



ATONEMENT

By

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CHAPTER ONE

“I’m telling you, Trelawney, people think that Hell is an infinite expanse, and it’s not. There’s a limited amount of space for a limited number of people.” The speaker strode around the small room, his long, auburn hair streaming behind him. He stopped and stared at Simon. “Do you know how many people we get every day? Have you any idea?”

Simon Trelawney shrugged and leaned against the fireplace mantle. He’d been at a loss for words from the moment his visitor had appeared, quite literally, out of thin air.

When he’d found out who his unexpected guest was, well ...

He’d known his soul was damned, but it was unsettling, even for a vampire, to have a tête-à-tête with the Devil himself.

“Well, I’ll tell you,” the fallen angel went on. “Thousands. And a vampire takes up more space than a mere mortal. We’re running out of room. That’s why I have a proposition for you. One that may keep your soul out of my realm and open up more space for lost mortals. Interested?” He watched Simon closely, dark blue eyes sparkling with--what? Duplicity? Annoyance? It was hard to tell. After all, he was the ultimate trickster.

“How is that possible?” Simon straightened from his slouched position against the fireplace and propped one fist on his hip. “My soul was condemned when I became one of the undead. What can you possibly do for

me that God cannot?" He hardly dared to hope that what Lucifer offered was legitimate. But, to redeem his soul...!

"Ah, but is it that God *cannot*? Or that He *will* not?" the Deceiver asked in a silk-laden voice. "Is there any soul beyond His redemptive power?"

He glided forward and touched his hand to Simon's shoulder. "Let me explain my plan, then you can decide if you would like to take advantage of this opportunity for atonement."

Simon backed up a few steps. Crossing his arms over his chest, he gave a brief nod, careful not to cause offense. This was his first dealing with the Prince of Darkness, but he'd heard from others of his kind what Lucifer did to those who crossed him. "Fine," Simon murmured. "Tell me your proposition."

The other being offered a beguiling, crafty smile. "It's really quite simple. Your very nature is that of a killer, a beast of prey. My proposition is this. You protect one innocent from her untimely death and your condemnation will be reversed. Your place in Heaven will be assured." He stopped, waiting for Simon's response.

"You've got to be kidding," Simon scoffed, the stirrings of anger overriding his curiosity and cautious hope. "You must think I'm a fool to believe it would be that easy."

Eyebrows rose over glittering blue eyes. "Oh, I didn't say it would be easy. Simple, yes. Easy? On the contrary. For you must face your oldest, most brutish nemesis in order to win the prize."

"You can't mean ... Jack."

“Yes, Jack. You must prevent him from taking another life.”

Simon sat abruptly in the chair behind him, his entire body shaking with anger, hatred, and fear. Yes, fear. For this enemy who preyed on females was the monster who had killed his mother, the last of his Whitechapel victims, nearly a hundred and twenty years before.

But he'd not been content with devastating Simon's life before he was a year old. No, the fiend had hunted him down and irrevocably taken his life away on his thirtieth birthday, turning him into the same damnable creature as he. “Who's his next victim?”

“You have obviously mistaken me for the Other Guy, Trelawney. I'm not omniscient.”

Simon sighed, losing patience with the double talk, Devil or no. “Believe me, I don't think you're God. Sorry if that offends you. But you can find Jack, and you would know his thoughts. Why can't you find out the identity of who he's stalking by just tapping into his mind?”

“Did I say this was going to be easy for you? No, I believe we've already covered that.” Sarcasm dripped from each evenly spaced word. “If you want redemption, you're going to have to work for it. I will help ... pave the way once you've discovered her identity, but the discovery itself is up to you. That's my deal.”

Simon pursed his lips, realizing there was a very clear “take it or leave it” hanging there, unspoken. Dare he trust Lucifer, the Father of Lies?

Dare he not?

But to do so, he would have to face down his most hated adversary, the most infamous murderer of the nineteenth century.

Jack the Ripper.

* * * *

Tessa watched the two men enter the elevator. She stood silently, uneasy of being the lone female in close, boxed-in proximity to strangers, especially after dark in an all but deserted building. She glanced at them surreptitiously and moved a little further away, careful to stay out of the corner.

Both men were tall and powerfully built with tailored charcoal-gray suits accentuating their muscular frames. The man closest to her had thick, dark hair with silky strands falling over his forehead and curling over the collar of his expensive suit. Heavy brows slashed above deep-set green eyes that stared straight at her. His nose was a little large, almost hawkish, and dominated sensuous lips and cleft chin. His strong jaw was shadowed blue-black with stubble that gave his face a hard edge.

A real tough guy.

What would it be like, she wondered, to feel his heavy weight on top of her, his hard, thick cock impaling her until she howled with ecstasy? She felt her pussy flood with cream and shifted her weight, trying to relieve the sensation.

Tessa realized he stared at her, one brow cocked over knowing eyes. She felt her cheeks heat, but couldn't look away from that piercing emerald gaze. She ran her tongue over suddenly dry lips and swallowed as those eyes narrowed on her mouth. She was filled with a nearly overpowering urge to wrap herself around this man and kiss him silly.

She had never felt this kind of instant attraction before. Oh, she could

appreciate male beauty as much as the next woman but she'd just never been so tempted to jump a guy's bones.

Or, at least, one *particular* bone.

Her gaze drifted down at that thought and she swallowed again. The heavy outline of his erection was visible through the crisp material of his pants. Oh, man. She wasn't usually the type of girl who went down on a strange man in an elevator, but looking at the way his cock lengthened under his pants, boy, oh, boy was she tempted. There had to be at least eight inches there, more than she could take into her mouth, but she sure was willing to give it the ol' college try.

Her gaze shot back to his face. His nostrils flared as if he knew the direction her thoughts had taken and his muscular body shifted slightly toward her. Tessa realized she was putting herself in a rather risky position and broke eye contact with this sexy beast by glancing at the other man.

He was ... Beautiful was the only word she could come up with. Like Michelangelo's David. Or Adonis. Long, auburn hair fell nearly to his waist and glittered in the light as if stars were caught in the dark strands. His features were perfectly symmetrical, from his evenly spaced eyes to his gorgeous lips. Startling blue eyes fixed on her with an unwavering stare.

The back of her neck prickled and she knew the other man continued to stare at her. She felt her pussy clench and ground her teeth together to hold back a moan. If she could get this turned on by just *thinking* about sex ... she really needed to get laid.

Relieved when the elevator stopped at her floor and the doors swooshed open, she hurriedly exited, practically power-walking down the

hallway. While neither man had made any threat, she couldn't shake the feeling that they were up to no good and she wanted to get as much distance between her and them as fast as possible.

Tessa shook her head. Just turned thirty and she was getting paranoid. They were probably two businessmen coming back from a late supper. Two stunningly gorgeous businessmen, but businessmen nonetheless. With a last wistful memory of clear green eyes, she tamped down a restless sense of disappointment and turned the corner, walking down the hall toward her office. She still felt a thrill of pride when she saw the lettering on the frosted glass door. *T. A. Long Investigations*.

"You've come a long way, baby," she muttered, grinning. The key slipped easily in the lock and she pushed open the door. Kicking it closed with her foot, she dumped her purse and briefcase on her assistant's desk and took off her coat. Reaching for a metal hanger, she stiffened when she felt someone behind her.

Abruptly, she jabbed her arm back and jumped to her right, knowing whose hard abdomen her sharp elbow had just contacted. She pivoted to face the men from the elevator. "Who are you and what do you want?" She straightened the neck of the hanger, turning it into a weapon.

Well, the best one she could come up with on short notice. She didn't carry a gun. She should definitely rethink that decision.

"Please, miss, you have no need to be frightened of us, I assure you." Adonis stepped forward and gave her an old-fashioned from-the-waist bow. He smiled, drawing her eyes to the deep dimples that dented his chiseled cheeks. "We merely wish to speak to you about your most recent client. I

believe he is calling himself Jack Rippert?”

“I don’t talk about my clients.” This charming, oh-so-handsome man didn’t fool her, even if she was a sucker for a man with dimples. In her line of work, she’d learned the hard way that some of the best-looking men were the deadliest.

“Of course not, my dear. It’s just that, well, we have some rather distressing news about him. Information that may change your mind about keeping him as a client.”

When she didn’t respond, the dark-haired man stepped a little closer, ignoring her not-so-threatening gesture with the hanger. He ran a large hand through his hair. “I told you this wouldn’t work,” he muttered to his companion. “He’s too slick.” His frustrated tone was deep and sexy, with a slight inflection that brought to mind double-decker busses, Big Ben, and fish and chips.

And writhing, tangled bodies joined on silken sheets. Tessa bit her lip and clenched her thighs against the wave of lust that rolled through her, wetting her panties and tightening her nipples so that even the silk of her bra was sensual torture.

“Ah, Trelawney, don’t give up,” the other man murmured. He, too, moved closer to Tessa.

She tightened her grip on the metal hanger, ready to lash out. Suddenly, it vanished from her grasp. “What...?” she gasped, backing away from the two men.

What the hell! Something weird was going on and she didn’t want any part of it. While she was just as daring as the next person, she wasn’t stupid.

“I don’t know who you are, or what you want, just get out. Get out!” she demanded a little shrilly when the tough guy moved closer.

“We’re not here to hurt you. We’re here to save you from him. For the love of--” He broke off, following her when she ran toward the inner office.

Tessa slammed the door and locked it, then shoved a chair underneath the knob. That should keep them out, for a little while at least. Long enough for her to call the police. She turned to go to the phone on her desk and stopped, her breath catching in her fear-tightened throat.

Both men stood in front of the desk, watching her with equally intent eyes. Blue and green, like two different depths of the same ocean. One gaze calculating and mesmerizing, the other holding frustration layered with distinct masculine arousal.

Turning, she frantically tried to move the chair, sobbing, fighting hysteria. She’d be of no help to herself if she lost control. How they had gotten into a locked room was beyond her, and she didn’t particularly care at the moment. She just had ... to ... get ... out.

Screaming at a touch on her shoulders, she lashed out with elbows and feet, using every trick her self-defense instructor had taught her. Tessa brought her heel down on his instep, hard, and heard him gasp in pain. Smiling grimly, she thrust her elbow back into his firm stomach and heard his breath whoosh out of him at the jab.

Muscular arms wrapped around her, grabbing her hands, trapping her folded arms with surprising gentleness against her chest. She kicked backward, her heel connecting with his shinbone, and heard a few grunts over her own labored breathing. She kept kicking, he kept grunting, but the

unyielding hold didn't break. Finally, exhausted, she slumped in his arms.

CHAPTER TWO

Simon held the young woman gently, taking care not to hurt her with his greater strength. The heat of her body sank into him, stirring the hunger that was always present at some level. Her feminine scent--soft floral and gentle spice--was mixed with an intoxicating tinge of fear that added to the temptation.

She was definitely worth the trouble he'd gone through to get to her. And, despite his annoyance with her stubbornness, he admired her spunk, respected that she had fought him even though he outweighed her by nearly a hundred pounds.

"Just come over here and sit down," he coaxed, turning her to face him. "We're not going to hurt you." He led her to a blue-on-gray armchair and pushed her gently into it. His eyes searched her face, seeing the fine line of perspiration on her brow, the heightened color of her cheeks.

A rush of heat and hunger nearly overpowered him. He might consider himself civilized, but his body, his *nature*, was not. He was, as all of his kind were, a creature of the night and all that went with darkness.

Sex.

Violence.

Hedonistic appetites.

He wanted to do nothing more than sink his cock into the depths of her hot, tight pussy, and his fangs into her soft, fragrant throat.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the time, or the place.

Damn. He glanced away from her and fought for control. After a moment, he looked back at her, making sure to keep his face expressionless. Crouching in front of her, he placed his hands on each side of the armchair, gently imprisoning her in the chair's depths. "We'll explain everything."

"Yes," Adonis whispered in a sibilant tone. "You'll understand the situation quite clearly. But know this, Simon is your only hope." He stepped back, white teeth flashing in a wide grin. "Here's your first ... demonstration of what Simon is about to explain."

He slowly faded from sight, from the outer edges in, until only his sardonic smile remained, like a wicked, sensual Cheshire cat. Then it, too, disappeared.

Simon stood and backed up as Tessa jumped to her feet. She searched the room, her head whipping back and forth, small panicked choking sounds coming from her throat. With a soft whimper, she sank back down into the chair, making a stifled noise and cramming a small fist to her mouth. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Please, just go away."

He hunkered down again in front of her, staring up into tawny-brown eyes glittering with tears. One droplet glided down her cheek, coming to rest in the corner of her mouth. He stared at those satiny lips and was filled with the urge to kiss the tear away, to taste her, to strip her clothing away and slide her naked body beneath him.

He knew her skin would be soft against his, her tight, hot cunt slick

with cream. His breath caught and he reached out to cup her cheek.

She shrank back in the chair and murmured a shaky protest. One slender hand rose to hold him off.

Muttering a curse, he rose to his feet and walked to the desk, resting his rear against it. He stared at her, allowing her--and himself--a few moments to regain composure. He took a breath and let it out slowly, and then said, "What I'm about to tell you is incredible, even unbelievable. But you must believe it, Tessa. Because your life is in great danger, and I'm here to save you."

She glared at him through the tears. Even with the fear she still felt, she was a fighter. He bit back a grin at her spunk. Somehow, he guessed she wouldn't appreciate seeing a smile on his face just now.

"From Mr. Rippert." Disbelief was clear in her voice.

"Yes. I know him, you see. Although, the first time I met him, he was going by a different name. Back then, he called himself ... Jack the Ripper." He watched her closely, waiting for her to sass him. She didn't disappoint.

"Ri-i-ght. Okay." She stood up and walked toward the door. "Okay," she said again in a voice meant to soothe and placate the mentally unbalanced. "You've done your duty. You've warned me. Now you can go."

"You don't believe me."

She looked at him, slender brows raised, blonde head cocked to one side. He could almost hear her thinking, "Duh".

"Let me tell you a story," he said, motioning for her to resume her seat. She ignored him. He fixed her with a steely gaze, which caused her to merely tilt her stubborn chin and return the glower. He found himself biting

back another grin.

Yeah, she had plenty of sass, all right. His kind of woman.

“My mother’s name was Mary Kelly. She was a prostitute in London, in the East End. Whitechapel district to be precise. She was the last victim of Jack the Ripper. He killed her just a few months before my first birthday.” Simon watched her closely, ready to catch her if she decided to bolt. While she appeared wary, she was at least listening.

He went on. “He disappeared after her death and Scotland Yard assumed that he’d either died or had been carted off to an insane asylum. As I grew older, that’s the verdict that I, too, came to accept even though I had no clear suspect in mind and there were a sufficient number from which to choose. But I was wrong. Because Jack came back. For me. And thirty years after he killed my mother, he brought me over.”

“Brought you over?” She took a tiny step toward the door.

“I’m a vampire.”

Tessa’s heart began rat-a-tat-tatting in her chest. This guy was delusional. Not only did he obviously believe that he was over one hundred years old, he also believed that he was a vampire.

A vampire!

There was no telling what he might do to her. If she could just inch her way to the door, she might be able to get away from him. *Never mind that doors didn’t seem to matter to him*, her mind whispered.

“It’s true,” he said. He straightened away from the desk and walked closer to her. “Look.”

She gasped when he tightened his lips in a distorted smile and showed

his pearly whites. Long, *sharp* pearly whites. His eyes, too, had changed, and now glittered with a silver hue.

Oh, my God. She didn't believe in vampires, but whatever he was, he wasn't normal.

"It's true," he said again, his voice husky and deep.

"I ... it can't be," she murmured, backing away from him, wondering even as she did so why she wasn't absolutely terrified. Not to say she wasn't afraid, she was. But nothing like she *should* be. "My dad's a minister, he would have told me ... There are no such things as vampires."

"Just because you don't believe it doesn't mean it's not the truth. Please don't run," he said when she turned. "It will only waste time for me to have to chase you, and I *will* catch you. I'm not here to harm you. I'm here to save you from him."

This was the third time he'd said those words, and they finally began to sink in past her doubts. "You really are ... and he really is...?"

He nodded. "I really am a vampire and he really is Jack the Ripper." He stopped and stared at her for a moment, his eyes green once more and dark with memories. He blew out a breath and said, "Look, I know you have an appointment with him tonight. Is there someplace we can talk without being interrupted? I'm not quite ready for him to know that I'm here."

She stared at his face, which was once again normal, and suppressed a sudden urge to touch her finger to the dent in his chin. What was it about him that drew her so? She had met other men as handsome as him and had felt varying levels of attraction, but nothing equal to what she felt now. This allure was more than physical. Even though he was preternatural, he seemed

familiar to her, like a long-lost childhood friend.

Or longed-for lover, a little voice inside her whispered, while her clit throbbed.

“Th-there’s a coffee shop on the corner,” she said, thinking that anywhere with people was better than being alone with him in her office in an empty building.

She wasn’t worried very much about what he’d do to her.

She didn’t trust *herself* to be alone with this man.

He smiled, seeming to know what she was thinking. For all she knew, he did. Wasn’t it said that vampires could read others’ thoughts?

The walk down the hallway was a silent one. They waited for the elevator and Tessa turned to face him. “So,” she said, more to fill in the silence than to gather any information, “the other man who was with you, he’s a vampire, too?”

He cleared his throat. He looked at her, then away, then back again. “Uh, no. He was, *is*, Lucifer.”

“Lucifer. As in Satan? The Devil?”

“Uh-huh.”

Tessa felt her heart pick up that reggae beat again. She was going to hyperventilate, she just knew it. “You know, I don’t remember being in an accident, but I must’ve been. I’m in a coma and hallucinating this whole thing,” she murmured, staring at the elegantly clad *vampire* in front of her.

Her hallucination stepped forward and clasped her hands. “It’s not a coma, Tessa. It’s very real, deadly real. Didn’t you ever think it was odd that he would only meet you at night?”

“A lot of people only meet me at night because they have full-time day jobs.” She stared at their joined hands, feeling the heat from his skin. “I thought vampires were supposed to be cold.”

“We are if we haven’t fed. Plus, I’m drawing warmth from your body heat.” He released her fingers and slid his big hands up her arms to cup her shoulders. “I’ll apologize now if this offends you, but I’ve wanted to do this since we rode up the elevator together.”

He bent his dark head and captured her lips. Lips parting, she closed her eyes when his tongue surged forward to trace a pattern against her teeth. She met his tongue with her own, parrying his thrusts, advancing against his retreat.

He tasted bittersweet, like the richest, darkest chocolate. The strangeness of the evening’s events faded, the threat of danger evaporated. She burned for him, *with* him. Her nipples hardened and she wanted to feel his mouth all over her body.

His hands slid around her, one to cradle the back of her head, the other to press against the small of her back. His mouth grazed her cheek, her eyes, her jaw. A groan rumbled through his chest as he moved his lips back to hers.

Pulling her blouse free from her slacks, he slipped his hand under the material, his fingers dipping below the waistband to rest against the swell of her buttocks. His mouth was gentle, even tender, in contrast to the powerful muscles of his body.

Every nerve ending in her body flared to life, prickling along her skin. The sensations were nearly overpowering and she could only cling to him,

her mouth moving against his, drinking in his rich flavor.

She was drenched in a storm of emotion and desire, filled with aching need. Curling her hands around the hard muscles of his back, Tessa held on as passion swirled through her like a flood. She'd never felt like this before.

As if she were adrift and he was her only anchor.

His hand glided down to her bottom and pulled her against his hardened cock. Tessa's pussy moistened and clenched with aching, demanding need. She touched his lean cheeks with trembling fingers, ran them down his hard, sculpted jaw.

Simon drew his mouth away and she leaned against him, battling to breathe. "You taste so good, Tessa." He sighed and held her, his mouth against her forehead, his own chest still and silent under her hands. "I knew it would be like that," he whispered, brushing a kiss on her brow. "He was right. You are my chance for atonement."

Tessa took a shaky breath and drew back from him. "What do you mean?"

He grimaced and shrugged, his face filled with chagrin and doubt. "Lucifer says that Hell is getting too full. He claims that I can assure my place in Heaven if I save you from Jack."

"Is that possible?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know, but I had to try. And now, after meeting you, I know I have to succeed, if only to assure your place here on Earth."

The elevator doors swooshed open. Tessa barely comprehended that someone else was there when Simon shoved her behind him.

“Well, well, well.” The voice was smooth and disdainful, the British accent distinct and sarcastically challenging. “I can see it was fortuitous of me to be early for my appointment with Ms. Long, although this is a development I had not foreseen. Why are you poaching on my territory, dear boy? There’s plenty to go around.”

A tall man stepped out of the elevator, his thin face pale and framed by dark blond hair. Long, slender fingers held a gold-topped walking stick.

Tessa held her breath. Mr. Rippert. No, *Jack the Ripper*.

A golden eyebrow rose over icy blue eyes that glittered with sardonic humor. “What’s this?” He took a long, deep breath through his nose, then looked at Simon and clicked his tongue. “Simon, my dear boy, she’s creamed her panties. You have her panting like a bitch in heat already? How ... common of you.”

“Stay away from her, Jack.” Simon bared his teeth in challenge to the older vampire.

“I can’t do that, I’m afraid. She belongs to me. Do you really think you can steal her from me, fledgling? If anyone’s cock will slide into that juicy cunt, it will be mine. She’s *mine*. She has *always* been mine. She always will be.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She’s the reason I embarked on this journey to begin with. She’s my failure ... and my reason to keep going.”

Simon kept Tessa behind him, though he could feel her struggle to see the other man. He wished she would stay still--he couldn’t afford to have his attention drawn away from Jack for an instant. The other vampire was

maniacally clever and patient, and knew just when to strike. “You’re not making sense, Jack. How could Tessa be your failure when she was born nearly a century after your butchery in Whitechapel?”

Jack stepped closer and twirled the walking stick between his fingers. “Well, of course it’s not Tessa personally. It was her great-grandmother, Marie. She was to be my first, except she got away from me. She was a charwoman, much too suspicious of a strange man approaching her from the alley.”

His shrug was nonchalant, so much so an observer would think they were discussing something inane. That the monster could talk so calmly about something so horrific disgusted Simon. The Ripper went on, “So I had to switch to whores. They needed men, and back streets were their favorite places to conduct their business. They didn’t expect much and the quicker a chap was the better. A flip of the skirt, a cursory bump and grind, and two bits for another shot of gin were earned. But, by damn, I wanted Marie.”

He walked around them and Simon turned, keeping Tessa behind him. Jack tapped the end of the walking stick against his cheek, thoughtful as only the truly insane could be. “But here’s my chance to atone for my failure. Tessa. Except for the color of her eyes, she is the mirror image of dear Marie.”

“My grandmother told stories of how her mother saw Jack the Ripper, but we all thought she was making it up. You know, bedtime ghost stories.” Tessa peeked over Simon’s broad shoulder and stared at Jack.

“Oh, not a ghost story at all, my dear,” purred the fiend. His eyes took on a silvery cast and seemed to glow. “Come closer and you will feel the

ecstasy that she refused.”

Tessa felt a strong compulsion go to him and nearly stepped away from Simon. She gritted her teeth against the urge to bare her throat to Jack. “No,” she said, and ducked behind her protector once more.

“Ah, a resistant, like dear Marie. All the better. It tastes so much more ... intense if it’s given unwillingly.”

“You’ll have to go through me, you bastard.” Simon took a fighter’s stance, feet braced apart, hands fisted and ready to attack.

“Gladly.” A slow smile spread across the other vampire’s lean face before he leapt forward.

Tessa screamed and fell against the elevator doors as the force of the two men’s struggle threw her backward.

“Get out of here, Tessa,” Simon snarled. He threw a punch at the Ripper, knocking the man away from him. He followed, wrapping his hands around the other vampire’s throat. Looking over his shoulder, he stared at Tessa with eyes of molten silver. “Push the damned button and get out of here.”

Jack laughed, a high-pitched, choked sound that iced up her spine and reached around to grab at her throat. “What about you?” she cried even as her finger felt for the button to summon the elevator.

“Don’t worry about me. Just go.”

When Jack managed to get free and bit into the fleshy part of his shoulder, Simon’s face contorted. Sharp teeth tore through cloth and Simon hissed in pain. “Go,” he yelled when the doors opened.

She went, crying with fear and relief when the doors closed behind

her and the elevator began moving. When the doors pinged open on the first floor, she stood inside for a moment, shock holding her immobile, then slowly walked out. Raising her hand, she swiped at the tears still rolling down her cheeks. She stopped and looked back at the elevator. What would happen to Simon?

“You really should be more worried about yourself, my dear, and forget about Simon.”

Tessa screamed with fright and turned to face Jack. She watched, mesmerized like a cobra with a snake charmer, as Jack slowly drew the gold handle away from the walking stick to reveal a sharp, deadly rapier. Light danced along the silver blade, breaking her from her trance.

She turned and ran, thrusting both hands flat against the bar at the front door. The door opened and she was through, running as fast as she could.

“Yes, yes. Run, run, *run*. The pursuit makes it all the sweeter. Run away, my pretty. Run.” His laugh chased after her, raising goose bumps along her skin.

Tessa dashed down the sidewalk and across the alley that ran alongside her office building. She glanced over her shoulder to see Jack saunter out of the building and stop to look at her. When a wide smile crossed his face, she turned her head and sprinted.

And wished, not for the first time tonight, that she carried a gun. A bullet between the eyes might not kill him, but it would definitely slow the son of a bitch down.

Just as she reached the far side of the next building, a hand shot out

and grabbed her arm, yanking her around the corner. Before she could draw breath to scream, another hand clamped down on her mouth and Simon whispered, “It’s me.”

He drew her deeper into the shadows, tucking her under his arm, placing his back toward the street. “Don’t move,” he cautioned softly. “I can mask our presence and he won’t find us, but you have to stay absolutely still.”

Tessa held her breath as the distinct *tap-step* of Jack’s arrival sounded. The bastard was in no hurry, walking as if he were merely out for a nightly stroll.

Tap-step. Tap-step. Tap-step.

He paused at the entrance to the narrow space between the buildings. Simon blocked her view with his larger body, but she could sense Jack standing there, could almost see his thin nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air around him, seeking her scent.

CHAPTER THREE

Jack took a few steps forward and Simon tensed over Tessa. He could feel her breath against his neck, her heat against every part of him. Her slender hands clutched his back, under his jacket, and as Jack took another step, she pressed against Simon, her breasts flattening against his chest.

Every sense heightened. The hunter in him flared to life. His teeth elongated, along with his cock, with painful awareness. Simon clenched his jaw as desire and bloodlust screamed through his veins. He was injured, needed blood in order to heal, and his self-control was slipping--fast. He wanted nothing more than to pierce her, with teeth and cock, to take from her what his body demanded.

She shifted her weight and he knew she could feel his thick erection pressed against her. Her heart pounded against him, her breath quickened. His hunger flared brighter.

She tried to pull back and he tightened his hold. He realized she could feel the changes taking place in him, but she had to stay still. He ran his hands up her back, cupping one hand around the back of her neck, pressing her face against him. It was vital that she remain motionless and silent. As aroused as he was, he was in no way the threat to her that Jack was.

Jack remained still a few minutes longer, then with a muttered, "Damn

it!” he strode away.

Not trusting the other vampire, Simon held Tessa immobile and, after not sensing Jack’s presence for several minutes, he allowed her to draw back.

And knew by the expression on her face she was going to sass him.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” she snarled.

He pasted what he hoped was an innocent expression on his face. Whether he got it right ... well, it had been years since he’d been anything close to innocent. “What?”

“Don’t ‘what?’ me!” She gave a pointed glance to his groin, then looked back at his face. “Well?”

He shrugged. “It’s a perfectly natural reaction when a man’s holding a beautiful woman.” And when an injured vampire held a warm, tasty treat like her ...

“With a madman waiting to kill us?” Giving him a shove, she pushed him into the weak light from the streetlights, gasping when she saw the blood on his face and his torn and bloody shirt. “How badly are you hurt?” she asked, her tone quiet.

He shrugged, then winced and grabbed his shoulder. “I’ll be fine, once....”

“Once...?” She stared at him. “Once you get some blood.”

“We need to go,” he said, ignoring her statement. “I need to get you away from him.”

“Simon,” she started, then stopped when he grabbed her hand and dragged her after him. He paused at the edge of the building and took several

minutes surveying the area. Apparently deciding it was safe, he drew her after him down the sidewalk to a dark blue Jeep Cherokee. He drew his keys out and unlocked, then opened the passenger door.

“This is yours?” Tessa wasn’t sure what she expected a vampire to drive, but apparently not an SUV, since she was surprised.

“Mmm.” He waited quietly, patiently, as she climbed into the vehicle. He closed the door behind her and walked around to the other side.

Getting in behind the wheel, he inserted the keys in the ignition and twisted his wrist. The engine kicked to life and Simon maneuvered the vehicle out into the light traffic.

They drove in silence for several miles before Tessa spoke again. “Where are we going?”

“I have a place where we should be safe for awhile.” His face was planes and angles in the light from the dashboard. “Then I’ll go after Jack.”

Tessa thought about that, about the fact that she was running, hiding, instead of fighting. It wasn’t in her nature to hide. She was used to fighting.

But fighting *Jack the Ripper*?

Fine. No problem. Hiding was good. She was okay with hiding. At least until they figured out what to do. She glanced at Simon again, wondering briefly at the sense of safety she felt with this man whom she knew barely knew.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. She suspected he had a depth of honor that many men didn’t possess. He’d had a critical need for blood, but hadn’t forced her to provide any. He was strong, but had been exceptionally gentle with her. Even when he was aroused.

Her face heated at that thought and grew even hotter when she realized she was staring at his groin. Her clit twitched at the memory of his thick cock pressed against her belly. She squirmed against the seat, her face erupting in flames when she looked up and caught Simon's knowing look.

Tessa turned and stared out of the window, her thoughts in chaos, her pussy thumping away. He was a vampire, for God's sake. But it didn't seem to matter. She wanted him with a fierceness she hadn't felt in a long time.

Ever, actually.

After two hours, they pulled onto a winding, dirt road. A few miles later, Simon drove down a quaint main street, making a right at the corner where a small church, complete with bell-tower, shone white from the light of the moon. He brought the Cherokee to a stop in front of a sprawling log cabin a few blocks away. Getting out, he came around to her side and opened the car door.

Tessa blinked, suddenly so desperately tired she could barely keep her eyes open. Before she realized what he was about, Simon reached in and scooped her into his arms.

"What are you ... I can walk," she insisted even though she looped her arms around his neck. Her hands brushed against the dark hair at the nape of his neck. Threading her fingers together, she resisted the temptation to play with the silky strands.

"I can carry you," he said quietly, tightening his hold on her. He approached the door. "Get the knob, would you?"

Tessa reached down and turned the knob, then slid her hand back up around his neck. This time, she gave into temptation and twisted her fingers

in his sleek hair.

He rather unceremoniously plopped her on the sofa and practically snarled, "I'll be back. I have to--" He broke off with a grimace and turned away from her.

Tessa watched him as he went through the doorway, slamming the door behind him. She had seen the glow in his eyes, had seen the rough planes of his face become more pronounced, had seen the whiteness of sharp teeth.

He was going out to hunt.

* * * *

After he'd fed, Simon made his way back to the cabin, wondering what he would say to Tessa. He knew what he'd looked like when he'd fled the house. She had to have known what he was about to do.

Damn it to hell. He hated Jack.

Gathering his courage, he pushed open the door. He stopped at the sight of Tessa asleep on the sofa. One hand was curled under her cheek, the other rested on her stomach. Her full breasts moved up and down with her gentle breathing.

He crouched beside her, reaching out to brush a strand of blonde hair from her brow. She was so lovely, her skin clear and clean. Her lashes swept long and lush over cheekbones sprinkled with golden freckles. He ran his finger lightly over one satiny cheek.

Unable to resist, he placed his mouth on hers, kissing her gently. Immediately he was inundated with heat. Feeling her sleepy response, he deepened the kiss and slanted his body possessively over hers.

Blood roiled through his veins and shot straight to his cock. He slid his mouth to the corner of hers and drifted across the line of her jaw to her soft throat. Feeling her shiver, he murmured her name and slid one broad hand under her blouse. Cupping one lace-covered breast, he rasped his thumb across the tightening nipple. He pushed the blouse aside as his lips moved down her chest. When his mouth latched onto the other nipple and began to suckle through the bra, her breath caught.

He reached up, tweaking and rolling one nipple between his thumb and forefinger while his mouth tugged on the other. Beckoned by Tessa's wet heat, his hand left her breast and slid down her body. A quick flick of his wrist, a slow slide of a zipper, and his hand slipped under satin panties to cup warm, soft pussy. One long finger dipped inside, then another, slowly pumping in and out while his thumb rubbed and flicked her swollen clit.

Simon moved his mouth to her other breast and she moaned. *He needed to taste her.* He tugged her slacks and panties off in one effortless pull, his mouth replacing his thumb. When he sucked on her clit, her sharp gasp turned into a low moan. His tongue stroked in a long, slow lick along her folds, then jabbed at her clit again. *Oh, dear God, she tasted so good.* Sweet, tangy and spicy.

His gums prickled with the need to bite into her, to draw her warm, life-giving blood down his throat. A vein pulsed in her thigh and he could hear the beat of her heart.

But it was too soon. This taste of her cream had to be enough for now. He pulled her swollen pleasure bud into his mouth and suckled, hard. Her climax overtook her and she cried out, jerking against his mouth, her pussy

convulsing around the fingers he pushed into her. He kept up a steady pace as she came down from her orgasm, his mouth and fingers still working at her. She whimpered his name as the pressure began to build again.

Her soft voice broke through the haze of passion that held Simon in its grip. He paused, breathed in the scent of her sex, then moved his face up to rest between her breasts. He slid his fingers inside her tempting wet heat a few more times and reluctantly withdrew them.

His body was ready to impale her. Even after feeding heavily, his fangs ached to pierce her soft skin, to draw her life-giving blood into his own body.

She had never been in a more precarious position than she was now.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice low, soft. He rubbed his cheek against full, soft breasts. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why not?”

Simon sighed, taking a few moments to gain control over his passion. If he looked up at her now, with his eyes glowing and his fangs hanging out over his bottom lip, she’d run screaming from him. And straight into Jack’s arms.

He could never let that happen.

When he was sure he was back to normal, or as normal as he could ever be, he reached up and grabbed the throw draped over the back of the sofa, drew her into his arms and wrapped it around her. He scooped up her clothing and deposited them in her lap. Picking her up, he walked down the hallway to the guest bedroom.

“I must protect you from Jack,” he finally said as he sat her on the

edge of the bed. "I can't be ... distracted by a physical relationship. It would be too dangerous."

"I'm a distraction?"

Simon couldn't read the emotions in her voice, nor tell from her carefully controlled expression what she was feeling. But every instinct screamed at him to proceed lightly. What was the saying? *Hell hath no fury* ...

"What I mean is...." He stopped, battling to find the right words. "I want nothing more than to yank that blanket off you, strip you out of the rest of your clothes, and make love with you until neither one of us can move."

He walked over to the closet and withdrew a silky black robe. Moving back to her, he handed her the robe. Her slender, trembling hand took it from his grasp.

"And pardon me for being so graphic, but I don't want to be in the middle of fucking you mindless when Jack finds us." Simon could see the spark coming back into her eyes. Holding up a hand to forestall her comeback, he pointed to his left and said, "The bathroom is through there. I'll go fix you something to eat."

"Never mind," she said. "I'll just take a shower and go to bed, if that's all right with you. I'm really not very hungry."

He gazed at her, tried to probe her thoughts, but with no luck. "I'll see you in the morning," he finally said, and left the room. Waiting for a moment on the other side of the closed door, resting his back against it, he willed himself to move away when all he wanted to do was go back in that room and lose himself in her body.

But he couldn't. He really shouldn't. There were a wealth of reasons why it would be a bad idea, the biggest one being Jack. There were also a thousand reasons why he should, the most important one being that he recognized her as his other half, the woman who completed him.

He'd call her his soul mate, if he believed he still had a soul.

With a sigh, he pushed away from the door and walked down the hallway to his room. Closing the door behind him, he undressed, his thoughts in chaos, his body taut and hard with need.

He went into his bathroom and turned on the water, not waiting for the water to warm before he stepped under the spray. The coldness hit him full in the chest and he gasped at the sensation. The water slid in rivulets down his abdomen and over his straining cock.

Simon moved his hands down and started massaging his erection with one hand, pumping it up and down in firm, long strokes. His body shook as his lust built. He stroked his hand over the weeping head, spreading the natural lubrication over the sensitive shaft as he imagined thrusting into Tessa's tight, wet pussy.

Picturing her hot channel taking the ramming of his cock, imagining her screaming with her release, he moved his hand faster, gripped his flesh tighter. Remembering the way Tessa had looked in her passion, the feel of her against his hands, against his mouth, had him groaning again. His balls drew up tight against his body. He threw his head back, biting his lip to hold back a groan as he ejaculated with thick, spurting streams, his hips jerking helplessly with his release.

He leaned forward, bracing his hands against the front of the stall and

let the water pound against the back of his neck. His dick was still semi-hard, even with the hand-job.

It wasn't enough, because it wasn't Tessa.

Damn. He was in bad shape. All he could think about was Tessa. Her hair. Her eyes. Her firm breasts. Her hot, wet cunt. He needed her like he needed blood to survive, but it was a bad idea. It'd been the truth when he told her she'd be a distraction he couldn't afford. He couldn't get caught with his pants down, literally or figuratively. He just wasn't sure he had the willpower to resist.

His cock bobbed and twitched, straining up and away from his body. Simon let out a string of curses as he moved his hand back to his unruly body part.

He was *not* going to survive this.

CHAPTER FOUR

The atmosphere around the breakfast table the next morning was tense. Simon watched Tessa push food around her plate. Because he still enjoyed the flavor, he had, out of habit, poured himself a cup of coffee that was rapidly becoming cold. He picked up the cup, took a sip and set it down with a sharp *thunk*.

Tessa jumped, giving him a startled look.

“What do you want from me, Tessa?” he asked, frustration turning his voice into a growl. “I try to act like a gentleman....” he trailed off at her raised eyebrow and remembered that the way he had touched her had hardly been something a gentleman would have done. “Well, almost like a gentleman.”

“Mmm.” She stared at him for a moment, then looked down at her plate and began pushing her scrambled eggs around again. “I don’t want anything from you, Simon. Why should I? You have a stake in this as much as I do, after all.”

“I have a....” He stared at her. She thought the only reason he hadn’t finished what he’d started last night was because he wanted to save his soul?

Well, of course that was what had started him in Lucifer’s game, but he wouldn’t put his soul before hers. He had known he was damned from the

moment Jack had forced his tainted blood down his throat. And, despite the Dark One's promise, he couldn't entirely believe there was a way to reverse that damage.

"I told you last night that I--we--can't afford to be distracted--"

"Yes, I remember what you told me last night." Ice frosted her tone. "I remember exactly. You said, 'I don't want to be in the middle of fucking you mindless when Jack finds us'. Our situation didn't seem to impair you when we were hiding in the alley yesterday and your dick was poking me in the stomach."

"For the love of..." She was spoiling for a fight, and after a sleepless night filled with images of her lovely body straining against him in carnal pleasure, he was just the man to give it to her. Jacking off hadn't helped--he'd gone to bed with a hard-on and had woken up the same way. His cock had started throbbing the second he'd laid eyes on her this morning, looking so sexy with her hair tousled and her eyes soft and dreamy from sleep.

If she wanted to do the old bone dance, he'd be happy to oblige. Simon stood and carefully placed his cup in the sink. He repeated the action with her still-full breakfast plate. She must have read the intent in his eyes because she shot out of her chair and kept the table between them.

"Simon, what are you doing?" She raised her hands as if she could hold him off.

"I am living down to your expectations, darling," he snarled, desire and hunger turning his voice raspy and deep. With a sweep of his hand, he shoved the furniture out of his way.

She gave a startled squeak and ran out of the kitchen, her bare feet

slapping along the wood floors, long legs carrying her swiftly to the bedroom where she slammed and locked the door.

Simon took his time, even in his frustration and anger he sensed that while she was nervous and a bit panicked, she wasn't afraid.

He didn't want her afraid. He wanted her mindless with passion. This isn't what he had planned and it definitely wasn't a good idea, but there was something about Tessa that made him hot, aching and hard.

He stopped outside the bedroom door and knocked softly. "Tessa?"

"Go away, Simon. Whatever you have in mind, just forget it. You don't want to be distracted, remember?"

He grinned, and his body flared with painful awareness of the sweet, sexy, sassy creature on the other side of the door. "Open the door, Tessa."

"No frickin' way."

"Have it your way, baby. But I gotta tell you, women who pretend at playing hard to get really turn me on."

"I am *not* playing."

Simon lifted his right foot and kicked the door just under the doorknob. The door slammed open, bouncing against the wall, leaving a splintered doorframe. He stalked into the room and moved toward her, blocking her between the bed and the wall.

She squealed and scrambled across the bed, cursing at him when he caught first one and then the other ankle and dragged her back toward him.

"Such language from a lady, Tessa," he admonished, his mouth lifting in a smile. His body slanted over hers, holding her still on the bed, leaving her in no doubt as to his arousal. He clasped both wrists above her head in

one hand.

The other hand he ran down her face, briefly cupping her jaw before settling it on her left breast. "Your heart is beating very fast." He looked into her eyes. "But you don't look frightened, Tessa. So, it must be ... excitement? Or maybe it's just good, old-fashioned lust."

She twisted her wrists in his grasp. "You're hurting me," she said, her voice soft and uncertain.

"I am not," he responded, knowing his hold on her was extremely gentle.

Tessa stared up at him, caught by the sound of his voice, deep and husky with desire, and realized his expression had softened. His eyes were dark, the green almost swallowed up by the pupils. His mouth held a sensual curve and his nostrils were flared as if he were scenting her.

She wanted him to kiss her. To touch her like he had last night. But more. She needed to feel him inside her, his hard, thick cock filling her, making her wild.

He leaned over her and touched his lips to hers gently. When she reared up to deepen the kiss he laughed softly and pulled back. "Not so fast, sweetheart. We have all day."

Keeping one hand restraining her wrists, he flicked open the buttons of her blouse, his eyes narrowing at the sight of her lace-clad breasts. He made a pleased rumble deep in his throat and buried his face in the valley between the soft slopes, rubbing his cheek against her. The stubble on his face rasped against her skin and caused her to shiver.

"Wh-what happened to not getting distracted?" Tessa managed to ask,

amazed that she could get her brain to function well enough to formulate a coherent sentence. His mouth slid to her nipple and suckled it through the fabric of her bra.

She jerked against his mouth, her mind turning to mush. Cream slid from her core to lie thickly along her folds. She was ready to fly apart and he'd barely touched her.

His big hand slid beneath her and opened the clasp of her bra, and he nuzzled it above her breasts, baring her flesh to his mouth. When his mouth latched onto her nipple again, only this time without a barrier between her skin and the rasp of his tongue, she moaned. She moved her legs against him, opening for him, and moaned again as he pressed his groin against her.

A groan rumbled from him, the sound dark and harsh. Lifting his face, he looked into her eyes while his free hand slid the zipper of her slacks slowly down. His hand covered her belly, the tips of his fingers just above the silk of her panties.

"Now's the time to stop me, honey," he rasped, his eyes glittering with a silver hue. "If you don't want this, tell me."

She stared at him, more certain of this one thing than anything else in her life. "I don't want you to stop."

Growling his pleasure, Simon nipped at her lips, his fangs pricking her skin. His tongue laved the small hurts. When she reached around and grabbed his butt to hold him against her, he moaned and jerked away from her. He quickly stripped off his clothing and gave her a minute to look at him, to make certain that this was what she really wanted.

When her eyes darkened and she held out her arms, he felt emotion

tighten his throat. It had been a long time since a woman, knowing him for what he was, had looked at him like that.

Simon drew away Tessa's clothing, his eyes narrowing at the sultry picture she made. Her pink-tipped breasts billowed above a narrow waist and generous hips. He came down on top of her again and kissed her, his tongue sweeping into her mouth to mate with hers.

Her hands came around him and he felt her fingers flex into his back muscles. She moved her legs restlessly, and he slid between them, his cock stiff against her belly.

He kissed his way down her throat, closing his eyes against the involuntary stiffening of her body at the feel of his fangs scraping her vulnerable skin. Scattering kisses across her breasts, he tongued each stiff nipple before kissing his way down her flat stomach.

His hands parted her thighs just a little wider, his fingers stroking a long caress in the moist folds between her legs. She jumped when he touched her, jerked against his hand, a sharp cry of pleasure escaping her.

He pushed a finger slowly inside her tight, hot sheath. At once her muscles clenched around him, velvet soft, firm and moist. His own body throbbed and swelled in response.

Her hips pressed forward wantonly. In her rising passion, all inhibitions gone. Simon thrust another finger into her, stretching her, preparing her. More than anything, her pleasure mattered to him. Her velvet folds pulsed for him, wanting, *demanding*, and he fed that hunger, pushing deep, retreating, thrusting again so that her hips followed his lead.

"That's it, baby," he breathed against her stomach. "Just like that. I

want you ready for me.”

“I am ready for you,” she panted, her slender hands grasping his hair, trying to pull his face up to hers.

“No, you’re not. Not yet.” His mouth found the triangle of damp curls at the juncture of her thighs. Her breath hissed out as his tongue tasted her, his name a whispered plea. He lifted his head to look at her. “Open your legs wider, sweetheart. Let me have you.”

Her thighs moved further apart. He pressed his fingers against her again. She was hot and wet and slick, and he groaned her name before lowering his head to her once more.

He licked up her hot folds, tasting her, teasing and sucking at her until she was sobbing his name, writhing beneath him, thrusting helplessly against his tormenting mouth. He built her passion and gentled her, taking her higher each time so that her body shuddered with pleasure over and over.

Simon knelt between her legs and guided his throbbing cock to the entrance of her body. She was unbelievably wet, her cream trickling down her thighs. He pushed his hips forward, saw the moist tip of his cock slide past the slick folds of her sex and felt her, tight and hot, close around him. The sensation shook his control even further.

“Tessa!” Her name burst from between his clenched teeth. He grabbed her firm ass and lifted her as he slid in another inch. “Tell me you’re okay, honey.”

“I’m fine. I’d be better if you’d just hurry up.” She gasped, her eyes bright, her hands sliding around him to clutch at his back.

He laughed, a short, sharp burst of sound from a throat tight with

need. With a hard flex of his hips, he buried his cock deeper. It had been a long time since he'd felt such ecstasy, perhaps he never had. It was all he could do to keep from ravaging her, so great was his need. Lowering his head, his tongue flicked the taut peaks of her breasts. The action tightened her body around him even more.

"I feel full, like you're part of me," she whispered. "But I want more, Simon. I want all of you." She slid her hands from his back down to grasp his buttocks.

"Me, too," he gritted his teeth and surged forward. Her sheath was slick and hot and velvet-soft, and so tight it was just about to kill him. He buried himself deep, withdrew, thrust hard again. He watched her face for signs of discomfort, but her expression held only a look of passion, her eyes glazed, her breath coming in pants.

Satisfied she felt the same pleasure as he, Simon began to move, gliding in and out of her, deeper with each stroke. He tilted her hips so he could thrust even deeper, wanting her to accept every last inch of him, as if by her body accepting his she could see past the monster in him and love him.

He buried himself to the hilt, shoving so deep he felt her womb, felt the spasms of her climax beginning. "Tessa, I've never felt like this. Never." He needed her to know how he felt, what she meant to him.

His rhythm became faster, harder, his hips surging forward, beyond any pretense of control. Tessa cried out as her body splintered and Simon felt the strength of her inner muscles gripping him in the intensity of her orgasm. He pumped into her frantically, the explosion ripping through him from his

balls through the top of his head. Helpless against the raging hunger his desire had built, he bent and sank his fangs into her throat.

Tessa couldn't believe it when another orgasm rippled through her at the prick of his teeth at her neck. She couldn't believe herself, how wantonly she responded to this man. She lost herself in the hard thrusts of his body, the piercing of his teeth. She clung to him as he thrust hard one last time. Moving his mouth from her neck, he rested his face against her heaving chest, her name a muffled whisper as his cock pulsed, flooding her with his hot seed.

He exhaled, his breath warm against her skin. His body was heavy against her, his cock twitching with the last of his release.

Tessa wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. She felt his tongue flick her nipple, a languid back and forth motion that sent renewed shockwaves through her body. Her pussy rippled with aftershock and tightened around his still-hard shaft.

Just when she thought he might start the dance again, he suddenly raised his head, nostrils flaring as he scented the air. When he jumped off the bed, pulling her up behind him, she gasped.

He muttered an oath. "He's here," he hissed. "Get dressed."

"Jack? But ... How did he find us?" Tessa stared down the hallway, her heart in her throat, shaking fingers quickly drawing on her clothes as Simon pulled on his trousers. "How in the name of God did the bastard find us?"

"Lucifer," Simon replied, his voice deep and hard. "He must have shown Jack where we were." He glanced at her, his eyes glittering like

shards of ice. “Stay behind me, Tessa. When you see a chance, you run, you hear?”

“Simon, I won’t leave you.”

He whirled to face her and grabbed her upper arms, giving her a small shake. “Do you hear me, Tessa? If both of us die, he wins. I *will not* let him win. You run the first chance you have. Promise me.”

She stared into his silvered eyes, seeing the desperate need to know she would survive. There was no time to argue. “I promise, Simon,” she whispered.

He lifted one hand to caress her cheek. Drawing her down the hallway toward the front of the cabin, they reached the heavy front door just as it splintered open.

“So, here we are again, dear friends.” The oily voice preceded the monster into the house. He eyed Tessa with an icy gaze. “Now that Simon here has broken you in and turned you into a whore, I will enjoy you the most, my dear. You haven’t known true pleasure until you feel the thrust of *my* cock, the sweet piercing of *my* rapier.”

“Not in a thousand lifetimes.” Simon pushed Tessa further behind him and took a step forward.

“It seems we’ve been here before, dear boy. But this time, make no mistake, you will die.”

The two combatants launched at each other, their bodies thudding together. The noise they made as they fought sounded more like wild animals than men.

“Go, Tessa,” Simon yelled, his arms wrapped around Jack’s throat in a

classic wrestling maneuver. “Go!”

Tessa ran, sprinting down the steps of the porch. The fierce fighting still sounded in the cabin behind her. She had to find something to help Simon. But what?

The first strike of the church bell startled her. The church! If she could reach it, perhaps she could find something to ward off the other vampire. By the time she reached the doors of the church, she was gulping for air and holding her side. “I swear, if I live through this, I’m gonna start working out,” she muttered, pulling on the doors. Locked. “Oh, for cryin’ out loud! In this teeny, tiny town, why bother locking the church?”

Not giving herself time to think about what she was doing, she grabbed up an ornamental lawn rock and tossed it through a window. Clearing the glass out of the way, she hoisted herself up and through the opening, dropping to the floor. Running into the main sanctum, she headed straight for the altar at the front. There, hanging on the wall, was a large wooden crucifix, the paint faded with age. Probably weighed more than she did. But, it was better than nothing.

Tessa climbed onto the ornate chair to one side of the religious object. Standing on her tiptoes, she reached to lift the crucifix down from its place above the small communion table.

She almost fell off the chair when the weight of it dragged her off balance. Stepping down off the chair, she turned and yelled when she saw Simon standing there.

“You scared the hell out of me, Simon.” She approached him, cradling the crucifix in her arms like a dozen long-stemmed roses. “I thought he’d

killed you.” Tears leaked into her voice, thickening it with emotion.

“No, not yet.” Simon grimaced and pulled his hand away from his shoulder. Blood welled from a deep wound. He nodded toward the cross in her arms. “That won’t help you, you know. We’re not frightened of inanimate objects.”

“But, I thought--”

He snorted. “A myth started by people clinging desperately to a religion that no longer served their needs.”

“So, holy water won’t work, either?”

“No, my dear, it won’t.” Jack’s voice echoed through the church, and she and Simon looked to find him. He was nowhere in sight.

“Come out and play,” Simon called, narrowing his eyes and searching the shadows.

“So eager, my boy. And here I thought you were done with playtime. I would have finished you off, but I didn’t want to miss my opportunity for atonement.”

The words were too damned familiar. Simon swore and pulled Tessa into his embrace, crucifix and all. Tightening his arms around her, he yelled, “Lucifer, you son of a bitch. I know you’re here, too.”

“Is that any way to talk to a Supreme Being?” The mocking words came from behind them. Simon turned his head and frowned to see Lucifer standing behind the pulpit, clad in the robes of a priest. “What?” Lucifer asked, his handsome features drawn into a frown. “I think it rather suits me.”

“Yes, Bright One, it does,” Jack murmured, appearing from behind one of the columns at the side aisle. “And, as you said, my redemption is at

hand.”

Simon held Tessa tightly in his arms. “Jack, he’s lied to you. He’s lied to both of us. He told me that my chance for atonement was in keeping Tessa safe from you. If that’s so, how can your redemption be in killing her?”

Jack shook his head, silvered eyes glittering with feral hatred. “He may have lied to you, but my master would never lie to me.”

“That’s right, Jack. I’ve always been truthful with you. You kill this one girl and all will be right with your world. Just. Kill. The. Girl.”

“What is she to you, Lucifer?” Simon asked as Tessa trembled against him. “Why do you want him to kill her?”

The devil snarled at him, his face dropping its cloak of beauty and reflecting the true evil within. Simon and Tessa both gasped at the horrible visage. “Because he can. Because he will start another reign of terror that will turn mortals away from Jehovah. Her father is a powerful spokesman for Him. With her death, the preacher will lose his faith. Because of that, others will, also. Do you know how many times their thoughts betray them? ‘How could a loving God allow this?’” he mimicked, his dark blue eyes glittering.

“There is no God,” Jack cried, rushing forward, naked rapier in his hand.

“Stay behind me,” Simon muttered, and leapt forward to meet his nemesis once more.

* * * *

“You’re the prize for the winner.” Lucifer spoke from behind her, so close that his breath stirred the hair at the nape of her neck.

Tessa whirled to face him, holding the heavy crucifix out in front of her.

He shook his head and reached out to snatch it easily away. He threw it to the floor, where it shattered like a broken mirror. "I am not frightened of religious objects, either, little girl. I am Lucifer, Satan, Beelzebub. Fall down and worship me and perhaps I'll spare you."

One thing Tessa was not, and that was a Satan worshipper. Nor was she a coward, although she'd sure been acting like one. In her defense, there was nothing quite like a vampire, Jack the Ripper and the Devil to make one lose her bravery.

"Forget it," she whispered, backing away from him.

He shrugged and stayed where he was, eyes straying to the fight going on behind her. "Fine. It appears as though Jack is winning." His gaze returned to her. "Are you sure you won't change your mind? I'll let you live if you do."

"Fuck you," she spat out, and cringed when he laughed.

"That could be arranged, though I guarantee you wouldn't like it."

With a shudder, she turned away from him and saw Jack knock Simon to the ground. Quick as a snake, he stabbed her lover in the chest with the rapier. From here, she could see the dark blood welling from the wound. Simon's face contorted with pain, his hands weakly grasping at the blade. When Jack slowly drew the blade out of his flesh, he groaned.

"You are too honorable, Simon," Jack said, kneeling down to wipe the blood from the rapier onto Simon's trouser leg. "You won't fight dirty."

Without a thought to herself, Tessa grabbed up the larger portion of

the splintered crucifix and ran down the aisle. Coming up behind the Ripper, she thrust the sharp piece into his back, as hard as she could. The action shoved him onto the floor, where he writhed, screaming in agony. She held on, though her hands quickly became slippery with blood as shards of wood from the rough edges sliced into her palms. "I'll fight dirty, you bastard," she muttered.

She leaned into her makeshift stake, grinding it down into Jack's body, ignoring the pain that scored her hands. He groaned, reaching around to try to dislodge her. With a grunt, he reared up, knocking her loose. Rolling to his back, he started to rise, his molten silver gaze glaring with hatred and lust.

Tessa battled back the fear that iced her skin. She launched herself at Jack, her momentum carrying them both to the floor once more.

He snarled, fangs elongated over his lips. "You can't defeat me. I am Jack the Ripper."

"Yeah, well, rip this." Tessa batted his hands away and thrust the broken crucifix into his chest, piercing his heart.

He screamed, the high, thin wail of a wounded animal, his body writhing under her. His eyes fluttered closed. "You're as bloody-minded as your great gram," he muttered, then shuddered and was still.

She slowly got off him, ready to leap back on for another ride at the slightest twitch. "I'll take that as a compliment." She went over to Simon and knelt at his side. At the touch of her fingers on his face, he opened his eyes.

A slight smile creased his lean cheeks. "You are something else,

Tessa. I wish ... In another time and place, we might have been friends.” He took her hands in his and lightly raked his tongue across both palms, his eyes showing his pleasure at the taste of her.

“You’ve risked your life for me more than once, Simon. That makes us friends now, in my book. We’re more than friends.” She looked at their joined hands and saw that hers were no longer bleeding. That they were, in fact, starting to heal.

He nodded and closed his eyes.

“Simon.” She shook him.

He moaned at the movement. “That hurts,” he muttered. “I’ll be okay. I just need to ... get to the cabin ... before sunup.” Simon struggled to sit up and she reached around his shoulders to support him. “Where’s Lucifer?”

“I don’t know.” She twisted around to look at the altar area, but the fallen angel was no longer there. “I guess he’s gone. I don’t understand. If Lucifer wanted me dead, why not do it himself?”

He looked at Jack’s still body. “From what I understand about how these things work, he’s not allowed to do direct harm to mortals. So, of course, he finds someone else to do his dirty work.” Simon unsteadily rose to his feet, shrugging off Tessa’s supporting arm. He hadn’t been a very successful hero tonight. He was supposed to protect her. Instead, it had happened the other way around.

His strong-willed lady put her shoulder under his arm and muttered, “Don’t go macho on me, you idiot. You’ve lost a lot of blood. It won’t do your bruised ego any good if you fall flat on your face.”

She was right. He allowed her to help him out of the church and down

the street toward the house. He stumbled, grateful for Tessa's supporting arm.

"What am I supposed to do with you, Simon? You need rest, and...." she trailed off, looking adorably uncertain.

"Yes, I need blood, Tessa. Not a lot, just enough to get my body's healing processes started." Simon stared at her, knowing that the longing was plain to see on his face. Reaching out, he touched his finger to her face, grimacing when he left a smear of blood on her satiny skin. "Sorry." He gestured at her cheek.

"What?" She reached up and rubbed her cheek, sighing when her fingers came away stained red. "Oh, for the love of ... Okay, this is how it goes. We'll get cleaned up a bit, and then you can have a sip. One sip," she stressed, raising a brow.

He bit back a grin. Pure, unadulterated sass. "It's a deal."

She paused at the edge of his property. "What a night," she finally said, and reached up and kissed him, her lips giving him a promise of more. She leaned into this strange, mysterious man and felt safe and protected. She felt ... like she was home.

And he felt atoned.

EPILOGUE

He watched them enter the small house, frustration and fear seeping into him. There'd be hell to pay for this night's activity. No pun intended. But the Man Upstairs wouldn't be happy with him. Not that he cared.

He'd lost a damned fine killing machine tonight. No wonder Simon was so enamored with the female as Jack had been with her grandmother. They were both unique women.

Perhaps he was losing his touch. A slight grimace curled his lips. No. Love had entered the picture, and that always fucked things up for him.

He'd have better luck next time.

THE END