upon him. I wrapped my free arm around his neck drawing his head to me.

He sank his teeth deep into my breast, just above my heart and I screamed our pleasure as he shared his satisfaction with me. He came then, spilling his seed, deep inside my body.

I held him close, my left arm cradled his head against my breast until he withdrew his teeth, the pinpricks healed almost instantly.

I looked over at our still joined hands with our fingers laced together. My right hand held to his left. The red cloth gave way and slithered to the floor, almost like a living thing. It fell on to the carpet, a puddle of blood red silk next to the bed.

We pulled our hands apart and I marveled at

the fine cut still in the center of my palm as it healed before my eyes.

Micah pressed a kiss to my forehead.

“Thank you for choosing me, Tasha. I will never give you reason to regret it.”

He rolled onto his back, taking me with him. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer to rest my head on his chest.

“No, Micah.” I smiled sleepily. “Thank you for saving my life, in more ways than one.” I rubbed against him like a cat. I loved his scent and the smooth warmth of his skin.

I kissed his almost hairless chest sleepily. “I do love you, you know,” I murmured into his armpit.

His hand stilled over my head where he’d been absently smoothing my hair. He squeezed me a bit tighter.

“I love you too,” he sighed. “I have loved you, in one way or another, since the day you were born.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Welcome to our world, little sister,” Shay said over a cup of coffee when Micah and I entered the kitchen the next morning.

I blushed at her knowing smile then frowned. “Why are you all suddenly eating and drinking?” I blurted the question out because I have absolutely no tact whatsoever.

Shay laughed. “We will, no doubt, have to spend several hours in the company of the police. We all thought it would be beneficial to re-acquire some of our more human characteristics.”

“That makes sense, I suppose.”

“Why don’t you fix yourself something to eat? I’ve heard of your addiction to coffee.”

I wasn’t really hungry, but I do love bagels and cream cheese. I walked over to the counter and helped myself to a large cup of coffee. I sipped it then looked down into the steaming dark liquid.

“I don’t know why I’m still drinking this.” I made a face. “I really don’t even like it. I just

drank it to help me when I ... when I gave up drugs." My face grew warm.

"At least you don't have to worry about undue side effects. It's decaffeinated." Shay smiled and put her hand over mine.

"Yeah, I suppose." With my new vampire healing abilities, that coffee aphrodisiac idea appealed to me again.

"There's no need to feel ashamed." She looked around the room before she dropped her gaze to her plate. "We all have at least one skeleton in our closet."

"So, manslaughter and drug addiction are mine, huh?" I asked ruefully as I picked up a bagel and slathered it with cream cheese and strawberry jam.

Shay sat across from me, finishing her breakfast. I turned and noticed for the first time that Micah hadn't followed me into the room like I'd originally thought.

I frowned. "Where'd Micah go?"

"He most likely went to thank Elisabeth for her hospitality." She took another bite of her Danish. "We have to leave soon to catch the noon ferry. This situation with the police must be handled quickly, before it escalates into something worse than it already is.

I nodded. She was right, of course. The whole situation had already reached an intensity that I

never expected. I just hated that the reality of my life always interfered with the fantasy.

Why couldn't I just once, have a normal vacation, a normal honeymoon or a normal life? Was I forever doomed to be always sitting on the outside looking in?

I felt Micah's pain as he touched my thoughts. I realized at once that what I dreamed of was not normalcy. Not any longer, at any rate.

I immediately felt bad and flooded his mind with my love. I didn't mean a life without you, Micah. I merely meant that I would love to be able to stay in one place for a while with no worries of the police trying to arrest me or evil entities out to sacrifice me.

I tried to make him understand the thoughts he'd inadvertently eavesdropped on. He sent his understanding back to me. It was a soothing balm to my frazzled nerves and I lifted my head and smiled at Shay.

"I hope we can get this over with, soon. I'm looking forward to an old fashioned honeymoon. I've just decided. I'm going to embrace my new life with Micah."

And I intend to celebrate every single extraordinary moment of its lack of normalcy.

With my arms held out, I tilted my head back and gloried in my newfound happiness. If my new family could be considered strange or weird, then

normal is definitely overrated.

Six and a half-hours later, we were ensconced in the limo, riding East toward Grand Rapids. I stole a look at my husband through my lashes and smiled. He sat next to me and held my hand in his as I rested my head on his shoulder.

His breath brushed my hair every time he exhaled and I thanked God for every moment I had with him. My entourage decided to pay the extra money for The Lake Express. It was something, I never would have considered in the past. It was more than I could afford, but Micah was happy to point out that money was no longer a concern of mine.

"I can't believe we just crossed the lake in a little over two and a half hours." Shay said, looking out at the shoreline as we drove away from the pier.

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe so, but I could have made a house payment with what we just paid for fares."

Micah hugged me to him. "You do not have to worry about that any longer. I will take care of the mortgage on your home. You will not lose it to the bank."

"Call me a diehard," I said and hugged him back. "Even with today's gas prices, it's still cheaper to drive around. The only drawback is that it's more time consuming."

We headed east on Interstate 96 toward Grand Rapids and the police department, which now had a warrant out for my arrest.

"I can't breathe." I gasped, sitting forward in the seat. I tried to get air into my lungs. The closer we got to the city, the more my heart slammed against my ribs.

"Shh," Micah whispered in my ear. He smoothed my hair and held me close in an attempt to comfort me.

"I don't know if I can do this." I raised my head, my eyes gazing into Micah's, nervous. "I don't lie well," I shook my head. "I really don't." I looked into his dark fathomless gaze, knowing my own eyes were filled with stark fear.

"What if they don't believe us?" I laughed hysterically. "And why should they? It's all lies. I did it. Every one of you knows I killed him. He killed Trina and I killed him for it. What if they arrest me?" I babbled on, almost incoherent, as I fidgeted in my seat. "I can't go to jail, Micah." I grabbed his arm, sick with fear. "I just can't. I wouldn't survive locked up in a small cell." I wouldn't either, and I knew it. My claustrophobia, even now, threatened to choke me. It attempted to squeeze the air from my lungs as I sat in the close confines of the car.

Micah grabbed me, pulled me onto his lap and held me against his chest. He whispered soothing

words in my ear, calming me down.

He put his fingers under my chin and turned my head to look deep into my eyes. I felt the strong push of compulsion as he spoke. His older, stronger, more experienced powers overshadowed my newly made gifts.

“You will not panic in the face of fear, Tasha. You have been traveling these past weeks with your new husband. Only now do you return to your home to share your good news with your best friend.” His eyes bored into mine. I felt the power flow into me, through me, as he spoke.

“We were devastated to hear the news of her death. Your husband and your new family has been with you constantly these past weeks. All of us are prepared and willing to testify that you were not even in the state at the time of Trina’s death. You have done nothing wrong.”

That was the story the police received from Micah. They were told I was under sedation having just learned of my friend’s death. I’m sure I appeared to be. His compulsion kept me very subdued and I agreed with everything he said.

“I think it’s strange that I can’t remember the interview with the police.” I told Micah much later as I sat on the bed and brushed my hair in one of his several homes. I watched him work on his laptop. The sound of the rapid clicking as his fingers flew across the keyboard sounded loud,

even though he was across the room.

"I am sorry I felt the need to compel you, my love." He stopped typing and looked at me through the mirror, which was in front of him on the vanity that he used as a desk. "But you were panicking and I could see no other alternative."

I nodded. "I can believe it, I'm so afraid of being locked in an enclosed space, it would have surprised me if I hadn't panicked." I shuddered at the thought. "I just wish I could remember what happened."

"No, you do not," Micah said, shaking his head. "They did put you in a cell for a short time."

"And you should have seen Micah, Tasha. He was all over them." Shay said, proudly, through the open door. "He made them let you out." She smiled, then closed the door and left us to talk more privately.

Micah's eyes took on an almost murderous glint. "Yes. They were determined to keep you there, by yourself, for questioning. Until I threatened to sue them." His white teeth flashed in his tanned face. "When they found out who I am and just who my friends are, they couldn't release you fast enough."

"Your friends?"

He grinned at me. "I have some very influential acquaintances."

"Oh." I left it at that. I figured I'd find out one

of these days and right now, I'm still trying to adapt.

I felt a little funny and my skin began to crawl a bit like it did when I was using. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms, and grimaced in pain when my stomach clenched. I frowned, looked over Micah's shoulder and glowered in my reflection in the mirror.

"I thought I was through it all." I whimpered. A tear slid down my face as I wondered if I would ever be truly free of my drug addiction.

Micah's gaze met mine over his shoulder and he stood. He folded the screen of the laptop down and left his work to join me on the bed.

"You should have told me you were in pain."

"What could you do?" I asked, pissed. "I can't believe I'm still going through withdrawal. Will it never end?"

"It is not withdrawal, sweetheart." Micah chuckled.

I looked over at him and watched mesmerized as his pulse beat beneath his skin. It called to me. I covered my mouth with my hands as my teeth lengthened and I had the almost uncontrollable urge to rip and tear at his throat.

I threw myself from the bed and ran from the temptation and Micah followed.

"You must feed, little one. I feel your hunger. I look at you and I can see your hunger." He

pushed my hair from my face. "You are very pale."

I looked over at the mirror and my eyes widened with horror at what I saw there. My skin had turned white, nearly translucent, and the hand that covered my mouth trembled and my eyes glowed with an unholy light. I fought the urge to sink my teeth into my husband's neck and drain him dry.

Micah walked up behind me and took me into his arms. He turned me and bent forward so he could rest his forehead against mine.

"Remember, little one? This is what I do. I teach those, like you, to control the horrible urge you're feeling now." His hands caressed my upper arms, his touch warm and soothing.

"I don't want to hurt you." I stepped back from him and fought to get free. If he held me to him much longer, I wouldn't be able to help myself. I couldn't bear the thought that I might kill him.

"You cannot hurt me, Tasha. I am centuries older and infinitely stronger. I will not allow you to take more than I can give."

He placed his hand on the back of my neck and pushed my face into his shoulder. I stood there for a moment, mesmerized by his heady scent. His body called to mine in more ways than one and I finally gave in and sank my teeth into his shoulder to draw hard on his skin.

Micah groaned. I wasn't sure if it was with pain or pleasure as he held me in his arms as I fed from him.

The pain and the horrible itchy sensation left me and I forced myself to pull my mouth from his skin. I licked my lips. A part of me was horrified at what I'd just done, but another part of me craved more. I pulled from his embrace and stepped away. I needed to put some distance between us because I still didn't trust myself.

"I—I don't know what just happened."

"You fed," Micah smiled. "That is what happened."

I turned away, waving my hand. "I know that. What I meant was, I just ...bit you. You always make me feel so, wonderful first." My face grew warm at the memory.

He gathered me close in his arms.

"You did very well, little one. I did not have to stop your feeding. You recognized the feeling of fulfillment on your own." He pulled his head back to look into my eyes. "That is something to be proud of, not ashamed. Very few of the newly turned can stop feeding on their own. That is why so many of them become Rogue.

I looked up at him and allowed him to see the fear I felt for what I'd become.

"I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

He reached up, brushed my hair back and tucked it behind my ear. I pulled free and paced away from him.

“Of what ...”

“Of what you might become?” He interrupted, looking at me shrewdly. He leaned back against the dresser and crossed his long legs in front of him.

I nodded. How could I get him to understand the fear? The loathing I felt whenever I thought of taking blood from anyone but him. Could I hurt him, kill him?

“No. You cannot,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “I have lived for centuries, training those who have been abandoned by their makers.”

He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I have chosen to teach them how to feed without killing and how to care for themselves.” He cocked his head to the right and raised one perfectly arched brow. “Do you think I would do any less for my own mate?”

He pushed himself away from the dresser and padded toward me, his bare feet silent on the thick, blue carpet.

He stopped a foot in front of me and held his arms open. He welcomed me into his embrace, welcomed me home.

I hesitated for a moment before I bit my lip and stepped into his arms. He wrapped them around

me and I stood surrounded by his scent, enveloped in his warmth, like I'd just been covered by a warm blanket.

I've never been so comfortable with a man, in my life. I'd never even been this comfortable with my father.

Micah's warmth seeped into my bones. It relaxed me and I let him hold me close as I leaned into his hard strength, absorbing his essence.

He rubbed my back, his hands sliding lower, working magic on my abused muscles.

"I don't know if I can make love again," I mumbled into his shoulder. I looked up at him and felt the need to apologize.

Micah smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "This does not have to lead to sex, Tasha. I have gone years without it before. A few days will not hurt me now."

"Years?"

Why had he gone years without having sex? Now that I knew what it was like, my new husband was going to pay hell for a few days off.

He flashed a grin my way, letting me know he'd been camped out in my mind again.

"A few days will be no hardship for me. I have centuries of practiced control." His hand reached down to curve around my bottom. "You, on the other hand," he leaned down to kiss my neck and I moaned.

I looked up him and swallowed convulsively. "That is so not fair," I scowled, as I tried to tamp down the answering need that blossomed within me. The warmth of desire already pooled between my legs.

Micah took pity on me and pulled his hand back up to rest against my lower spine.

"I apologize for teasing you, little one." His smile flashed again. "It's just such a pleasure to have you with me. I find that it is difficult to control those urges."

"Oh," I nodded sagely. "I see. Mr. I-Have-Centuries-of-Control is having problems keeping his hands off me?" I teased.

Micah's eyes darkened. "You don't know the half of it," he growled, just before he dipped his head and kissed my socks off.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“So, where are we meeting Shay and Damien?” I asked Micah over dinner that evening. I hate to admit it, but I kind of missed Shay’s quirky sense of humor. I hadn’t seen her since yesterday when they’d dropped us off to go spend the night in another of their houses an hour or so north of the city.

Micah sipped his soup and gave the bowl a suspicious sniff.

“We’re meeting them at Demon World.”

“Oh. I’ve never been there, but I have heard of the place.” Demon World is a fitting name for a bar that catered to vamps, I suppose. “Is it nice?”

He hedged around the question a bit, just enough to make me feel uncomfortable about going. I looked at him and narrowed my eyes.

“What?”

Micah shrugged. He’d put a little too much effort into making it look careless. I lowered my eyes to my bowl of soup.

I smelled a rat, and wasn't altogether certain that it wasn't coming from my bowl.

"It's mainly a place where our kind goes to let off some steam."

Did he mean Rogues or other Cartuoteys just looking for a bit of excitement?

"Are humans allowed there, or is it a strictly vamp club?" I asked. I knew the answer, yet I wondered if he felt man enough to tell me the truth. I watched, as he fiddled with his spoon for a minute then I took it from him before he made a mess.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you to never play with your food?" I teased, holding the spoon just out of his reach. I waited for his answer, my brows raised in question.

"Actually," he drawled, "She made sure we played with them, daily, so they would not fear us."

I dropped his spoon on the floor and stared at him. He can't be serious! Then I slapped my hand to my face as I remembered. I have no idea how a fact like that could have slipped my mind.

I never once questioned his story when he'd told me the first vamps were aliens. I assumed he told me the truth. After all, if there were such crazy, unbelievable things as vampires, why not aliens too?

That's it. They're bloodsucking aliens from the

planet Jugularia. I fought the urge to laugh hysterically.

“I—I’m sorry.”

I’d completely forgotten the fantastic story he’d told me, last week, was it? I left my apology at its simplest, my face blazing with mortification.

“Do not worry.”

He flashed those incredibly white teeth of his in my face again. “I did not take offence. I was merely joking.”

“You were joking?” How could a person joke about something like that?

“I never played with human children. I was allowed to play only with the children of The Chosen. When I was fed, I drank from a glass.” His face got a far away look as he remembered.

“As children, we are much like the newly gifted. We have little control and even less patience.”

“Oh.” I bit my lip, deep in thought. “Does that mean our children won’t be able to be around other children?” How can a kid be a kid, if they can’t play?

Micah reached over and covered my hand with his. “Of course they can play with other children. They will play with other children of The Chosen.”

I pulled my hand out from under his, stood up and waved my arms wildly only half-aware I was

overreacting and, quite frankly, not giving a crap.

"The Chosen?" I scoffed. "Do you have any idea how arrogant that sounds?" I heard my voice as it raised in pitch, even as I spoke, but was powerless to stop it. "I'll tell you how it sounds." I marched over to him and pressed my finger to his shoulder, poking him, to emphasize the point I was trying to make. "You all put yourselves above humans. You think you're better than us." I hated having to concede the point that vamps are genetically advanced. "And you use us." I gave him a scathing look that left nothing to the imagination as to how I felt about him at the moment. "We're little more to you than a walking Deli."

Micah turned toward me, his eyes blazing with fury. "I have never, in my considerable life, ever treated a human like a walking Deli." He raised his brow. "The entire concept is absurd." He grabbed my hand, dislodging my finger from where it still poked into his shoulder. "Our children do not play with human children, because if they lost their tempers, they could kill."

I felt the blood drain from my face. Okay, so I never thought of that.

"No. You didn't," he said, reading my mind again. "You also did not think that a child may like to show off his 'fangs' to other children, either. It could jeopardize our entire existence."

Holy shit, Tash, you're a know-it-all, self-righteous bitch, aren't you?

I pressed my lips together, not trusting what other font of extreme ignorance would fly from my mouth. I closed my eyes. When would I learn to hold on to my temper and not fly-off-the-handle at the least provocation?

Michah's eyes softened and filled with the affection I knew he was on the outer cusp of starting to feel for me. I knew it wasn't love, no matter what he said, but hey, I'll take whatever I can get.

"You will learn, little one. You have much to learn."

I stuck my tongue out at him. "Stay out of my head. My thoughts are my own and not for public exhibition."

"But I am not the public, I am your mate." He said the word with so much male superiority and smug satisfaction it made me grit my teeth.

"Mate, schmate. Stay out of here," I tapped my temple, "or stay out of here." My hand lowered past my stomach and tapped my crotch. "Your choice."

He shook his head and gave me an exasperated look. "You have such a colorful way with words."

I laughed. "Yeah, I know. You can be a royal pain in the ass, too, sometimes."

I turned away and bent to pick-up his spoon

from the floor. I gathered our untouched meal from the table and dumped the contents of the two bowls into the sink.

I have never been a fan of clam chowder anyway. It always tasted funny to me and the clams always seemed to be a cross between rubbery and slimy. Now that my taste buds have been enhanced ... Well now, it's just plain nasty. I rinsed the bowls with water and put them in the dishwasher before I returned to the table. I leaned my hip against Micah's shoulder and wrapped my arm around him.

"You know, you drive me crazy most of the time, but I think I'll keep you anyway." I smiled down, almost losing myself in his dark walnut eyes.

"So, we're going to Demon World?" I changed the subject.

"Yes."

"Can you dance there?" I knew the answer. I was just gauging his reaction. I'm not afraid to admit it. I love to tease him and I don't have centuries of practiced control. So I gave in to the urge.

"Others have danced there. Yes," he nodded and a look of trepidation crossed his features.

I grinned. Somebody doesn't know how to dance. An infant inside me chanted in a singsong voice. "But can we dance there?"

He sighed, "I do not dance." He pinned me with a glare. It was an attempt to look fierce but he only managed to look comical.

I giggled. "You can't dance, you mean."

His eyes widened and lit with an unholy light and I'm not entirely sure he wasn't serious.

"I choose not to dance."

"Only because you don't know how."

He sat back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and raised his right eyebrow. "I beg your pardon, madam, but I was trained by none other than Babbette Le Fluer, Louis the XVI's own mistress."

I slapped my hand over my mouth to stifle a scream, of shock, excitement, hilarity ...? Take your pick.

"Oh. My. God. You really can't dance?" I waved my hand in front of his incensed face. "Oh, of course you can do those prissy, dark aged, French dances, but you can't dance the way we do now."

"It was not the dark ages," He glowered.

"Whatever," I said waving my hand. I looked up at him from the corner of my eye and wondered if I should take pity on him and show him it wasn't really that hard.

"Can you even waltz, or was that after your time as well?" I shook my head, as he scowled his answer. "Guess not." I suppressed a smile, looked

him up and down, and pursed my lips. I walked around him in a big circle, eyeing him like a prized bull. My mind wandered to the memory of his impressive erections and I shook my head to clear it. I shrugged. I suppose prized bull was an apt analogy if I've ever heard one.

My fingers itched with the desire to touch him. I rubbed my hands together, trying to forget the way his cock felt as I caressed him to full arousal. I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and tried to focus.

"Dancing. Right." I smiled a secret little smile. "This is going to be fun." I walked over to the space-saver CD player that was mounted under one of the cabinets and turned it on. Classical, good. I held my arms out, waiting. "Come on, this isn't going to hurt a bit."

Micah abandoned his chair and stood watching me, leery.

I took his hand and pulled him away from the table then stepped into his arms. "Everything else has gotten harder over the years, but slow dancing? That's gotten a lot easier."

My head was level with his shoulder. I pressed my cheek against it and rocked back and forth to the sound of the music, rubbed my body sensuously against his and took a deep breath, inhaling his spicy scent.

"This is it?" he asked, incredulous.

This is a man who definitely needs to get out more. "This is it," I grinned up at him. "Well, there is dirty dancing, but we won't get into that right now."

"Dirty dancing?" he asked and arched one glossy, black brow.

"I'll tell you about that some other time."

Two hours later, we met Shay and Damien at Demon World. We sat at a small round table near the back, away from the dance floor and prying eyes. I watched the people dance with my elbow rested on the table and my chin in my hand. Which ones were the real vamps?

"Why did we come here, again?" I asked, raising my voice so I could be heard over the extremely loud music. I needed someone to refresh my memory. It's not like I felt the need to expand my vampire acquaintances.

Shay leaned toward me. "We heard a rumor that a bunch of Rogues hang-out here." She looked at Micah, almost as if she wanted to know how much to tell me. "Our group tries to stop them before they become addicted."

I whirled around to face her. "You do it too?"

"Most of us do, Tasha," she said with a nod. "It's the only way to keep the world from finding out we exist."

I scoffed, "Let the world know. Don't you think they can handle it?"

Shay looked at me like I was a burger short of a Happy Meal. "Are you nuts?" she asked, "If we allowed the general populace to know of our existence, we would be locked up, poked, prodded and used for medical research." She reached out to put her hand on mine. "Don't you realize that? What do you think the governments of the world would give to be able to study the way our bodies repair themselves? Or they would try to force us to become some sort of super soldiers."

A picture of us all captured and mutilated so scientists could study the accelerated healing rates our bodies possessed made me swallow visibly. Not to mention the horrible thought of being pressed into Military service.

"Well, I didn't think of that before, but I am, now." I gave her a sheepish look. "I never put much thought into it, to tell you the truth."

Micah stiffened next to me. He stood and stretched slowly, as if he had all the time in the world. Damien did the same.

Shay looked up at them with fear in her eyes.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked, looking from them to Shay, since the men were no longer talking. They acted so distant it was almost as if they weren't even in the same room with us. Yet there they both stood, their attention turned inward, like very realistic statues.

“They sense a Rogue,” Shay whispered. She looked around, her green eyes wide.

“I don’t feel anything.”

“You wouldn’t. You are a Guide. Just as they cannot feel an open portal, we cannot feel the Rogue.”

I frowned. I keep forgetting that little piece of my heritage. I was a Guide. Forever doomed to closing portals to dimensions that allowed lascivious sex demons to roam the earth raping and pillaging their unsuspecting victims. And they were just from one other dimension. I shuddered at the thought of what can come from all of those other planes of existence I’ve heard about.

“Stay here,” the two men said at once.

Micah nodded in my direction for an instant. His eyes were empty, distant, almost as if he’d already gone. Was he mentally tracking the Rogues?

“We must stay here while they find them. If they cannot be helped, they will be forced to take them to the others for punishment.” Shay explained.

I sat on the chair across from her, dazed. “I think I’m finally beginning to understand. Cartuoteys are good vampires who protect humans from the bad vampires. Am I right?”

Shay shook her head and covered my

trembling hand with her own.

"What?" I looked over at her, scared. I'd just about been afraid to ask the question.

"They don't just hunt Rogues."

I shook my head. "Oh, don't even go there. Please," I gasped. But she continued anyway.

"Cartuoteys protect The Chosen and humans alike, from all of the evil supernatural beings."

I scrunched my eyes closed and fought the ridiculous urge to stick my fingers in my ears and sing the Star Spangled Banner as loud as I could. And I know all of the words.

"I don't want to hear this, I don't want to hear this, I so don't want to hear this," I chanted, when the national anthem didn't work.

Shay continued, ruthlessly spilling her guts on all things paranormal.

"Let me get this straight," I said thirty minutes and three sloe-gin fizzes later. "Cartuoteys guard us from Demons, Imps, Goblins, Gremlins and Rogues?"

Shay nodded, "That's pretty much it." She frowned, "Well, I think there's more, but I can't remember and quite frankly, Damien shelters me from almost all of it. Being a Cartuotey means he guards us not only from the entities I mentioned, but from the fear that the knowledge of their existence would instill in us."

I sat across from her and banged my forehead

on the table. "I didn't ask for this," I said and brought my head up to look into her eyes. "I didn't ask for any of this."

I reached down to rub my belly. I felt a bit queasy and I wondered if it was the alcohol. I'd ordered it before I thought of my pregnancy, but Shay assured me it wouldn't harm my new physiology or that of my unborn child.

"Oh, my," Shay said from across the table as she rubbed her stomach.

Something's up. I no sooner had that thought entered my mind, than I doubled over, crying out with agony. I couldn't stand it. The pain was so intense it brought tears to my eyes. Like my stomach was trying to digest ground glass. A portal had just been opened.

A big one.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Micah!

I mentally screamed his name and hoped he would hear me. I know we have some sort of mental link, but I'm still not quite sure how it works.

Someone has opened a huge portal. I can't close it on my own. At least I'm pretty sure I couldn't do it.

The vibrations that came from the portal were more concentrated and a lot stronger than the last ethereal gateway and I'd needed Micah's help with that one, as well.

I got the impression that he was fighting for his life and I berated myself for being so needy.

You are the most independent woman I have ever known. Do not worry that you have any failings. I see none.

I tried to smile at his thoughtfulness, but I know it looked more like a grimace, as another wave of pain hit me, doubling me over.

Shay still sat, half leaning across the table, panting into her drink as she tried to ride it out.

"We have to be pro-active," I told her and slid toward the outer edge of the booth. "I can't just sit here and wait for the guys to come rescue me like some sort of damsel in distress."

She looked up. The intense pain was written on her face and reflected in her eyes. "I think I'm in labor."

"Oh, God. Just what we do not need!"

She rolled her eyes. "Tell me about it. If I am, this baby's a month and a half early."

"Jesus!" I closed my eyes. That one word was the closest I've been to a prayer in five years.

"See if you can find a doctor or a midwife, in this place." She panted funny and I wondered who it was that taught vamps natural childbirth classes.

I slid the rest of the way out of the booth and looked around the noisy bar.

"Hey," I scowled, "If all vampires are Cartoteys, why are all of these guys still here?" I jerked my head, indicating the men still on the dance floor. "Shouldn't they be out helping Micah and Damien?" I scowled at the men who were still dancing. Half of them looked as if they were having some sort of seizure. No wonder Micah didn't want to dance.

"Only full Cartoteys take it so seriously.

Besides, most of these people are probably human and the vampires who are made, just don't care."

"Full Cartuoteys?"

She pointed up. "You know, the ones from out there."

"Oh. Well, hell, no wonder there are so many Rogues running around. If the general populace doesn't give a sh ... crap."

I turned from the table and walked out onto the dance floor. I tapped a few shoulders, trying to ask where to find a doctor or a midwife.

"Get lost, pitiful human," one young woman said as she turned toward me baring her filed canines.

I grinned, allowed my incisors to lengthen and decided to have some fun. "Bite me, wannabe, if you dare."

Her eyes rounded and she apologized quickly. "Forgive me, Mistress. What did you need to know?" She asked with her head bowed.

I looked around at the rest of the couples and wondered if any of them were real vamps. And would I trust one of these kooks to touch Shay even if there was a doctor here? I sighed. What real choice did I have?

"I need a doctor or a midwife, fast. My sister is in labor." Sister? Where in the hell had that come from? Well, it felt right and I didn't have time to argue with myself about it right now.

The girl turned, stepped from her lover's arms and hurried over to the DJ's booth. She turned off the music, snatched up his cordless microphone, and ran back to me.

I shook my head. "Why didn't I think of that?"

She grinned and winked before she put the microphone to her mouth. "Attention, humans, vampires, and scum sucking denizens of the underworld, we are in need of a midwife, doctor or nurse. A new life trembles on the cusp of entering our magical world."

There was a small commotion back by the bathrooms before I saw the DJ. He'd hurried from the restroom. No doubt, to retrieve his microphone.

"And I'll bet he didn't even take the time to wash his hands, either. Yech!" I turned to the girl and flicked my gaze to the mic. "Get rid of it. Believe me, you don't want this guy touching you," I said, as he stalked toward us.

"Uh, oh." The girl said, as she ducked behind her date. "Cover me, Billy." She brought the instrument back to her lips. "Any medically trained personnel, please report to the large table in the back, under the picture of Bella Lugosi."

The girl stuck the microphone under her shirt, hiding it from the DJ as he passed by. He headed for our table, he obviously thought he would find his microphone there.

The girl threw it when his back was turned. She covered her mouth with horror at the sound of the muffled thud that came through the speakers, and the angry exclamation that followed.

"Hey, Steve?" Someone called out from the area where the microphone had landed. "We just found your mic, someone just conked Carlos on the head with it."

"Yeah!" another voice called out. "And that shit hurt, too!"

We watched a well-dressed man extricate himself from the crowd and approach Shay. I moved to join her. What if he was another Rogue and I'd just led him to her? I hurried over to show my support, biting my thumbnail, nervous.

"I'm a doctor, how far apart are the contractions?" he asked as he knelt down next to her. He grabbed her wrist and took her pulse.

She held up a finger as she panted her way through another contraction. "Hee, hee hoo. Hee, hee hoo."

We waited while she repeated this exercise a few more times then sighed with relief and relaxed when the contraction was over.

Shay looked him over, suspicious. "What would a doctor be doing in Demon World?" she asked. Clearly not sure she wanted to trust him.

He bent his head and sighed. "I don't have

much of a choice. Fifteen years ago, a female Rogue thought it would be ... interesting to have a male harem."

"Well at least you're not some kooky wannabe." Shay moaned, with pain, as another contraction took hold, and he was all business.

"How far are the contractions apart?" he asked again.

"They're about two minutes apart, already." She turned toward me and smiled ruefully. "Sorry, hon, but you're going to have to handle this one on your own." She stood up and allowed the man to help her to her feet, his hand under her arm.

"Come on, let's get out of here and head to my car. It's bad enough that my baby is going to be premature, I definitely don't want to have it in a nightclub." Then she grinned, "Besides, Damien has the limo set up with emergency supplies. He knew something like this was going to happen." She shot me a grin and shook her head. "I used to tease him about being paranoid. I'll never live this down, you know."

I watched her leave and wished I could follow. But the dull ache in my belly reminded me there were bigger things at stake and this was no time to be squeamish.

There was an open portal out there and I had to find it. I sat back down at the table and cleared

my head, concentrating on finding the open gateway. It's not an easy feat in a nightclub and with an audience. With my hands in position, I was able to locate the portal. Only it wasn't really a portal at all.

A portal, as I have been seeing them, is like an open doorway. This was a tear. It looked like a long, jagged-edged hole in the pavement of a parking lot. I frowned. I'd seen that place before. I knew where it was, if I could only remember ...

I opened my eyes and saw the young couple staring at me.

"What?" I asked, almost impatiently and wondered if I'd suddenly grown a penis on the top of my head. I fought the urge to reach up and feel. That was just stupid.

"You're a real vampire," they said simultaneously. "We've never met a real vampire before." They looked at each other and nodded.

"Can you turn us?"

I shook my head. "I have no idea how, I was just made myself."

"Oh." They looked disappointed.

"Look," I said as I alternated my attention between them. "I have to go. I have to find someone." I regarded them thoughtfully. "You guys wouldn't happen to know where a purple brick building is, would you? It would have to be pretty close. Within a few miles."

The girl brightened, eager to please.

“Sure! I know where it is. It’s south of here on Eastern, somewhere between thirty-second street and fifty-fourth. I’m not exactly sure where.”

“Thanks,” I said with a smile. “At least it gets me close.”

“Hey,” Billy scowled at her. “Why’d ya just tell her like that? You could have used the information to get her to change us.”

The girl rolled her eyes and slapped him on the back of the head. “Didn’t you hear her say that she didn’t know how? Geeze, Billy, clean the shit out of your ears!”

I left them to finish their argument and ran out to the car. I looked around inside it, hoping to find a spare set of keys. But no luck.

That figures.

I started hoofing it down twenty-eighth street, hoping I’d get there in time to prevent a major catastrophe.

Around Division, I felt the need to hurry and I started to run. I surprised myself with my newfound ability to run very, very fast. I just hoped no one was paying attention to the not so skinny blonde, running down the side of the road at about forty miles per hour.

I turned south down Eastern and put on a burst of speed and tried to stay in the shadows. I ran through parking lots and people’s front yards,

feeling an urgent need to be there. Now.

About a block from the tear, I heard a scream. It was a woman. "Dammit," I whispered and slowed down. I knew I couldn't leave her to face whatever it was alone. What if it was another damned Rogue? The last thing I wanted was to find the woman drained dry and her throat slit from ear to ear.

I slowed down a little bit more as I approached, not wanting to pass the poor woman who obviously needed my help. I opened a gate in a nearby cul-de-sac and entered someone's backyard. The yard was full of robed people. Their manner of dress looked familiar and the hair on the back of my neck prickled.

I hoped it wasn't a trap. After my narrow escape from being sacrificed last week, this group made me nervous. Micah said I wouldn't die if I got shot, but I didn't want to test it. It could still hurt like hell. Besides, there are things in this world that are a lot worse than death.

I hesitated until I heard the scream again. The shriek was cut off, followed by a muffled sob. They'd apparently gagged her.

"It's a good thing Harvey thought to tell his neighbors we'd be rehearsing a play tonight." One of the robed figures said.

Another laughed. "Yeah, I know. Otherwise there'd be cops all over us. And I don't know

about you guys, but I want my turn this time.”

I stepped up behind them. What was going on and who was screaming and why? The screams sounded too real to be just an act. Besides I could feel the woman’s terror. I don’t know how I could feel it. Maybe it was some newly acquired ability brought on by my change to one of The Chosen.

What the hell?

The figures all shifted and moved forward. They were standing in line!

I peeked out around them, in an attempt to see what in the world was happening.

“I can’t wait to finally close on that house in the country. I’ll have that three hundred and fifty acres out in the middle of nowhere and we won’t have to worry about how much they scream while we fuck ‘em.”

Excuse me? I know I didn’t hear that right.

I couldn’t take the screams anymore. I closed my eyes and prayed that being a vampire – no matter how newly made I was – would help me now. Otherwise, I’d be next. I squared my shoulders and braced myself. I took a deep breath, and screwed my courage back up into my chest from where it had fallen to my feet. I tried not to think of the consequences of what I was about to do.

I walked past the two men in front of me and they stopped talking. I kept walking and the men

in the line all stopped their conversations as I walked past them, yet no one made a move to stop me.

My step faltered when I got a glimpse of the horror that awaited me if I couldn't manage to overpower all of these sick bastards.

At least twenty or thirty of the robed men surrounded a covered gazebo. Inside the small structure was an altar, surrounded by various colored candles and a pentagram was drawn on the floor with chalk. It was what I saw on the altar that made me gag.

A young woman or girl, I couldn't tell which, was tied naked and spread eagle on the top. I watched horrified as one grunting man pumped in and out of her abused body, shooting his semen onto her exposed breasts. When he left her, another man took his place, pounding into her with no mercy, as blood and semen ran from between her legs.

My lips thinned and I gritted my teeth. I fought the tears that threatened to run down my cheeks when I met her hopeless, tear filled eyes. At least she was still alive.

I looked around at the robed figures, amazed that no one had tried to stop me from entering. I stared at the blood stained altar knowing they had no intention of letting either of us leave this place alive.

I couldn't stand to watch this anymore. I had to do something and do it fast. There was a giant hole in the parking lot next door, that led to another dimension, and I had to fix it. Who knew how many of those strange and evil creatures were being set loose on the city?

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I hoped like hell I could pull this off. Otherwise, I was about to be raped and murdered by a bunch of people who looked a lot like Satan worshippers. I gathered my strength, my wits, and my courage about me and stepped within the circle surrounding the large, stone altar.

God help me. I hope this works.

I turned to look at every one of the men who stood around the altar and raised my arms. I almost lost what little courage I still possessed, then, but the looks of depravity sent my way, gave me the strength I needed to go on.

"In the name of my Dark Lord, I order thee to release this human, that he may enjoy her supple body." That got their attention.

"He has answered us! He has sent an emissary!" A man called out, excited.

"Our Lord Satan has answered our prayers," Still another one said.

One man grabbed a knife and held it above his head. "She shall be his."

The girl stared in horrified silence as the knife

quickly made its descent toward her heart.

I reached out with one hand and stopped the man's two, which held the knife headed for her chest. The show of my vampire strength won over the skeptics in the crowd.

"No, you fools!" I called out loud enough for everyone to hear. "He has taken human form and wishes that she be taken to him. Untie her and give her a robe," I demanded imperiously.

Then I stood up straighter and willed my eyes to glow red. The crowd in front of me took a cautious step back and I fought the urge to grin with triumph.

The girl stared at me with renewed horror. I can't say I blamed her, at all. I wouldn't want to have to go through this, either.

With any luck, Micah would be able to compel her and make her think this was all a horrible nightmare.

It wasn't long before the girl stood before me, dressed in a blood red robe, new tears ran down her face as she, no doubt, contemplated a horrific end.

She shuffled past me and whispered the Lord's Prayer. She was obviously prepared for a horrible death at the hands of a madman who believed himself to be Satan, himself.

I admired the way she carried herself as she refused to cower before these men and walked

with her head high, only limping slightly.

She finished reciting the prayer, stopped and looked me in the eyes. Even the men had refrained from looking me directly in the eyes after their little glowing stunt.

The woman had courage and spirit. I'll give her that.

"I will not submit," she said, proudly. "He will have to force me, just as these animals have." She waved her hand toward the robed men.

I watched her, proud that she still had so much spunk after everything she'd been through. I studied her for a moment sure that she was a Guide. My guess was the tear opened when her virginity was taken in the name of Satan.

If so, these sick bastards had the idea right, they just didn't have enough knowledge to steal her powers. They'd only borrowed them for a bit. Either that or she knew she was a Guide and opened the portal in an attempt to gain assistance from the creatures on the other side. Like when I called Brock a few weeks ago when Camen had attacked me.

"I wasn't really sent by Satan," I whispered in her ear.

She turned her sad, cinnamon eyes on me. "But you said you were sent by the Dark Lord."

"I said in the name of my Dark Lord." I didn't tell her, my Dark Lord was Micah and he

wouldn't want anything from her.

"She lies," someone cried. "The woman lies, she was not sent by our Lord Satan!"

"Run," I screamed to her. "Run, and don't look back."

It was already too late. Two men tackled her, bringing her to the ground. They ripped the robe from her already abused body. One man wasted no time as he grabbed her breast and settled himself between her bruised thighs.

Suddenly, a loud roar rent the air and the man went flying. I looked up to see another man standing over the girl as she stared at him with renewed horror.

The new man towered over the woman, his nearly seven-foot frame covered by a black leather duster. He removed his coat, dropping it over her.

"Cover yourself."

The smooth rich baritone of his voice flowed over me like warm butter. I frowned at the effect it had on me. I shouldn't have reacted to it the way I did. As Micah's mate and a newly made vampire, I should have been resistant to his compulsion.

He turned my way, his silver eyes boring straight through me, the irises swirling like mercury.

I shivered uncomfortably. I looked death in the eye as I attempted to shake off the degenerate who'd just started to paw at my clothing.

I slapped at the man as he reached up and grabbed my ass. Then I kicked him away from me when he wouldn't let go. The man flew about ten feet backwards.

"Hey," I grinned. "I guess I don't know my own strength."

The Cartuotey removed the remaining threat from the girl and walked toward me. I knew he was a Cartuotey. No one else could be so handsome and compelling. And no one else would have cared enough to try to rescue us from these monsters alone.

The sound of his voice was almost enough to make me want to fall at his feet and beg to hear more of its musical baritone. I shook my head to clear it of his compulsion.

The man scowled in my direction, his dark, brown brows cruel slashes over those beautiful silver eyes. He grabbed every man who tried to harm either one of us two women and sent them flying.

The sickening sound of bones as they snapped and broke was loud as he wrenched their necks before tossing them away, like so much garbage. A few of them ran out through the gate, smart enough to realize that they were out-matched.

The Cartuotey turned his nearly dead eyes on me once more, looking me up and down, he arched one perfect brow in question.

"Were you planning to help her service all of these men?" He brought his arm around in an arc, encompassing the area that was now littered with broken bodies.

I heard the poor girl gasp in outrage at his comment and, before I could think, before I could stop myself, my hand shot out, and I slapped his too perfect face.

He just stood there and stared me, my hand print a red mark on his cheek. He lifted the corner of his mouth, in what I suppose, for him anyway, was a smile.

"That is a strange way to thank me for saving your lives." His eyes narrowed. "Go fix the tear, Guide. Why have you insisted on wasting your time to save this woman when you know you have a job to do?"

"Because, Cartuotey," I spat. "This woman is the poor, previously untapped and untouched Guide, whose powers were used to open that fissure." I bared my teeth in what I hoped would pass for a smile. "I need her help to close it. How did you expect me to close it while they kept feeding it her stolen power in an attempt to keep it open?" I paced away from him and snarled, "You're such a jerk. Someone needs to teach you some manners."

His eyes widened and his attention turned back to the girl, now huddled within the folds of

his long, black, leather coat, sobbing.

He sighed and stepped over the prone bodies to approach her. The Cartuotey reached down with his right hand and offered to help her up. She shied away from his touch, quickly shuffling away from him with a frightened whimper.

He looked down at his hand and wiped it on his pants, then looked over his shoulder at me. I could have sworn, for a moment, that those frightening eyes revealed a vulnerability that was previously not present.

I shook my head, determined not to feel sorry for the arrogant ass.

“Go repair the tear, Guide. Too many of the Narctou have escaped already.”

I skirted around him, unsure if he would retaliate for my slap earlier, then bent to help the girl up.

A closer inspection of her battered face revealed her as a young woman, not too much younger than myself. It was her size that made me think she was just a girl.

“How old are you?” I gazed down as she looked up at me and pushed her hair back and I noticed the dark circles under her eyes and a swelling along her jaw. Dirt smudged her cheeks and blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

“Twenty four.”

So, she wasn't a girl, then. And she was plenty

old to have not been divested of her virginity before. It seems we may have a little in common.

"I know how you feel," I said as I pulled her to her feet. I didn't, not really, but I didn't know what else to say. "Just so you know, a Cartuotey," I gestured toward the man, when she gave me a confused look. I was unwilling to call him a vampire. I needed her cooperation, not her hysterics. "Someone like him will never harm you intentionally." I shot a disdainful glance over my shoulder. "Even if they are thoughtless, arrogant asses."

I don't know how I knew that, but I felt that it was the truth, deep within my bones. I wrapped an arm around her and led her out of the yard toward the portal.

"What is a Cartuotey? I've never heard of them."

I sighed and tried to think of what to say to keep her curiosity at bay until one of them could explain it to her. I didn't want to terrify her, and I was sure I would if I told her, they would be knocking on her door to screw her brains out from time to time if she didn't use her powers regularly. She definitely didn't need to hear that, right now. Besides, that was for one of them to tell her.

I opted for a partial truth.

"They protect us from evil entities and make us whole." I didn't want to tell her how they made us

whole, exactly. Those bastards tonight ruined that for her.

I shot a glance her way and wondered if she would ever be able to trust a man again. Especially one with the kind of power a vampire wielded.

We walked through an opening in the fence and I pulled her down the street to show her the tear.

“They did this when they stole your power. They took the untapped power within you, which you were meant to use for good. They tried to open a portal to the netherworld.” I waved my hand toward it as a goat-like creature ran out of the opening. “You can see the other-dimensional creatures slipping through, even now. That was an incubus,” I pointed to the creature. “We must close it before too many more escape.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

She stared at the open portal and brought her hand to her chest. "I did this. I wanted it to open closer to where I was being kept. I wanted to use one, or more, of the creatures to aid me against those ... monsters." Her voice broke. "They refused to come," she sobbed. "If I had been more experienced, maybe I would have been able to open the portal properly and in the right place."

She looked at me with huge, light brown eyes and I smiled softly. "You know you're a Guide?"

She nodded, new tears flooding her eyes. "My aunt and grandmother tried to keep me sheltered from all of this, but they found us." She gestured back to the house where she had been held prisoner. "I don't know how to close it." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I've never had to close one before."

"Well, you're one up on me. I just learned what I am a couple of weeks ago. At least you know what to expect." I patted her arm and tried to

comfort her. "Just picture an impenetrable door in your mind and close it over the portal. That's all I've ever done and it seems to work fine. I just learned how to do this, myself."

She turned shy eyes on me. "What is a Cartuotey? You never did answer."

"They are the equivalent to supernatural policemen." I shrugged and left my explanation at that. "We have our work cut out for us here." I walked around to the other side of the tear and examined its jagged edges and wondered if we could close it. Energy popped and cracked around the edges.

"Your untapped powers could have surged as you opened the portal. When they stole your innocence. Then the men continued to feed it energy, through you, to keep it open. Now it must be drawing its power from somewhere on the other side. I need your help to close it. I can't do this by myself, it's too powerful."

I knelt down next to the tear and placed my hands on the ground near the opening.

The Narctou filtered through at an incredible rate. The vamp stood near, taking care of them as they attacked us and tried to pull us into the hole. The tear became smaller as I concentrated on it, but it refused to go past a certain point. The energy that poured from the open fissure was too great for me to close it by myself.

The girl knelt in front of me and placed her hands on the ground. We looked at each other from opposite sides of the tear. She nodded and closed her eyes. We both stayed on our knees, our hands near the edge, as the tear slowly grew smaller.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end and I felt a presence behind me. It distracted me enough to look.

Micah smiled down at me then rested his hand on my head, stroking my hair.

"You had me worried, little love. I couldn't help you." He reached out and calmly grabbed a Narctou by the neck and hurled it back into the hole. It screamed its fury at being sent back to its own dimension, where it had no supernatural powers.

I shrugged. "I knew you'd be here as soon as you could."

"Damien and I would have been too late. That was why we sent Gabriel." He turned slightly and indicated the new Cartuotey, who stood several feet away. His eyes were glued to the girl who still knelt before me, her palms flat on the rough pavement.

I gaped up at him. "You sent that relic?"

"Relic?" he frowned then looked from me to his friend.

We both watched as the man in question

decapitated another “visitor” and sent its body back through the portal. I fought the urge to gag.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah. Mr. Six-and-a-half-feet-of-total-stupidity.”

“Gabriel is six-foot eight,” Micah informed me.

“Whatever.”

The girl cleared her throat. “It’s getting bigger again. I don’t know what to do to stop it.”

“Dang it!” I cursed, and settled back down onto the ground to finish my work. I looked up at Micah. “We’ll finish this later.” I gave him a meaningful look before I got back down to business.

Geez. The man is almost a thousand years old. You’d think he’d have better taste in friends.

It took a lot of power to repair the chasm. I almost wasn’t able to manage it. Not long after we began to attempt the repair the second time. I felt Micah’s immense power flow through me as it rushed to help mend the dimensional tear.

His power wrapped around me and kept me safe as I pulled massive amounts of energy from the woman. So much energy that I had to wonder if she wasn’t The Chosen One, my mate had mentioned, instead of me.

I came to realize then, that even though I didn’t have a lot of power myself. I was able to draw it from others and channel massive amounts of it toward closing the portal.

I used both the girl and Micah as anchors to bind me to this world, even as the energy of the portal tried to pull me down.

Someone on the other side attempted to pull me through. So they would have their own Guide to open portals, no doubt. The power of the fissure seeped into me. There was a presence there. Someone wanted to turn me to the darkness that waited within the dark pit. The entity on the other side whispered unbelievable promises to me, in an effort to tempt me to abandon my world and join him in the next dimension.

My hands and body tingled with the effort to hold the power at bay as it seeped through the barriers in my mind and tempted me with everything I had ever dreamed of. I gritted my teeth against it and fought the horrible urge to give up and let them come.

I ignored the horrible sounds of death around me as Micah and his friend protected us from the grotesque Narctou. Blood splattered my cheek when a leg flew past me and into the hole, followed by the rest of the limp body.

The tear slowly narrowed as the portal finally closed. When the last fraction of an inch was finally sealed, I sagged to the ground, completely spent.

The girl - whose name I learned, through the tapping of her powers was Alicia Chalmers - lay

beside me, her eyes closed, her chestnut lashes dark crescents on her pale cheeks.

I lifted my hand and covered hers in a show of sisterly solidarity. We may not be related by blood, but some ties were stronger.

Then I looked up at Micah and my newly acquired canines lengthened. They shot from my gums in a painful manner. Even though he looked exhausted, he bent down and picked me up with a smile.

“You must feed, my love,” he whispered in my ear. His breath brushed the side of my neck and sent a shaft of desire through me. My body clenched in anticipation as he tilted his head and exposed his neck to me.

I buried my head in his shoulder. My mouth watered with anticipation. My gums throbbed around my canines as my body begged for sustenance. I shook my head and denied my need.

“I can’t,” I whispered into his neck, my voice and body trembling with urgency.

I couldn’t bring myself to feed in front of the others. I refused to just stick my teeth into his neck with no foreplay again. Feeding was an orgasmic experience for both parties if it was done correctly.

I glanced up at him and remembered that he was my mate, not just my dinner. I shook my head, squeezed my eyes closed, and realized that the same determination I possessed, which

allowed me to stop my use of drugs, would also help with the development of my feeding habits.

Everything in my new life was ultimately determined by how well a person could control themselves and their urges.

Micah gave me a light squeeze then released me, a proud smile on his face.

"That's my girl." He patted me on the back then quickly backed away as a scream rent the air.

I whirled around, expecting some other horror to appear, only to see Micah's friend approach and stand over Alicia. His face was an implacable mask as he bent toward her.

Alicia screamed again. She attempted to crawl away but she was too weak. She collapsed in front of him with a frightened whimper.

I ran to her, placed myself between them and looked up into those glowing silver eyes. I stared death in the face for the second time in just a handful of minutes. I swallowed thickly as he took a step closer. Terrified, I stood my ground and stared down an ancient vampire.

"Leave her be, Gabriel." The menace in Micah's voice was clear as he watched every movement his friend made and stood ready to defend me.

"The woman is mine," Gabriel bit out between clenched teeth, as if he dared Micah to tell him differently. "Only my mate would have been able

to draw power from me as she has.”

“Perhaps,” Micah agreed then nodded his head. “But she must choose. You cannot force her.” He cocked his brow at the offensive stance Gabriel had assumed as he prepared to attack me. “You would not be like the miscreants we have all faced tonight and take the choice from her, will you?”

Gabriel looked from Micah to the girl on the ground in front of him. She looked tiny compared to the two men who stood over her. She even looked tiny compared to me, like a little broken doll that had been thrown to the pavement.

“Do you think she will choose you, now? Let my mate and I take her. We will care for her, heal her, and protect her. Tasha, my mate, will help her come to terms with what has happened tonight. Then perhaps, in time, she will come to you of her own free will.”

Gabriel’s gaze was still on Alicia, his eyes were unreadable and I feared the worst. He staggered back a bit. When the glow ebbed from his eyes, I realized, for the first time, how weak he really was.

“Please attend to my mate. She is injured.”

I bit back a smile at that. I knew from Micah’s personality how much effort it took for him to ask and not demand.

I knelt down beside her and bent to whisper in

her ear. "Can you hear me?"

She nodded and licked her split, swollen lips. "Keep him away from me, please," she sobbed.

Tears slipped from my eyes and ran down my cheeks unchecked. Tears for this poor woman and for the horror and degradation she'd gone through tonight. I was amazed that she'd still had enough strength to help me when I needed it, strength enough to tap into a vampire's immense energies.

I put my hand on her head and wished with all of my might that I had the power to help heal her mind. To make the horror of this night lessen, if not completely go away. I pulled my hand away quickly when I noticed her wounds were closing at an accelerated rate. The split on her lip healed, with no trace, in a matter of seconds.

"Micah?" My voice trembled as I stood and backed away from her. "Why is she healing so quickly?" She was a human. She shouldn't heal at such an accelerated rate. I peered down at her still form. Her wounds no longer continued to heal since I'd stepped away from her.

I lifted my hands and stared down at them with disbelief. It couldn't be me. I'd never had that effect on anyone before.

Gabriel looked from me to the girl. She still lay like the dead on the pavement. She appeared unconscious.

"Heal her, Guide."

"I have a name," I snapped. My nerves were shot and I was damn tired of his imperialistic demands. I turned to Micah. "How can this be happening? People don't just develop magical abilities like this in an instant."

Yet I had.

Micah stepped forward. "Tasha," he whispered, "You must heal her if you can." He gazed at me with hunger that made me burn and then raised his hand to push a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "I'm not certain what has happened to you, little one. But you must help her if you have that ability."

I nodded. Of course I had to help her, but who was going to help me?

Micah rested his hands on my shoulders and I immediately felt ashamed. He would help me, of course. I just didn't know how to be dependant on him yet. He gave me a light squeeze. I settled back down onto my knees and looked at my hands with trepidation.

I placed my hands on Alicia's head again and her face healed completely. Every cut scratch and abrasion she sported disappeared before my eyes in seconds. I don't know what, or how many internal injuries I healed.

I jumped back when her eyes flew open.

She sat up and rubbed the back of her neck. "Thank you for helping me," she said, looking me

directly in the eyes again. "They would have killed me if you hadn't come along." She raised a hand and felt her lips. She looked at me with wide eyes when she realized they were no longer split and swollen.

"They would have killed you both if I hadn't come along," Gabriel added.

I closed my eyes and willed the idiot to shut up before he ruined every chance he would ever have to make Alicia his.

"Gabriel," Micah said as he gave the man an unreadable look. "I would have a word with you." He indicated that they should step away from us. They moved to a corner of the lot to talk. I could still hear them with my newly acquired abilities but, apparently, it wasn't me that Micah was worried about.

"You cannot force her to accept you, Gabriel. You would be no better than those who have stolen her innocence this night." He cocked his head the side and paused. "Someone has called the police."

Gabriel was quiet for a moment while he obviously listened to the approaching vehicles. "I hear the sirens. We must quit this place immediately."

It always amazed me that they functioned so well in today's society when they still spoke the way they did. Old habits do die hard, I guess.

Gabriel wasted no time. He strode back to us, his tone as forceful and autocratic as ever.

“We must go.” His gaze flicked over Alicia, as he checked her condition.

She was still conscious and, she was better, but to run, or even walk, was totally out of the question. She could barely stand.

I looked between the two men. There was no doubt in my mind which one of them would want to carry the girl.

I leaned down to speak to her. “We have to leave quickly, before the authorities arrive.”

Alicia peered up at me with frightened eyes. “We have to report what happened.” She drew Gabriel’s coat tighter around her trembling form. “I don’t know if I can stand to have them touch me. Do you think they will touch me?” She shuddered visibly and drew her knees to her chest. She rocked back and forth on the ground.

I blinked and forced back more tears of frustration. I should have been faster.

Do not blame yourself, little one. How could you have been here before they harmed her? It was her impending violation that forced her to open the portal, alerting you to their presence.

I heaved a sigh and threw Micah a thankful look. He was right. It was too late the second the gateway had been opened.

I cleared my mind and looked Alicia in the

eyes. I knew what I had to do. She would never allow this from either of the men.

I took a deep breath and gave my first attempt at compulsion. "We cannot stay here. The police would not listen to the truth. They would believe us to be delusional."

Alicia's eyes glazed over and she nodded. "They would think we were delusional."

"You must allow Gabriel to carry you."

She gave a little whimper of distress. I smiled softly and tried to assure her. How could I make her comfortable with the idea of being held in Gabriel's arms?

"He would never harm you." I laid my hand on her shoulder. "I will be there with you. You will not be alone with him."

Her eyes glazed over a bit and she turned to look at him. "Gabriel will not harm me, you will be there."

I stood and nodded to Gabriel. "I think she'll let you carry her now. At the very least," I dropped my voice to a whisper. "She'll be more susceptible to your compulsion." I gripped his forearm. "And don't you dare abuse it."

Micah took my hand in his and pulled me away from his friend. "We must leave this place. Now."

The sirens were louder, almost upon us. Gabriel scooped Alicia up into his arms and we all

ran to the back of the lot.

My mouth dropped open as I watched Gabriel raise himself and Alicia up over the eight-foot tall chain-link fence.

Micah's fingers squeezed mine.

"Imagine that you are as light as a feather. The wind is so strong, it carries you up and over the fence."

I felt my feet leave the ground as I did what he asked.

"I'm flying! I don't believe it, I'm friggin' flying!"

He grinned at me. "I'd forgotten how to be excited about our abilities, until we were brought together. You make everything new to me again, Tasha. That alone makes you precious to me."

He wrapped his arms around me and I reveled in his embrace. I didn't even realize we'd started to make our descent until my feet touched the ground.

I looked over to see Alicia and Gabriel watching us. Gabriel looked on with ... longing? Alicia watched us with barely disguised disgust.

I couldn't help feeling a little bit sorry for Gabriel. He certainly has his work cut out for him. That's for sure.

Yes, he does. But he will give her them time she needs. After all, if there is one thing he has, it is time.

"Come. This way," Micah said, as he pulled me behind him.

"Where are we going?" I asked as I struggled to keep up with the two men. I don't know if it was their age, or the fact that they were male, but they could sure move fast.

Micah cast a glance over his shoulder. "We're going back to Demon World. Shay and Damien can give us an alibi, if we should need one."

I shook my head. "Shay's in labor. I doubt either of them will be able to help us out with that."

Micah's eyes widened a fraction. It was the only indication he gave that he was either shocked or worried.

I was tempted to touch his mind to find out which, but I couldn't very well keep demanding that he mind his own business, if I wasn't minding mine.

"You must be mistaken. The baby isn't due for weeks yet." He said as he held my hand in his and dragged me along with him at an incredible pace.

"I know. That's what Shay told me, right before she told the doctor - who just happens to be a vampire, by the way - that her contractions were two minutes apart."

"We must go to them," Micah said as he took both of my hands in his, turned them over and studied my palms.

I shook my head. "We don't know what effect, if any, I would have on her or the baby."

"We must return to them in case there are any complications."

I didn't want to go. It's not that I didn't want to help Shay if she needed it. A part of me was gung-ho about it. The other, more-sane part was scared shitless. I was afraid that I would do something horrible. Cause some sort of irreparable damage to either Shay, or her child.

After we ran a few minutes, Micah lifted me into his arms and carried me the rest of the way. He still moved faster than I could, even under the burden of my considerable weight. We arrived at the club in record time.

* * * *

I had half hoped we would be too late. That Shay would have had her baby by now, and they would both be fine. What I didn't want to see was a very concerned doctor and a frantic husband.

"She can't die in childbirth like a mortal can, can she?" I asked, confused over the hubbub.

"No, but the baby can," Micah whispered. "They think the baby is already gone. Shay is just doing her best to push the fetus out of her womb so it can be taken care of." He rubbed my back and the gentle motion calmed my frazzled nerves.

Damn! I knew something like this was going to happen. I just knew it.

The doctor knelt just outside the door to the limo and coaxed Shay to push harder.

I tapped him on the shoulder. "May I?"

He scowled at me. "This is not the time for you to play at being a nurse."

I looked at Micah and crossed my arms over my chest. "Well, I tried." I wasn't about to start a fight about my desire to use an ability that may or may not desert me at any time. The last thing I wanted to do was raise false hopes.

Micah reached down and grabbed the man by the neck. "You will allow her to aid Shay." Apparently there was no arguing with him when he had his mind made up.

The doctor nodded rapidly. "Okay, okay. She can help her." He stepped out of the way and walked around to climb into the front seat of the limo, aided by Micah's hand on the back of his neck. On his knees, the doctor leaned over the back of the front seat to supervise.

I knelt down just outside the back door. I can honestly say I wasn't prepared for the sight that met me. The last thing I ever expected to see, in my lifetime, was another woman's bare body. Let alone find myself on me knees between her legs.

This is gross!

The doctor stuck his head over the back of the

front seat.

“Put some gloves on, for God’s sake. It’s going to be messy, at the very least.” He gave me a sober look. “Are you sure you’ll be able to handle this?” He really wanted to know if I was prepared to deliver a dead baby.

I swallowed thickly. “This baby is going to be fine, if I have anything to say about it.”

The doctor just closed his eyes and shook his head. To him, it was hopeless.

I took a deep breath and turned back to Shay. Maybe I was the best person for this after all. At least I had some hope.

I put the gloves on. Not so much as to protect the baby, but my mind told me how nasty this was about to get. I looked up and noticed Damien for the first time as our eyes met. I gave him a wobbly smile and looked away. I reached up between Shay’s legs when he urged her to push.

After two more contractions, the baby slid out into my hands. His tiny blood-soaked body was blue from lack of oxygen. Vampires don’t have to breathe often, unless they want to appear human, but they do have to breathe.

The doctor held out his hands and would have taken him from me, but Micah stopped him. I used the scissors they had stored in the limo to cut the cord and I tied it off with the twine the doctor handed me.

"I don't know why you're even bothering to do that," he said, his look grim, as he examined the lifeless face of the infant in my hands.

I frowned then stepped out of the way so the doctor could attend to Shay and deliver the afterbirth. I cleaned the blood from the tiny body with the soft cloths brought to me from a suitcase in the trunk and swabbed the mucus from the boy's bow-shaped mouth.

"I don't understand." I knew it was too much to ask. My ability to heal had apparently vanished. The powers were probably no more than borrowed energy from the open portal. And now they were gone.

I handed the baby to Micah and removed the gloves. Tears ran down my cheeks as I looked at his perfect little face. I reached out and touched the soft skin of his hand and used my thumb to gently wrap his tiny fingers around my larger one.

As soon as the palm of his hand made contact with my finger, the baby inhaled deeply and let out a bellow that would make any new mother proud. His legs jerked, making a bicycling motion and he stuck his hand in his mouth and sucked on his fingers.

"My baby!" Shay cried, from inside the limo. "Damien, it's our baby."

Damien left her for a moment to run around the limo and take the baby from Micah's arms. He

cradled the wrapped bundle to his chest, looked at me and smiled.

“I don’t know what you did or how you did it, and frankly, I don’t really care. But thank you.”

I gave him a wobbly smile in return. “I’m not sure what I did either.”

“You healed him,” Micah said.

I grimaced. I may be modest, but my mate sure isn’t. “I touched him, Micah. I don’t know what healed him.”

I looked down at my hands and wondered if I could have gained my new powers from the conversion or if the ability to heal is just a residual by-product left by the portal when it tempted me with its power.

Micah wrapped his arms around me and grinned. “It does not matter. You will deal with this just as well as you have dealt with the other impossible things you’ve dealt with lately.”

“I suppose.” I looked over at Gabriel and Alicia. He still held her in his arms. He looked at her like he was a starving man and she was, well, lunch.

Alicia wriggled in his arms.

“Put me down!”

Gabriel held her closer to him. He didn’t even appear to notice her struggles. “I would know your name before I leave you, mate.”

Even I felt the compulsion in his voice. The

command he gave for her to surrender her name was very strong.

Alicia must have felt better, either that, or she'd realized somehow that Gabriel wasn't going to hurt her.

She crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. "Tough crap, Goliath! Put me down."

I hid a small smile behind my hand at the look of total disbelief on his face. Someone needed to tell this guy no, on a regular basis and Alicia just might be the person to do it.

Gabriel bent his head closer to her and smiled. "Only a true mate can deny compulsion," he said his voice smug, as he set her on her feet.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alicia sniffed, as she wrapped his coat tightly around her.

She limped over and stood just behind me to use me as a shield to protect her from Gabriel's intense stare.

"I'm nobody's mate," she returned, her eyes haunted. "I will never submit to that kind of degradation ever again." She reached up and swiped a tear from her cheek. "I'll never let another man touch me like that," she said with a shudder. "Ever."

I knew she meant that now, but hurts do heal. Even grievous wounds like those she'd received today. There is no doubt in my mind that, given

the determination in Gabriel's eyes, she would one day be his. It just wouldn't be tonight.

"I would know your name before you leave me, mate."

My mouth dropped open when Alicia told him to do something that I'm pretty sure is anatomically impossible. Even for a vampire. I took her manner as being too prim and proper for that kind of language. But, I guess not.

She looked around. "I don't know how I'm going to get home." Tears streamed down her face. "I'm not even sure I have a home to go back to."

"Why?"

She turned those haunted cinnamon eyes on me.

"They took me from my home. They ..." she choked on a sob. "They killed my aunt and grandmother when they tried to protect me. I don't have anyone anymore. I'm alone now."

I shook my head. "No, you're not. You have us." I smiled a bit sadly. "You can stay with us as long as you need to." I shot Micah a nervous glance and hoped he wouldn't mind that I'd just opened our home to her.

He winked, letting me know it was okay.

I looked up at Gabriel's somber face, and smiled. If the loneliness that Micah had gone through was any indication. The poor man needed

some hope.

So, I threw him a bone. I wrapped my arm around her and winked at him. "Come on Alicia, let's get you home."

EPILOGUE

Six weeks later:

Micah had been in town, overseeing some business venture and was on his way home. Alicia was with Shay and Damien. They said something about going to the movies.

I sat on the sofa, in the living room and waited for my husband like an unwrapped Christmas present. Well, an almost unwrapped present.

My skin still glowed a soft pink from my warm soak in the small swimming pool that Micah called our tub. My cheeks were hot, flushed with a mixture of desire and embarrassment as I waited for Micah to return. I only hoped he would get here fast before I lost my nerve and ran upstairs to put some clothes on.

After my long, hot soak in the massive tub, I dressed in a new emerald-green crotchless teddy. The matching garter belt held up my black fishnet stockings. My feet were encased in a pair of three-

inch black stilettos that I'd purchased before we were married.

The staff was gone since I gave them the night off and I waited, rather impatiently, for my best friend and lover to return.

Micah found me waiting on the sofa. My legs were spread wide and my hand lazily caressed my pussy. His mouth dropped open when he entered the room. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed visibly and watched my index finger circle my clit in a leisurely exploration.

I stood up slowly. I wanted to be sure he got a good look at all of my exposed attributes. My hands traveled up over my stomach and cupped my breasts. The movement accentuated my exposed cleavage and drew his attention to my hardened nipples. I smiled an invitation as I sauntered toward him.

"Hello, lover."

I wet my lips. My tongue trailed along my lips in a blatant show of my desire. A movement low on his body drew my gaze and my eyes lowered to his crotch. I wished his clothes away as I trembled with suppressed need.

His cock bucked and swayed with anticipation as I approached. My husband was definitely happy to see me.

"Natasha, you look –"

I put my fingers over his lips as he drew me

into his arms. I didn't want talk. I wanted action.

He inhaled deeply, took my fingers into his mouth and suckled my essence from them.

"That's so sexy, Micah," I gasped. I pulled my fingers from his mouth and trailed my hand down the smooth skin of Micah's chest. His breath rushed out in a hiss as my fingers lazily circled his flat, brown nipples.

Micah's hands brushed lightly over my back. They skimmed down over my hips to caress the partially exposed cheeks of my ass.

"How did you know this would turn me on?" he asked, his eyes glazed with desire.

"I'm your woman," I said and pulled from his arms for a moment to turn in a slow circle in front of him. "And I'm dressed in this." I said as I modeled the teddy, making sure to trail my hands over my body as he watched before I stepped back into his arms. "Why wouldn't you be turned on?"

I reached down and grasped his cock. My thumb caressed the tip and rubbed the little pearl of moisture away. He was already straining to hold back his orgasm. Good. It was about time I got to drive him wild.

"Ah, that feels good," he said as he sucked his breath in through his teeth. The muscles in Micah's neck bulged as he fought for control of his body.

The pictures that danced through his mind

were erotic. My skin heated to a burn when I realized this was one of his fantasies come to life.

With his hands still caressing the cheeks of my rear, Micah slowly released each strap of the garter. Then he knelt in front of me and peeled the stockings from my legs. He took his time as he pushed the netting down to let his fingers glide over my heated flesh.

"I've imagined this," he whispered. His breath brushed against my upper thigh as he kissed around the strap of the garter.

I lifted my left foot while he removed my shoe and stocking before placing it back on the floor. Micah's eyes were glazed with need as he forced himself to take his time with the other leg. He rolled the netting down over my calf and caressed the arch of my foot as he pushed the stocking from my toes.

I shook with need and my pent up desire, my legs almost gave out. I put my hand on the wall and buried the other in Micah's hair to steady myself.

"Yesss," I hissed out my pleasure as his tongue flicked through the folds of my nether lips and caressed my swollen clit before he cupped my ass in his hands and buried his face between my legs. He sucked my clit into his mouth and nibbled lightly on the swollen nub. I was so turned on it didn't take long to reach the edge.

I'd never climaxed standing up before, but I guess there's a first time for everything. "Micah!" I screamed out his name, a warning as I stumbled when my legs gave out and I almost fell.

He scooped me up in his arms and carried me back to the couch where he sat me down and spread my thighs. I felt the heat of his gaze like a touch.

"Let me watch you," he urged, taking my hand. He placed it over my glistening, dew-covered curls and watched as I plunged my fingers into my honeyed slit.

I slowly parted my nether lips and my fingers reached unerringly for the little nubbin that I knew would send me over the edge once more.

Micah knelt between my spread thighs, his face tight with passion as he watched me pleasure myself.

"That's it, baby. Bring yourself to it."

I groaned as my fingers slid over my hardened clit. It throbbed and twitched with each little flick of my finger.

Fire climbed up my legs, crawled up to lodge in my belly as I brought myself closer to the edge.

"You're getting closer now, aren't you?" Micah panted. "I can see it." He reached up with both hands and squeezed my nipples through the lacy fabric of my teddy.

I closed my eyes, reveling in the sound of

Micah's raspy, breathless voice.

"Aiiieee!" I keened, as he drove himself deep inside me.

The shock of his sudden possession sent me over the edge. I quickened my fingers on my clit as he rammed himself into my claspng vagina.

"Fuck me!" I demanded as another orgasm overtook me.

"Yes, Tasha," Micah groaned. "Come for me. Tighten that little cunt around my cock."

He drove his thick length into me and I screamed out another climax as his hips ground into mine. His balls slapped my ass as he pushed himself into me, up to the hilt. His blood-engorged cock bucked inside me and filled me with his seed. He rested his damp head between my breasts, his breath coming in short gasps.

It was a heady feeling to know I'd driven him so far over the edge that he was gasping for breath.

The sound of the front door closing filtered down the hall and through the still open formal double doors.

"Shit, Alicia's home. I didn't expect her, this early. She's supposed to be at a movie with Shay and Damien." I rushed around and frantically picked up our clothes.

Micah chuckled softly and dressed us with a thought. The only evidence of our recent activities

was the faint smell of sex that I hoped Alicia's senses were too dull to pick up.

I needn't have worried.

"I hate that man!"

Alicia exclaimed as she climbed the stairs, heading straight for her room.

"I absolutely detest him, the chauvinistic pig!"

I sighed and leaned over to give Micah a soft kiss on his lips.

"Call Gabriel and tell him her favorite flowers are daisies.

He looked at me and raised his brow. I just shrugged.

"Look, I don't like eavesdropping on her thoughts. You, of all people, should know how I feel about that."

I'd thought about it earlier when Gabriel talked with me on the phone. He'd asked me to find out what her favorite things were. It was a necessary evil as far as I'm concerned.

She didn't know it, but Alicia needed Gabriel as much as he needed her. There wasn't another man on this Earth who would be as patient or kind with her while he waited for her to overcome her fears. My experience with Micah told me that much.

"Tell him he's going to have to be very patient with her, but she does care for him a little. She has a tiny bit of affection peppered with a hint of

attraction and healthy lust. She doesn't like it that she wants him, but she can't stop herself."

I wanted to refuse to make excuses for my behavior, but I felt I should explain.

"After being in your mind, I couldn't bear the thought of him continuing to face the future alone." I shrugged at the question in my husband's eyes. "No, I still don't like him. I still think he's an ass, but he saved my life. I felt I owed it to him to at least give him a little hope."

Micah nodded. "He has that now, and given time, Alicia will agree to be his mate."

To be continued...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tianna Xander is the author of several paranormal, time-travel and science fiction romance novels. She loves reading everything from romance novels, murder mysteries and encyclopedias, to handbooks on solar energy. Tianna is the first to admit she spends far too much time surfing the internet and chatting with her online friends and critique groups.

Having written four novels and working on at least one more at any given time, Tianna still finds time for her family, friends and her many pets. She currently lives in Michigan with her husband, two children, a pair of cats, two big dogs and one occasionally terrorized Netherland Dwarf bunny. Her life is anything but boring.