



From Tonight Until Forever:

# Destined

By

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Dedication:

To my husband. The hero of all my dreams ... past, present and future.

## Prologue

*Summer 1692*

Elizabeth shivered against the dampness that seeped through her dress from the stones at her back and the hard earth beneath her. Only a hint of the warm night air drifted through the bars of the cell's only window above her head, and it did nothing to counter the chill embedded in her bones. More than a dozen women were jammed in the small cell, leaving little room to sleep comfortably.

But who could sleep when the crying wouldn't stop? They were frightened, all of them. Witch trials had started last month in Salem Village miles away, and already the hysteria had spread to their small town. The warm and friendly community where she'd lived all of her twenty-one years was foreign to her. People she had called friends, people she had treated under her grandmother's guidance, now looked at her as though she might strike them dead if they met her gaze.

There had always been gossip--she lived too far outside the village, didn't attend church often enough, helped strangers and travelers when they were sick and in need of a place to stay, remained unmarried. Until now, she had ignored all of it. Even the scandalized whispers of her involvement with the man made ill by the sun had not earned her such treatment.

But things had changed. Now the faces of the townspeople carried pity, despair, hate, and even fear. Few people in the town had dared acknowledge her as guards escorted her and the others to their prison. Neighbors, friends, most had crossed to the other side of the street to avoid them.

Elizabeth lifted her face to the silvery moonlight pouring through the bars. Had William returned? Did he know she'd been arrested?

Relieved her younger sister and grandmother had been spared this, Elizabeth studied the faces of the women closest to her. Some were asleep, others trembled with teary shudders, and still others stared into the darkness, worrying about their fate, their families. All of them cramped around her in the eight by eight cell were as innocent as she. But the town's people insisted on blaming someone for the deaths of countless cattle and the mysterious illness of young Geoffrey Harkin. She, herself, along with her grandmother, had visited the boy. Following days of erratic behavior -- talking to himself in nonsensical sentences, drawing horrifying images, hurting himself -- he'd fallen into an inexplicable deep sleep. None of their attempts to rouse the boy were successful, hastening the spread of whispered rumors of demons and witchcraft throughout their otherwise peaceful community.

But it would pass. This madness could not continue. Someone would stop it. Someone would realize she and the rest of the women sharing her cell had no more to do with the cattle's illness and Geoffrey's strange behavior than the rising of the sun.

Elizabeth gripped the black pendant that dangled close to her heart and closed her

eyes, searching deep within herself for some hint of what was to come. Never before had she felt so out of touch with her gift. Even the women around her, those she brushed against in passing, none of them gave off even a glimmer of their possible futures. Not a whisper slid through Elizabeth's mind, leaving her puzzled and a little frightened. She had picked up on images from these same women whenever she visited their sick families and friends with her grandmother. She knew many sharing her cell had long lives still to come.

But why couldn't she see those images, those futures now?

"Elizabeth," Mary whispered, "William has come."

Careful of the sleeping bodies curled into themselves for warmth, she made her way to the cell door. Five evenly spaced bars in the wooden door allowed her clear sight of him. Her throat squeezed and tears burned behind her eyes. She knew he would be able to see them even in the dark, and blinked them away as she reached a hand through the bars for him.

"You shouldn't have come." She meant it, but couldn't keep her voice steady. Relief swam through her at the sight of his handsome face.

"What is happening? Have they hurt you?" Concern and anger flickered in the moonlight blue eyes she'd fallen in love with at first sight.

She forced a half smile to her lips. "I'm fine. My sister and grandmother? Are they still all right?"

"They are well. Scared. You grandmother sent Simon to track me down. I should never have left you."

Elizabeth shook her head, hearing the blame in his voice. "There is nothing you could have done."

"I'm getting you out of here."

"No," she said sharply, catching his hands before he gripped the door. "You cannot draw attention to yourself."

"I will not leave you here," he snapped. The tight lines around his eyes immediately softened. "I cannot leave you here."

"Those who hunt you, are they close?"

"They do not matter."

"If you free me tonight, with no arrangements, we will be much easier to follow, will we not?"

"Do you think I care about them? I want you away from here. Safe."

She pushed away the lock of black hair forever falling across his eyes. "And I need you to be safe. This shall pass. Everyone is just scared. They will not hurt any of us."

His eyes glowed eerily in the darkness. "I will not take that chance."

"Please, William. Wait. Tomorrow I go before the council. They will release me, I'm certain of it." The townspeople were concerned, frightened, but they surely would not hurt any of them. Not once they were reasoned with, made to see the women in this cell--their friends, mothers and sisters--could no sooner be involved in such matters than the town's minister.

"And if they do not?"

Icy fear wrenched her stomach into hard knots. Keeping her voice deliberately even, she said, "Make arrangements. For my grandmother and sister, as well. They cannot stay here without me."

He nodded and tightened his hand over hers.

An image slammed through Elizabeth. She tensed as the familiar spiky sensation curled down her spine and the vision unfolded in her mind.

William, but different, his clothes, his hair ... and beside him stood a woman. Her? No. But the resemblance ... remarkable. But it was not Elizabeth. It was someone else ... someone who loved William. He held the woman close, and the intensity of their feelings, their love for one another sliced through Elizabeth. She held fast to his hand, her only anchor under the onslaught of emotion, both those in her vision, and her own. She was going to lose him.

William frowned. "What is it?"

Elizabeth shook head, closing her eyes as the image faded. Her heart pounded against her ribs as she fought to drag a breath past the thickening lump in her throat. The crushing weight on her chest, the loss she felt for him, for her, for the future they did not have together, all of it...

No. It was wrong. It had to be.

Her forehead rested against the bars, her jaw tight, aching. Her visions were never wrong. She bit her lip until it throbbed, wishing they were wrong, wishing she wasn't locked in this cell. The need to bury herself in William's embrace and pretend she hadn't seen it nearly choked her. Her fingers tightened around the bars and she dug deep inside to face the truth.

They weren't meant to be together. She blinked furiously, determined to hold back the tears that desperately wanted to fall. One slipped down her cheek despite her efforts.

"Elizabeth?"

With the back of her hand she brushed it away. "I am fine, just worried about my grandmother."

His brows scrunched together. "You would tell me if you saw something?" His tone dared her to lie to him.

Hearing the trace of fear in his voice he wasn't able to mask, Elizabeth tried for another reassuring smile, but knew the attempt fell pitifully short. She didn't know when they would be separated or how or why, only that nothing would alter the vision she saw. The images that flashed through her mind always came to pass. As a child she'd tried countless times to prevent what she saw, only to see fate accomplish its goals in another fashion.

He studied her closely. The fierce expression in his eyes should have frightened her. Instead she took comfort from it, from the love she had for him and he for her. She glanced down to where his fingers laced hers over the bars. If she told him of the vision, she knew he would not believe it, would do whatever he convinced himself needed to be done, to change it. Risk exposing himself and what he was to free her. And even if he succeeded, it would change nothing. They did not have a future together.

Another wave of anguish seared her heart. Tugging him closer, she touched

William's face. His unshaven jaw scraped her palm.

Hard blue eyes bored into hers. "Tell me."

"Everything will be fine," Elizabeth promised, but even as she spoke the words aloud she knew it would never be fine again.

William's hand closed over hers. "I cannot lose you."

"Some people are destined to find their true soul mates. You are one of those people, William." Her voice trembled, and she pressed her lips together to force back her growing need for reassurance. Reassurance he couldn't offer her.

His frown deepened. "Elizabeth, please. Did you see something?"

Elizabeth shook her head, her throat squeezing tight. When she trusted herself to speak, she whispered, "I love you. So much."

He lifted her hand to his mouth, his voice rough with affection. "I love you, too."

"Then go. I'll be all right. There are worse places to spend the night than here." Her attempt to lighten the mood did nothing to ease the fear building in her chest.

William's eyes flashed. "Do not say such things, Elizabeth. They locked you in a cage." A dark growl hovered beneath his words.

"And they will release me. All of us." She said it to remind him others would witness his actions should he give in to the urge to tear the door from its hinges. An urge she read clearly in his eyes even as his hands clenched the bars.

"It will be all right," she added, determined to make him believe her. "I'll be fine."

Elizabeth refused to let him hear the doubt she could not shake. She would not give him a reason to expose himself. If anything happened to him ... She would not see him harmed because of her.

"Go," she whispered. "I'll be home by the time the sun sets tomorrow."

"And if you are not--"

"I will be. Now go." She knew the longer he remained, the more likely he would ignore her wishes and try to free her.

William stared into her face and she felt the first hint of a real smile since she had been arrested. Why he still tried to push beyond the mental barrier that separated her thoughts from him, she did not know. He always had difficulty reading her. Even if she possessed the ability to let him into her mind, she would not. She knew he would refuse to leave her side if he picked up on the vision she had had moments ago.

William squeezed her hand, grudging resignation crossing his face as he moved away from the door. "I'll be waiting for you."

Tears thickened her throat, and she gripped the bars to keep from reaching for him. "I'll see you soon."

He nodded solemnly and disappeared into the shadows. Alone, she let the tears fall freely down her cheeks. She would see him soon. She would.

So why did dread tighten her chest, making it so hard to breathe?

Elizabeth shook her head and wove around the women asleep at her feet until she reached her spot against the wall. She closed her eyes, willing away her fear of never seeing him again, and focused on calling to mind his face, his smile. The memory of his laugh, the teasing weight of his mouth against hers, the feel of his strong arms wrapped

tightly around her comforted her to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

William paced the length of the small cottage, willing the sun to set. Something was wrong, he felt it deep in his heart, and it terrified him. He had sent Simon into town to see about Elizabeth and update him hours ago. The necessary arrangements to leave tonight were made, should they not release her. And he suspected they would not. She would have returned home by now if they decreed her innocent of the ridiculous charges. Imbeciles. All of them. If any of them laid a finger on her....

The flowers on the table caught his eye again as he circled the table he had spent the last four hours pacing around. He had picked them for her the night he'd returned to find her gone. William traced the pale pink petals, picturing Elizabeth's soft smile and playful brown eyes.

He should never have left, but hunters were close, so close he'd almost felt them breathing down his neck. They had tracked him without cause, but trying to explain that to them during their last encounter had proved useless. He hadn't planned to remain in the sleepy village of Lake Falls at all when he had first arrived more than six months ago.

Then he had seen Elizabeth.

From her first smile he was lost. He had first thought his infatuation would pass, but found himself aching to be near her at the most unexpected moments. When she sat close to the firelight to read or when she hummed out of tune as she baked or washed dishes. Once he realized his feelings for her ran deep, he had feared she would cower from him, be afraid of what he was. What he could become. No one was more surprised than he when she welcomed him into her bed and her heart with no wish for more than what he could give her.

But he would give her everything.

When he got them away from here, they would be together. Always. He would somehow finally convince her to become like him, a decision she had refused to consider because of her sister and grandmother. The old woman was wise indeed, not believing his claim that the sun truly made him ill. She knew what he was, and despite that she'd welcomed him into her home.

The door crashed open. William recoiled from the fading sunlight and slammed his eyes shut to avoid the temporary blindness the sun could cause. Following the sound of the door shutting, William opened his eyes to find Simon bruised and bloody, his breath choppy.

"They took her. I tried to stop them. They ...."

"Who? Hunters?" How had they closed in on him so quickly?

Simon shook his head. "The townspeople. They tried her for witchcraft. Her and two others. They took her ...."

William didn't listen to the rest. He fastened his cloak, and slid the hood into place.

"The sun has still enough power to burn you."

He ignored Simon's warning and ran for the barn so quickly he felt but a warming through the cloak. Memory guided his steps as his vision blurred but didn't fade to blackness. The sun's strength was waning with the approaching sunset. His horse already



saddled, he mounted quickly. Head bent, he sent the horse tearing down the road, trusting the animal to get him to town. In minutes his greatest weakness would dip below the horizon. Desperate to reach Elizabeth, he urged the animal faster. He couldn't lose her. Not today. Not ever. Elizabeth believed they were soul mates, meant to be together. Fate would not be so cruel as to take her from him.

He would get there in time. She would be safe.

Darkness clung to the town as he galloped down the main road. Lights still blazed from inside the courtroom, but no one lingered outside. Ahead of him a small crowd of people gathered in the square. Someone there would know where she was. He recognized the minister, but did not demand any answers, instead followed the troubled gazes of the onlookers across the square.

"No!" William vaulted to the ground and sprinted across the dry earth, the roaring in his mind as loud as the guttural cry ripped from his chest.

Elizabeth was in the middle, her lifeless body suspended by a long rope looped tightly around her neck.

William's chest locked up, his heavy limbs dragging him to his knees. Grief clawed at his insides. He couldn't move, couldn't think, couldn't ....

No. She couldn't be gone. Maybe there was still a chance. Maybe it wasn't too late. He used the knife in his boot to cut her down, not caring if anyone noticed how easily he reached her.

She fell into his arms, and the moment he touched her he knew beyond a doubt, she was lost to him. He collapsed on the ground, cradled her to his chest. This wasn't right. She wasn't supposed to die. They would be together. Always. Did fate not know that? Did it not understand how much he loved her? That he would give his immortal life right now if she would take just one breath.

"Elizabeth, please open your eyes. Please," he begged, grief constricting his throat. It couldn't end like this. He wanted to shake the life back into her, wanted her to ....

A hand touched his shoulder. "She is gone my son."

William glared up at the minister, hatred consuming him until he knew nothing but the yawning blackness that swallowed him whole.

"She should not have welcomed the devil into her home."

William growled and bared his teeth, shoving the man backwards. He ignored the man's cries of agony when he hit the ground more than twenty feet away.

The soft weight in his arms tore at him. "Elizabeth, please do not leave me. I need you," he whispered against her hair. All his pleas were for naught and he knew it, but could not stop himself as he pleaded with her, with God, to bring her back to him.

He smoothed her blonde hair back from her face, wishing desperately to see her deep brown eyes laughing up at him as though this were some horrible joke.

But she was gone.

The realization sunk deeper and his body started to tremble. William cupped her cheek, brushed his mouth across hers.

*Some people are destined to find their true soul mates. You are one of those people, William.*

Elizabeth believed it. He knew it, felt it deep in his heart. He would find her again. In another time, another place, they would be together.  
He loved her too much to let it end like this.

## Chapter One

*Present Day*

"I need a favor," Gabriel called out the second Will stepped into the room.

Seeing Gabe parked in front of the computer, hard rock pounding from the stereo system, Will smiled. He'd missed his friend, but not all the times he'd walked in here to yell at him to turn the music down. "Hello to you, too."

Gabriel turned back to his computer, his fingers gliding over the keys in effortless speed. "How was Africa?"

"Hot."

Will dropped onto the couch, laid his head back and rubbed at the steady ache hammering between his temples. He needed to feed. Already he'd gone longer than usual and knew he was weaker for it. Still, he didn't make a move to get up. The trip home, even using Gabe's private jet, had been hellish. He and turbulence were definitely on the outs after the last six hours of air pockets bouncing him around like they were trying to shake the plane right out of the sky.

He should have stopped on the way home to satisfy the torrential hunger that had been building inside him for days. He knew better than to go so long. Knew that every day he asked himself how long he could go, he was risking some poor fool who was bound to cross paths with him when he'd pushed himself too far. The last time he'd played this game had been over a century ago, when he hadn't cared about anything or anyone.

Only death.

"Stop that," Julia said from the doorway.

Will sighed, but didn't open his eyes to look at her. Considering he had had nothing but human food for the better part of the last few days, he wasn't surprised he couldn't effectively shield his thoughts from her. Julia read him too easily on a good day, let alone when he'd purposely ignored the hunger for blood that simmered inside him.

"How long?" she demanded in her familiar, *and don't give me a dumbass answer* tone.

Will cracked open an eye, studied the blonde locks. Her new color of the week, obviously. "Nice look for you." On anyone else, the vibrant color might drown out the smooth lines and graceful features. Then again, Julia could make just about anything look good.

"Don't avoid the question by playing to my vanity." Julia sauntered into the room, sank into the deep burgundy leather chair opposite him. "How long?" she repeated.

"I'm going out just as soon as this headache goes away."

"The headache will go away once you feed."

Will shifted his attention to Gabriel, not interested in being nagged right now. He wasn't anywhere near the Russian roulette frame of mind, but the fact that he'd put off feeding just to test himself told him he was getting bored. He needed something new to focus on, to capture his attention, give him something to get enthused about. A new business venture maybe. Gabe had his hands in a number of projects at any given time and probably had something that would do the job.

"So what's this favor?"

Julia continued to watch him, her green eyes probing.

Through the constant tapping of pressure, Will felt her trying to sift through his thoughts.

"Cut it out," he snapped.

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm worried about you."

"Don't be."

"All you do is frown these days. Gabe, can you remember the last you saw him smile?"

"Sure," Gabriel answered distractedly. "Last time he walked in on you when you were in the shower."

Her delicate features curled into a disappointed scowl. "Can't you ever be serious?"

Gabriel pushed away from the keyboard. His blond head cocked to the side as he measured his opponent. "Maybe you should leave him alone?"

"And maybe you should try being a little bit less self absorbed."

"Give it a rest, children," Will warned. Gabriel and Julia were as close as he had had to family for the last hundred and fifty years, but there were times when their bickering grated on his last immortal nerve. Perhaps because the two of them were so close, they argued more than two siblings trapped side by side on a ten-hour road trip. The differences in their attitudes didn't help either. Where Julia was concerned and thoughtful, thinking out her plans for all occasions for days before the event, Gabriel was more a fly by the seat of his pants guy, fun being the endgame in everything he did.

Right now he'd love to possess even a fraction of Gabriel's zest for eternal life. His own was sure as hell lagging lately.

Julia sighed, and stood up. "I'm going out. Meet me at the club later?"

Because Will knew she wouldn't take no for an answer, he nodded and closed his eyes. Willing the headache to subside didn't accomplish much, but it kept Julia from harassing him about it further. She was right. Once he fed it would disappear, yet it felt so good to be home he couldn't work up the effort to move. The three-story house enabled the three of them to each have their own space and still remain close to one another.

He'd been at an all time low when he'd found Gabriel outnumbered by rogue hunters tormenting the newly turned vampire. Living with a death wish at the time, Will had openly provoked them, and despite being weakened he'd managed to get the upper hand long enough to run them off. Driven by some inexplicable need to give Gabe a place to stay and learn about his new nature, Will had ceased to push himself to the limits. A year later they'd come across Julie. Or she'd come across them. Depended on

who told the story. Either way the three had become a family then. For better or worse.

Gabriel's fingers lightly tapped the keys, the sound lulling Will's tired body. He wasn't quite five hundred years old. A drop in the bucket compared to many other vampires. How did the ancient ones not get bored? Surely after a few millennia they must have seen everything. What did they have to look forward to after that?

What would he?

"So she's right to be worried, isn't she?" Gabe pushed away from the computer and crossed his arms.

Damn it. He needed to feed. He couldn't put it off any longer, not when it left his mental shields this weak. "You two really have to stop doing that."

Gabriel snorted. "As if you wouldn't dig around in my head if you thought it necessary."

"No. I just wouldn't get caught."

"What's going on with you?"

Will stood up, leaned over Gabriel's shoulder, and peered at the screen. "What are you looking at?"

Gabriel stared at him, and Will waited for him to press the issue. Instead, his closest friend turned back to the computer.

Smart man.

"I found a bookstore that specializes in rare books," Gabe continued. "They have the one Julia's been searching for. I thought it would make a nice birthday present."

Julia insisted on celebrating every occasion possible. Will suspected she thrived on having things to look forward to. Many times he had watched a dark emptiness dull her bright eyes right before she found a new cause or adventure to occupy her thoughts.

"Does this have to do with the favor you mentioned?"

"Yeah. They're holding the book for me, but I have meetings for the next two days and then that charity thing Friday night. Julia's birthday is Saturday. I was hoping you could pick it up for me."

"Shouldn't be a problem. Where's the place at?" He scanned the web page displayed on the screen for the business address.

His body stiffened. Lake Falls.

Will jerked around and strode from the room. "You'll have to get someone else to take care of it. I'll be back later."

*Will?*

Will blocked Gabriel's voice from his mind as he left the building. The ache in his head thumped like a jackhammer, and a steel band clamped across his chest, making it difficult to breathe. Although he didn't need air to survive, he'd always been somewhat comforted by the rhythmic movement, perhaps because in a small way, it felt human.

Another stab seized his heart as he leaned against the cool brick wall. Lake Falls. He hadn't let himself even think the name of the town in more than two hundred years. Memories pressed on his consciousness, and the intensity of the images flickering behind his eyes threw him into a tailspin.

Shoving away from the wall, he headed in the direction of Julia's club, Infinity.

He wouldn't go back to Lake Falls, not even in his mind.

Will heard the approach of footsteps, felt the threat before the guy stepped in front of him.

"Let's see your wallet, buddy."

Will took in the young man's knife, wondering if the kind of wound the kid could inflict would be enough to bleed him out before sunrise. Doubtful. Will shook his head. Julia and Gabriel were right to worry about him. His thoughts were venturing into dangerous territory without him even trying.

"Now," the thug warned.

Will lunged forward so quickly, the young man didn't anticipate it. With sharp reflexes and a bloodlust that more than compensated for his weakened state, Will knocked the knife out of his assailant's hand, gripped him by the front of his coat and yanked him closer. The young man trembled. He looked younger than his twenty-seven years Will realized as he sifted through the man's thoughts. The same age Will had been at the time of his mortal death. But that was the extent of their similarities. This man needed money for drugs. The desperation for a fix pulsed through him in thick, vicious waves.

"Sorry man," the thug stammered. "Not myself, you know. We could just ...."

"Forget about it?" Will taunted, the rapid beat of the man's heart an invitation he couldn't ignore. He sank his fangs into the young man's neck, sighing as the revitalizing fluid rushed through him. Images from the man's life flashed through his mind as the echo of his heart slowed. *Jackson* ran away from home at the age of seventeen, wanted to go back, but didn't know how to get out of this life.

Closing his mind to the connection, William shoved the kid away from him, then turned to leave. Over his shoulder, he saw the young man watch him through glazed eyes. The puncture marks would heal quickly, but the memory of the attack would linger like a fuzzy dream, or a nightmare.

"Go home to your family. They love you. They'll understand and help you, if you let them."

The young man slumped against the wall.

With his headache gone, Will left the unconscious man. The kid wouldn't report anything to the police. Chances were when he came to, he'd continue to look for a way to get his fix. It was easier that way for most addicts.

Just as it was easier for Will to pretend he hadn't spent the better part of a hundred years searching for something he would never find.

Elizabeth was dead and she wasn't coming back. He had no illusions about that. Not anymore.

\* \* \* \*

"You had another one of those dreams again last night, didn't you?"

Lanie stared at the two books in her arms before flipping the top one open and skimming the first page, avoiding Brynn's perceptive gaze.

"No," she answered disinterestedly, taking an extra few seconds to respond as though it was an afterthought.

She closed the book and slid it into place on the third shelf. Still avoiding Brynn,

Lanie headed three aisles over to return a book to the romance section, a book two teenagers had been giggling over earlier. Taking a closer look at the mullet-haired hero dressed in a kilt with breasts bigger than hers, Lanie could see what the girls found so amusing.

Brynn met her at the end of the row. "There's no point in denying it. We both know you're dying to tell me all the steamy details."

Lanie snorted.

"Oh, come on. Your dream man highlights are the only thing I've got to look forward to on these chilly winter evenings."

"You could take Michael up on his offer of dinner one of these *chilly winter evenings*."

Brynn responded with nothing more than a roll of her eyes, and muttered, "Not in his lifetime."

Her arms empty, Lanie headed back to the counter to retrieve the last handful of books that needed to be re-shelved.

With a *tell me* pout, Brynn dodged her every step. "I know you had another hot one last night."

Lanie met her friend's curious stare, recognizing the determined glint in Brynn's eyes.

A yawn tickled the back of Lanie's throat, and she covered her mouth, fatigue settling deep in her muscles. Hell, it wasn't even eight o'clock.

She glanced from the stack of books in her arms to her closest friend. "Is it that obvious?"

Brynn twirled a strand of her ebony hair around her finger. "You look like you were up all night and I'm not talking about watching those black and white movies you're so fond of."

A blush stole across Lanie's cheeks. She and Brynn had talked about her dreams many times in the last few months, but now they were getting ... well ... hotter. No longer were her fantasy man's caresses PG-thirteen, as they'd been when she began to dream about him nearly five years ago. In the last six months the intensity of the dreams had jumped a thousand degrees, leaving her both eager for each night to come and exhausted each morning following one of them. But the most exhilarating and confusing part of it was how intense the dreams were. How real they felt.

"Earth to Lanie."

Lanie shook off the puzzled feeling and handed Brynn two books. "Here, these go in the Mystical section." She set her own armful of books on the bottom shelf and straightened the crooked ones on the upper shelves as she stood up.

The small corner bookshop didn't have computers to help customers search for books like the larger, recently renovated bookstore around the corner. Glancing around the shelves closest to her, Lanie was glad Harold had shown no desire to update the store with computers. Half the fun of her job involved talking to people who shared her passion for books. She loved the dark wood and cramped spaces that made the place feel cozy and intimate. Plus the shop always smelled of Mrs. Slokem's chocolate chip cookies. The fast-talking widow dropped platefuls of them off every

morning.

Brynn headed three aisles down. "So," she prompted.

After seven-thirty now, the cold evening air kept more people in than usual, leaving the bookstore empty but for the two of them. When customers were around, Brynn didn't bully her into giving up the more intimate details of her dreams. Tonight Lanie wouldn't be so lucky.

"Did he mention any names?"

"Does he ever?" Not once in all her dreams had her fantasy lover called her by name. He should, shouldn't he? It was *her* dream, after all. Only sometimes, it didn't feel like that. Sometimes he tugged her close, and instead of being in the moment, she felt ... detached somehow. She'd looked up dream interpretations in every book that mentioned the subject. Nothing gave her a satisfactory answer as to why the same man haunted her dreams night after passion-filled night, a man she had never met, but whose face she knew as clearly as her own.

A flutter of longing swept through her, and she glanced at the clock. They would still be open another two hours. A groan rose in her throat and she forced it back, cursing under her breath.

What was wrong with her? They were only dreams. She couldn't let herself look forward to sleep just so she could see him. Her social life seriously lacked as it was without locking herself in her apartment before nine on a Friday night.

"Do you think they mean anything?" She'd asked Brynn's opinion on the subject a dozen times before, but sometimes Lanie foolishly convinced herself the dreams were more than random images conjured by her subconscious mind.

Brynn shrugged. "Maybe you're waiting for him. Whoever he is." Brynn always gave the same answer. Why Lanie bothered to ask in the first place escaped her. Perhaps she hoped after she shared more details from her dream, Brynn would pick up on a theme or pattern Lanie couldn't pin down.

Lanie handed her two more books, and Brynn headed for the next row over, talking as she went.

"Be thankful you're getting some kind of action. A decent guy hasn't landed on my doorstep since my virginity decided it was time to let go."

As unusual as it seemed these days, Brynn was saving herself for the right man, or so she always joked. Lanie suspected Brynn's decision to hold out for Mr. Right went beyond the lack of suitable prospects. Years ago Lanie had learned to pay attention to the flickers of certainty that settled in her gut. Her mother called it her special intuition, claimed it ran in the family. Either way, what people didn't say often told her more than speaking aloud did. And not once had her instincts led her astray when it came to judging a person's true character.

But as close as they'd become in the five months since Brynn had moved to town, there were parts of her life she remained very guarded about. Once Brynn drank a few beers--okay a lot of beers--she opened up, shared more than usual, and talked of her family turning their backs on her and being out on her own. Each time the conversation revealed more than she had planned, Brynn immediately sobered as though someone had injected her with adrenaline. If she recognized Lanie's suggestion to go out for drinks



occasionally held a secondary purpose, she never let on.

Guilt burrowed into Lanie's chest at the thought of how she probed into her friend's life, but she wanted Brynn to be happy. And there were days Brynn pretended all was right in her world when something clearly wasn't.

"It will work out, you know," Brynn said from directly behind her.

Lanie jumped at the sound of her voice. "Hey, I've warned you not to sneak up on me like that." If she hadn't known better, she'd swear Brynn made a game of it.

Brynn shrugged, her smile not the least bit apologetic. "Someday, everything will be the way it's meant to be. For both of us," Brynn added, throwing an arm around Lanie's shoulder in a quick squeeze. A trace of hope lay buried beneath her friend's words. Almost as though she couldn't quite believe it herself, but wanted to.

"Okay, enough mushy stuff. I'm outta here. Lunch tomorrow?"

Lanie nodded, watched her friend pull on the jacket she'd left behind the counter.

Brynn paused at the door. "If you have another dream tonight, call me up and put it on speaker phone so I can live vicariously through you," she teased.

Lanie glanced around for something to throw, but the chime over the door sounded Brynn's departure. Brynn's laughter faded until Lanie was once more alone.

Alone.

Why was she alone anyway? There wasn't anything wrong with her. Her reflection didn't break mirrors, and she didn't have warts or snore. She had a sense of humor, thought of herself as a good conversationalist. Yet most weekends she spent with Brynn or Harold. Why weren't any of the men she'd casually dated in the last few years right for her? Did her mystery man really exist somewhere? Would he show up out of the blue for her one of these days?

Lanie sighed. Okay, it was official. Lack of regular sleep was messing with her brain.

Behind the counter, she fussed with the invoices Harold had left for her to sort through. The bookshop's owner didn't hang around as often these days, his health--although he refused to admit it--keeping him away. But that didn't stop him from involving himself in every aspect of Lanie's personal life. Even he knew about her dream man, but she kept the details to a minimum. He'd been like a father to her since her own parents had died five years ago, and she sought his opinion on things as often as Brynn.

Lanie glanced at the clock when she finished the filing. A whole ten minutes had passed. She stared at the door, willing someone, anyone, to step inside and give her something to do. Not a soul even passed the window. Toying with the black opal pendant she'd worn since her mother had died, Lanie leaned her elbows on the counter and closed her eyes, letting her thoughts drift back to last night's dream. They were in a barn, or hayloft. The sex--mind blowing. Lanie could almost feel the glide of his hands down her bare stomach, the lazy circles around her navel before he slipped his hands beneath her and cupped her bottom. A moment later he nudged her thighs apart.

She forced her eyes open. If she continued to replay the images in her mind she might spontaneously orgasm right there in the bookshop if the soft throb simmering between her legs was any indication. God, she needed to get a grip. Maybe she needed

real sex, with a real flesh and blood man.

Then again what real man could live up to her fantasy man? Bad sex was definitely worse than no sex.

And she really needed to stop thinking about sex.

A beer. She needed a beer. Much less complicated than sex. Damn it, could she even go more than two seconds without thinking about it?

Ralph's. For a beer, she decided. The local bar was as close to socializing as she got. At least then it wouldn't feel like her life revolved solely around the bookshop and the dreams of the black-haired man with haunting blue eyes.

The chimes above the door sounded. She glanced up, eager for a distraction.

Dressed in a dark suit and overcoat, the stranger closed the door. He kept his back to her a long moment, studying the shelf of books to his immediate right. Not from around here, she guessed. Lake Falls was a small town, so either he was new to the area or just passing through. Having lived here her entire twenty-six years, there were few people here she hadn't crossed paths with over the years.

The man turned in her direction. She started to call out a friendly greeting--as she usually did with most customers--only to have the words lodge in her throat as he lifted his face and his intense gaze collided with hers.

Lanie instinctively staggered back a step, her heart thundering in her chest.

It was him.

The man from her dreams.

## Chapter Two

What was he doing here?

Will had asked himself that question a hundred times in the last ten minutes. No answer came to mind as he stared down the quiet street. Nearly eight o'clock, the lack of traffic made it feel closer to midnight. Around him sounds from television sitcoms and late dinner conversation greeted him. He suspected the cold was keeping people inside tonight, which suited him just fine. Alone on the deserted street corner, he took in his surroundings uninterrupted.

Now a midsize town, Lake Falls boasted the usual small town shopping mall, movie theatre, restaurants, and a sizeable business district. He took comfort in the fact that not even a hint of the old village remained, at least none that he'd seen. This was like any other small city in the country. There were no reminders of that night, beyond the ones that lived in his memory.

A raven-haired woman emerged from the bookshop on the corner and passed him on the street, her mind carefully guarded. Unusual for a mortal.

He concentrated harder, the odd sensation that she was somehow different tickling the back of his mind. Something about her.... She wasn't a vampire, but.... He pushed harder, felt her tense. Will waited for her to turn around. She didn't, and carried on as though unaware of him. Images of her plans for the evening unfolded in his mind. Television, a long bath, and a few chapters from the book she'd started last night.

Not so unusual after all, he decided.

He stared across the street at the bookshop, a simple stone structure with an apartment overhead. He doubted they'd bother with frilly curtains in the windows if the second floor was merely for storage. Lights were on inside, so they were still open.

A cold breeze slapped his face, but he didn't move from the sidewalk.

Time slipped away and he didn't know how long he stood in the cold, waiting. Just waiting. He shouldn't have come. This need to exorcise his demons was too little, too late in coming. Visiting this town gave him no closure. No path to contentment that he suspected part of him longed for.

He'd get the book for Gabriel and forget this place. He'd loved Elizabeth with everything in him, and she was gone. Gone for more than three hundred years. The memories, whether he wanted them or not, were buried deeply in his heart. He could either pretend they didn't exist or he could ....

An image of him and Elizabeth slammed into his mind with the force of sledgehammer. The night they had made love in the barn.

*I love you William.*

*She lay back, and unbuttoned her dress. It had been so long, he couldn't remove his own clothes fast enough and join her on the blanket draping the hay strewn floor of the loft.*

*"I need to feel you inside me. Do not make me beg."*

Will whipped around, his gaze darting up and down the street. The image hadn't come from his memories. So where had it come from? No one knew of that night but the two of them. Had someone else been there that night? Another vampire? A hunter?

No, he would have known, would have sensed their presence. Wouldn't he have?

Will closed his eyes, concentrated on pinning down the source.

From a mortal?

No. That couldn't be right.

More images of that night rocketed through him. He felt the warmth of her skin under his palms, heard her soft whimpers as the heat lightning outside the barn lit up the loft. And her laugh.

Oh God, her laugh, that sinful smile, a knowing glance.

More images. In all of them they were naked, their bodies tangled together, clinging, touching.

His blood simmered as the memories channeled through him. But where were they coming from?

Abruptly the images faded, and the loss after such an unexpected assault of intimate memories was so profound he couldn't move. He hadn't willingly let his thoughts drift back to those days in so long that he wouldn't have expected the memories to feel so fresh in his mind. As though he'd dragged her into the barn hours ago instead of centuries.

He inhaled sharply, appreciating the icy blast of air that burned down his lungs. He'd long ago gotten used to the hypersensitivity to sensation that far surpassed a human's. And tonight the sting from the chill helped him focus.

Will jogged across the street and stepped into the bookshop, let the door shut behind him, certain the source of the images was very close. His heart pounded faster than it had in years. He scanned his immediate surroundings, then turned around and moved deeper into the store.

He spotted a woman behind the counter, and his determined stride faltered, tripping him up.

Will froze as he felt his world punch inward.

Elizabeth?

\* \* \* \*

Rooted in place, Lanie stared at the stranger less than ten feet away. Her pulse fired in her ears like a machine gun, and she reached out for the edge of the counter, needing something solid and stable.

The man continued to stare at her, his gaze piercing. Something akin to disbelief clouded his expression. Taking one hesitant step, then another, he approached the counter as though she might vanish before his eyes if he moved too quickly. He cocked his head, his eyes fixed on her face.

It was him. The man from her dreams.

Here. Now.

She was dreaming. She had to be, didn't she? He couldn't truly be real, could he? Hundreds of times she'd thought about it, imagined bumping into him on the street

one day. But it had been nothing more than wishful thinking. Or so her rational side had argued until seconds ago. Now she wasn't so sure.

The resemblance—How was it possible to dream of a man she'd never met? But the proof that her fantasy lover was very real stood mere feet away.

He was really here.

Lanie pulled in a slow breath meant to calm her runaway heart. She parted her lips to say something, but it took another few seconds for her brain to get the message, and a breathless sounding, "Hi," made it past her lips.

He continued to stare at her, and the fierce scrutiny in his expression scrunched his dark brows together. She waited for him to say something, anything. The heirloom grandfather clock in the corner ticked the seconds off as he continued to silently study her. How long did he plan on staring at her like that? Was it possible he had the same dreams she did? Or was that more wishful thinking? Completely irrational, living in a dream world wishful thinking.

Lanie shook her head, needing to get her spiraling thoughts back in the starting gate. The man before her looked different from in her dreams. His hair was shorter, his jaw dark with a five o'clock shadow, and he looked hard somehow, like his face might crack if his lips turned up the slightest bit. The man from her dreams smiled often, the tenderness always reflected in his eyes enough to speed up her heart just thinking about it.

No. Perhaps the two men had a resemblance--a coincidence--but they were not the same man. They couldn't be. Could they?

His frown deepened as he angled away, sweeping his gaze over the store. The surreal moment of awareness, of connection, was broken as his long sharp strides carried him from one end of the store to the other.

She didn't follow him, didn't trust her rubbery knees to get the job done.

A moment later he reappeared.

"Can I help you with something?" Her voice sounded normal to her own ears, but the hands fisted at her sides trembled. The usual question felt forced. Probably because all she wanted to do was ask him who he was, where he'd come from? Questions that would make her look like a complete and utter nut case.

And why wouldn't he say something already?

"I'm here to pick up a book," he said finally. All traces of the puzzled expression etched in his face moments ago vanished. The curious blue eyes assessed her as they might a stranger on the bus. No recognition, not even passing interest.

Had she imagined it? Maybe the man had been uncertain as to whether or not he was in the right place. With another bookstore around the corner, people frequently got the two mixed up.

That was the more rational explanation.

Lanie tried to suppress her disappointment and forced a smile to her lips. "What book would that be?"

"A friend of mine, Gabriel Pierce, called and spoke to the owner."

"Harold, huh? Well that means we have about a fifty-fifty chance of locating the book. Do you know the name of it or the author?"

He shook his head, his gaze lingering a little too long on her mouth. A shiver curled up her spine. She waited for him to meet her eyes, and chewed nervously on her bottom lip when he finally did.

"I'm sorry, but have we ever met before?" She had to ask, though she was positive she already knew the answer. She would've remembered meeting him face to face, yet she couldn't shake the tingling in her stomach that the stranger somehow knew her. Just as she couldn't ignore the fact that she'd dreamed about someone who looked exactly like the man before her. Perhaps there was no coincidence and it really was him. The more she thought about it, the less insane the possibility became.

"No," he answered, barely veiled curiosity imprinted on his face as he pretended not to follow her every move as she checked the shelves behind her and beneath the counter.

Not surprised by his answer, she tried to proceed as normally as she could. "When did your friend talk to Harold?"

"The day before yesterday."

"Okay, well let me check out back. Maybe he set it aside."

Lanie felt his eyes burning into her back as she slipped into the back room. Out of sight, she drew in a deep breath and tried to make sense of the crazy thoughts running wild in her head. He said he didn't know her, and yet the way he looked at her .... One minute as though she was a stranger and the next like she ....

"Any luck?" he asked.

She really needed to pay attention to those around her. Everyone and their brother could sneak up on her and she wasn't the least bit aware until her feet were back on the ground. Lanie shifted away from his casual stance in the doorway, trying to ignore the fact that his open coat revealed more of the familiar frame beneath.

"Still checking, Mister ...."

"William," he said, waited a beat, "but my friends call me Will."

She nodded thoughtfully, waited for something in her mind to shout, *Yes, it's him.*

"The book," he prompted.

Was that the beginning of a smile?

"Right." She turned back to the shelves crammed with filing boxes, books and whatever other junk Harold stored there. Removing an old pair of slippers and his extra set of glasses, she skimmed a finger along the leather spines on the middle shelf.

"Here it is," she managed, spying a hastily scrawled note half tucked into one in the middle of the stack. Tugging on the book did not dislodge it from the pile. Lanie glanced over her shoulder and found Will's attention fixed firmly on her bottom. He sensed her gaze and straightened in the doorway. He didn't look the least bit apologetic for getting caught in the act.

In fact, the longer she held his gaze, the hungrier his expression became. Or maybe she was imagining that, too?

Yep, lack of real sex was definitely screwing with her mind.

Dragging her gaze away, Lanie returned her attention to the book. Books she knew. Books didn't pretend they didn't know you, when clearly something about you affected them, him, whatever. She gripped the leather spine with two hands, and yanked,

jostling the precarious shelving unit Harold had built years ago in the process.

Something scraped the frame above her head. Lanie yelped as an arm wrapped around her waist and she was hauled backwards. Her back hit the wall behind her, and she lifted her head to find herself looking straight into moonlight blue eyes that were almost as familiar to her as her own. Over Will's shoulder she saw the wooden crate on the floor where she had been standing only a second ago.

"You okay?" he asked.

That depended on whether or not finding yourself held by the man you were convinced didn't exist outside your dream world was okay. Physically speaking, she couldn't think of a place she'd rather be. One solid arm locked tightly around her waist, the other rested against the wall near her face. Mentally speaking, she should probably have Brynn reserve a padded cell for her at the nearest nut house. Only a crazy person could dream the things she dreamt and believe they were anything more than a side effect of REM sleep.

Yet the evidence staring her in the face couldn't get any more convincing.

She knew this man. Somehow, she knew him. And with the same degree of certainty, she knew the recognition was mutual.

Her head began to throb, the inability to process it all hammering away in the back of her skull.

"You okay?" he repeated, and the underlying sensuality in his tone distracted her in a whole new way.

"I think so." She couldn't work her voice beyond a whisper.

This would be about the time when a polite gentleman who had saved her from a serious concussion or worse would step back and give her some room to breathe. Will didn't budge an inch. His eyes clung to hers. An unreadable emotion flitted across his face. Once more her attention shifted to his mouth, and she knew kissing him in reality would be much better than any dream. From shoulder to thigh, his body pressed against her with an achingly familiar intimacy. Her mind might be hesitant to reconcile her fantasies with reality, but her body had already made up its mind, and every cell screamed for his touch.

Abruptly, he pulled away, headed back to the counter out front. Over his shoulder he asked, "Do you take Visa?"

Lanie blinked. Visa? The man had just been inches from her mouth, seconds from her begging him to take her right there in the backroom, and he wanted to know whether or not he could put the book on a charge card? She could live to be hundred and fifty and she doubted she'd ever understand the male species.

Lanie shook her head and followed him out front, the book for his friend tucked under her arm. She couldn't meet his gaze as she rang up the purchase and slipped it into a bag for him. She didn't trust herself not to stare. If she did, she'd be hard pressed not to again ask if they'd met before.

He nodded, but said nothing else, not even goodbye before he turned and strode out of the store.

Out of her life.

She stared after him, still reeling from a surreal combination of disbelief and

undeniable longing she knew she had no hope of trying to understand. Not questioning what she was doing, she ran after him and yanked open the door. A gust of cold air blew in. She didn't know what she'd say to him, what she was expecting him to say in return, but she couldn't let him walk away just yet.

Lanie stepped outside, shivering in the frigid evening air as she scanned the deserted street.

She was too late.

He was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Lanie rolled over in bed, glanced at the clock. Only two minutes later than the last time she checked. Drowning a sigh with her oldest teddy bear--one she unashamedly admitted she still slept with on occasion--she closed her eyes. She wasn't sure if she couldn't sleep because she didn't want to dream of him, or because he might now look as he had in the shop--a little dangerous and stubbornly unaffected by the obvious connection between the two of them. Or at least he had left her with that impression.

Maybe she could find an excuse to call his friend Gabriel Pierce, and somehow find out more about Will. She could ask Harold where Gabriel had called from. But what would she do with such information anyway? And what would she even say to him if she could work up the nerve to call in the first place?

*Um, remember me? I'm the girl from the bookstore that kept asking if we'd met before. Oh, yeah, and I dream about you. A lot. Explicit, no-holds-barred dreams.*

Groaning, Lanie burrowed down under her covers. She slowed her breathing and forced her muscles to relax, to give into the sleep her body had craved only hours ago. It was nearly three a.m. She needed to sleep.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Deep breath in....

*"Open your eyes."*

*She turned towards the sound of his voice as her eyes adjusted to the dark. The mattress dipped as he stretched out beside her. His blue eyes gleamed in the shadows, but she wasn't scared. She was never scared with him. He would keep her safe. Always.*

*"I wanted to return sooner."*

*She touched his face, traced the outline of his mouth with her fingertips. "You're here now."*

*He bent his head and swept his mouth over hers in a lazy caress. "I missed you."*

*"Then don't leave me again," she whispered, half teasing, half serious as she slid her palm across his bare chest.*

*He tensed momentarily, and sucked in a breath. "And I definitely missed this."*

*Smiling in the dark, she moved her hand lower only to find herself flipped over onto her back.*

*He hovered over her. "Soon," he whispered. His mouth sank into hers, and the resulting spark from the contact spiraled a delicious heat straight to her core. She arched off the mattress, desperate to feel the weight of him against her. He smiled, a*



*tortuous curving of his lips meant to remind her he planned to tease her for a while longer. Loosening the front of her nightdress, he tugged it over her head. Warm air drifted around them, but her nipples beaded under the hunger that burned in his eyes.*

*He cupped her breast, the pads of his fingers brushing the sensitive peak. "I've been thinking about doing this for days." His seductive voice washed over her, and she swayed upwards against his hand. Each slow touch became more addictive than the last, igniting a desperate need to feel more of him. A need born from more than just awareness of him, but from the deepest place in her heart. She loved this man who filled her life with such dreams, hopes, and unfathomable desire.*

*"So you did miss me," he said, his breath hot against her neck. He didn't kiss her, kept his mouth poised above the spot he knew drove her mindless when he scraped his teeth across it.*

*Sucking her bottom lip in, she skimmed her hand past his waist. "Let me show you how much."*

Lanie bolted up in bed, her body slick with sweat. She untangled the sheet from her thighs and headed for the bathroom. With only the light from the octagon-shaped window to see by, she stared at her reflection. Between her legs ached with unfulfilled need. She gripped the edge of the counter and closed her eyes. A longing, so sharp that it snatched her breath, swept through her.

The man in her dreams loved her, *really* loved her. The kind of love people wrote about that often ended tragically.

How would it end for her? Was her dream man really the same man she'd met tonight?

And if so, could she just sit back and wait for him to reappear? Or should she track him down herself?

## Chapter Three

Spotlights twirled, blinked, and pulsed, turning the crowded dance floor into a wash of blues, greens, and reds. Music pounded out of the speakers. Bodies gyrated against each other, some in time to the reckless beat, others oblivious to rhythm.

Infinity was packed tonight as usual. The vampire presence was higher on account of the occasion. Julia had invited everyone she knew to join her birthday celebration and most hadn't disappointed. The only silver lining to the party was that Julia was too busy entertaining to pay much attention to him. He knew sooner or later she would probe into his head and find the one thing he didn't want to acknowledge.

Elizabeth.

Will downed the shot of whiskey in front of him and wished it burned the way it used to. Nothing, not alcohol, not even blood could make him forget the other night.

"Hi." A lusty blonde in a red shoestring leather outfit that looked painted on slid onto the stool next to him.

He nodded politely and motioned to the bartender for another shot. He wished he could get drunk and make all of this just go away. Moments like this, he longed for humanity, *his* humanity the most. What he wouldn't give to be able to drink until the world faded away and left him with nothing but a blissful haze.

"I'm Amy," the blonde said, leaning forward enough to show off her ample cleavage.

Will took note of the creamy swells, then straightened and yelled down the bar. "Mike. Bring me the bottle." He couldn't get drunk, but drinking gave him something to do. And if he drank he didn't have to talk.

"This is my first time here," she confessed. "You come here often?"

Will pinched the bridge of his nose. Small talk with a girl whose breasts were too big for her eighteen-year-old body was not high on his to-do list tonight. Her bra size had undoubtedly gotten her inside in the first place. He sure as hell knew there were enough men here looking for just the invitation her sparkling green eyes offered.

But he wasn't interested. The only blonde on his mind tonight didn't need to smother her face in makeup and squeeze into a dress illegal in a hundred different countries to look stunning. She had only needed to pretend not to watch him from beneath soft dark lashes as she had tried to keep her hands from trembling when she slid the book in the bag the other night. The soft blonde strands weren't fabricated with a bottle for added highlights. The few freckles nestled close to one side of her nose were enchanting, her smile devastating to him.

It always had been.

He shook his head, cursing. If he was going to think about her at all, he wanted to picture her as she'd always been, not the way she studied him so curiously the other night, or with her bottom lip trapped so playfully between her teeth.

What the hell did it matter? It wasn't her. Couldn't be her.

"Have a good night," Will murmured, snagging the bottle Mike set on the counter. He squeezed through the crowd without a backward glance. The blonde's thoughts were still focused on him as he took the employees-only stairs up to the catwalk above the club. From his regular perch, he watched the bodies sway beneath him on the hardwood floor. Women flaunted their bodies--something he usually appreciated--as the surrounding men leered and pursued to their hearts' content.

He chugged directly from the bottle, then set it on the ledge behind him. Three days. Three days since he had seen her.

Elizabeth.

The name swirled through his mind like a ghost. He could almost see her, feel her, but when he reached for her, she faded away.

He curled his fingers around the railing. Why now? Why hadn't he found her years ago? Was it really even her? The woman in the bookshop looked like her, but there were differences. Elizabeth didn't have a dimple and she'd been shorter, more petite. The woman from the shop need only tilt her head back a couple inches to look into his eyes. He'd towered over Elizabeth, but it had never bothered her that the top of her head barely reached his shoulders. But this woman--hell he didn't even know her name--came to chin level. Her honey-blond hair had tickled his face when he'd pinned her against the wall in the storeroom when the crate barely missed her.

Will closed his eyes, remembered the feel of every soft curve against him. He hardened instantly at the memory.

*Christ.*

Stalking the length of the catwalk, he tried to figure out what this all meant, what to do about it. Seeing her terrified him in a way he wouldn't have believed possible. Thinking about her before heading to Lake Falls hadn't prepared him for seeing her face. But it wasn't her. The woman's resemblance to Elizabeth didn't mean anything, did it?

He scrubbed his hands over his face and leaned against the rail.

*Some people are destined to find their true soul mates.*

Words from their last conversation replayed in his head. Had he really found her again after all this time? Or had fate simply found a new way to torture him, to drive him to edge of madness? A place few of his kind ever came back from.

"You found her?" Julia's soft voice jolted through him, and he swung his head in her direction.

One of these days he'd figure out how to keep her from slipping so effortlessly into his mind. Then again, he probably stood a better chance of finding the Key, the mythical source of vampires, than he did keeping her out of his head.

Will said nothing, instead glanced down at the people jam-packed on the dance floor below. Gabriel had his arms wrapped around a perky redhead in a black dress, with mile-long legs and stilettos deadly enough to be used as a weapon. It took little effort to sense the woman already imagined her and Gabe outside in the alley, wanted his friend to yank her dress out of the way and take her ruthlessly against the wall. Gabriel smiled down at her, obviously picking up the same images Will had.

Abruptly, Gabriel glanced up, spotting him and Julia. He cocked his head in

consideration, before he whispered something to the woman.

*Ah, hell.* He didn't need this tonight.

He watched Gabriel weave through the crowd as he made his way to the stairs and up to the catwalk. Julia remained silent beside him, but she wouldn't stay that way for long. He wasn't sure whether or not to be relieved by that.

"What's with the serious looks, people? It's party time." Gabriel swung Julia into his arms, planted a smacking kiss on her cheek. "What's going on?" he asked after Julia gently shook her head.

Will averted his gaze from the one he'd always thought of as his younger brother, even though Gabriel had been older in human years when he'd been turned. He opened his mouth to say something, but the words didn't come. What was he supposed to say? *Hey, Gabe, I found my dead girlfriend?* Will cringed and closed his hand around the bottle before he remembered it was empty.

Julia smiled in understanding. "Let's go to my office."

"I'm fine right here." Damn it. He didn't want to talk about this. He didn't even know what to think about any of it.

His senses prickled, and he frowned at the people below, barely swallowing a sigh of impatience. "Charlotte's here." He'd rather have a hundred Julia's poking around in his head than have to endure one conversation with Charlotte.

He shot an annoyed look at Julia. "Tell me you didn't invite her."

Her eyes narrowed. "I should hit you upside the head for even asking me that question."

"Sorry." Stupid question. Undoubtedly Charlotte had come here looking for him, birthday party aside. Though he could well imagine the performance of feeling put out at not being invited she was bound to pull now that she was here.

As far as he could tell, she hadn't picked up on his presence yet. Unlike Julia, he was far more adept in keeping the woman who'd turned him out of his head. He liked to think that particular talent stemmed from his profound hatred of her.

He pushed back from the rail before she emerged from the crowd below and spotted him. "Your office sounds good after all."

Gabriel left them at the stairs. "I'll try to get rid of her."

Nodding his thanks, Will followed Julia to her office. She closed the door behind him, and he sank into the closest chair, praying Gabe got rid of Charlotte before she realized he was here.

"Start at the beginning." Julia perched on the corner of her desk, her arms crossed casually, but there was nothing laid-back about the glint in her eye. She wasn't letting him out of here until he spilled his guts. And they both knew it.

Dressed in a stylish white pants suit, he knew she'd caused more than few heads to turn tonight. "Before sunrise," she suggested with a soft smile on her lips. "Talking to me always makes you feel better, you know that."

"This is different." And there was no way talking about it was going to make the heavy weight pressing on his chest spontaneously lighten.

"You can either tell me why you think you found Elizabeth, or I can stalk you the rest of the night until I get enough details out of your head on my own to piece it

together.”

“You play dirty. You know that?”

She beamed.

Will rubbed his forefingers over the perpetual frown he hadn’t been able to shake for two days now. “I went to Lake Falls.”

Julia’s, *I’m your shoulder to cry on*, expression concealed her surprise, but he felt it just the same.

“Why?” she asked, her tone soft, sisterly enough to make it easy to talk to her.

“A favor for Gabe. I was outside a bookstore and this image of me and Elizabeth came out of nowhere.” His body tensed as his memory teased him with details that ignited his blood--soft skin, full breasts, warm delectable mouth. “I went into the shop trying to find who it came from, and there she was.”

“Elizabeth,” Julia guessed gently.

He nodded, then corrected himself. “No. Elizabeth is dead.” Three hundred years later, and it still hurt to say the words aloud. “She looked sort of like her, that’s all.”

“And you don’t think that’s a little coincidental?”

Will jerked to his feet and paced away from her. “She died that night, Jules. I cut her down from that fucking tree myself.”

“I’m just saying it’s a little strange that after all this time you go back to that place and there is this woman that just happens to look a lot like her.”

He didn’t know what to think, but he was damned tired of trying to wrap his brain around it. “What are you getting at?”

Julia shrugged. “Maybe deep down she is Elizabeth?”

“You’re talking about reincarnation?” Will didn’t bother to keep the disbelief from his voice.

“Maybe. Maybe it’s fate giving you a second chance to get things right.”

“A vampire that believes in fate. That’s a bit fanciful even for you, isn’t it?”

She turned her head away and her pain sliced through him, brief but sharp.

Christ. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean ....”

“What’s her name?” Julia interrupted, her voice oddly quiet.

Will sighed. “I don’t know. I couldn’t read her very well.” The look on her face when he had walked in the door was another matter altogether. And the fact that she had asked if they’d met before had shocked the hell out of him. He could pretend to handle the fact that she looked so much like someone he would have died to protect, but facing the possibility that there was some cosmic force at work--*that* he couldn’t deal with right now.

“You always had trouble reading Elizabeth.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

She arched a brow. “How many other people have you had difficulty reading?”

“That’s not the point. You and Gabe aren’t always easy to read.”

“Humans,” she reminded him pointedly. “How many?”

“Only her,” he said sounding defeated. He dropped onto the burgundy leather couch.

“And no one else could share that memory of you and Elizabeth?”

“No one.” The memory was nothing an outsider could have projected. It was far too intimate of an encounter for anyone to have picked up on the intensity he’d felt when the images unfurled in his mind.

“Did she recognize you?”

“Yes,” he answered automatically. Leaning forward, his mind revisited their encounter. He had looked familiar to her. She had said as much. Hell, her face had lit up like she was surprised to see him, but somehow half expecting him.

Julia slid into the chair opposite him. “You still have a chance. Go back and see her, talk to her. Then you’ll know. Few people get a second chance to spend their life, immortal or not, with the one person they were meant to be with.”

Will took her hand, felt her heartache as she spoke of the chance taken away from her, ripped away by the callous vampire who had deserted her. If Will ever came across the bastard, he would gleefully rip his heart out.

“You’ve been alone long enough. Don’t throw this chance away because you’re afraid.” Standing up, Julia pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “I’ll be downstairs.”

Alone in the room, Will leaned his head back and stared at the plaster ceiling, following the circling designs until his eyes blurred. He didn’t know what he was more afraid of. That Julia was wrong, or that she was right.

After nearly an hour of replaying Julia’s conclusions in his head, he stood up, hoping Charlotte would be long gone. Downstairs, the crowd still pulsed with life, more people trying to carve out a few more inches of space on the dance floor.

He nodded to Julia before he let himself out the side door, and breathed deep the cool night air. It took him but a second to realize he wasn’t alone in the alley. He could hear the labored sounds of a couple having sex farther down in the shadows. Will smiled knowing Gabriel was giving his date exactly what she’d wanted.

At least someone was having fun.

Around front, a long line-up to get into Infinity stretched halfway down the block, and as he passed the waiting patrons, a familiar prickle skated down his spine. He groaned.

“Evening, Charlotte,” he said without stopping.

She pushed away from a shadowed doorway and fell into step beside him. Her deep auburn hair swept up from her face, she was dressed in an ultra-fitted bronze cocktail dress that might have caught his eye on anybody else. On her it was just another outfit she wore for the purpose of drawing attention to herself. She couldn’t stand being in any room without knowing she was the absolute center of attention, and that particular trait had gotten old with him real fast.

“Gabriel said you weren’t inside.”

He countered with, “Why were you looking for me?”

“I was in town, and we haven’t seen each other in a long time. Thought I’d say hello.”

He knew she was waiting for him to respond to that. Let her. It had taken him a while to figure out that silence worked best to keep her away from him. In the beginning his anger had only delighted her, made her pursue him more avidly. Nowadays his cool

indifference usually managed to keep a continent between them for years at a time.

He'd been foolishly naïve when he had thought himself infatuated with her in the last few weeks of his human life. That was before he had known what she really was--or who she was. For those first few weeks she'd let him see only the most positive qualities. After she had turned him, a choice she hadn't given him, her true nature had come out. The worst of it was he hadn't hated her for turning him in the beginning. He had hated her for not being everything he'd wanted her to be. It hadn't taken long to figure out that, her immortal strength aside, she was still a shallow, selfish, and cruel creature.

"I was hoping we could get a drink together."

She didn't mean grab a couple beers back at the club. She wanted to feed with him, or hunt, as she preferred to call it. The thought of watching her prey on an innocent like it was a game soured his stomach. One of these days a hunter would catch up with her. The one rule their keepers upheld was no taking of innocent lives. Being provoked by a stupid, criminally inclined human didn't count. But Charlotte didn't pursue such humans. No, her superior tastes demanded the forbidden.

"I have blood back at the penthouse," he offered, knowing she'd refuse.

Her face twisted into a disgusted scowl, and he hid his smile. Charlotte had always thought bagged blood was slumming it.

She stepped in front of him, pressed her hand and her breasts against him. He passed his gaze over the exposed flesh, knew she ached for him to tug her dress down and draw her nipples deep into his mouth. He could smell her arousal, and it did nothing for him. She didn't seem to notice he didn't respond to her. Either that or she didn't care.

"I was thinking about something a little closer than your penthouse. Something a little more fun."

He followed her nod to a young couple on the opposite side of the street.

"They have fucking on their minds," she whispered to him. "We could have them first, and after we drain them, we could have each other."

Charlotte was right about the nearby couple. The young man had plans to tie the timid looking brunette beside him to their bed and tease her until she begged him to take her over and over again.

But that was the only thing Charlotte was right about. There had never been anything between him and Charlotte since he'd been turned, and there never would be. The only thing that bound them to each other at all was the fact that she'd taken his life from him. He hadn't been given a choice, and although he had long ago accepted it, it was just one more reason to dislike her.

He brushed past her. "Goodnight, Charlotte."

She rushed to keep up with him. "There's another reason I'm in town."

Like he cared.

"There are some people I know who think they have a lead."

Will kept walking.

She planted herself right in his path. "They think they know how to find the Key."

"Good for them." He sidestepped her and continued on.

"So you have no interest?"

“Even if I thought they did have a lead--which I don’t because if there really was such a thing it would have been found by now--the last person or vampire I’d want to investigate it with is you.”

Like all vampires he’d spent his share of time hunting for the elusive source of all vampires, needing to know how such creatures had come into existence. After wasting more than a century in a pursuit that did nothing but send him and every other one of their kind desperate for answers in circles, he’d let it go. Even if Charlotte dangled undeniable proof right in front of his face, he’d walk away from it. He’d lost track of the different ways she had tried to convince him to form a partnership in one way or another over the years, and only a fool would go down that road knowing Charlotte as well as he did.

“I’ll pass, thanks.”

“One day you’ll change your mind and see I’m the best match for you. You have a dark side that no one but me understands. Eventually you’ll accept that, embrace it. When you do, I’ll be waiting.”

Will didn’t bother to tell her that immortal or not, she’d never live to see the day. He knew the second she’d turned away, and almost smiled. Should be at least another five years or so before she reappeared, given her track record. Of course five years wasn’t nearly long enough to a being who could live forever.

Pushing Charlotte out of his mind, Will headed back to his place. Maybe Julia was right, and he should at least go talk to the woman whose face had haunted him for so long. If there was nothing between them--even though some part of him insisted there had to be--he’d return home and go about his life as though he hadn’t just come face to face with the only woman he had ever truly loved. Somehow.

And if deep down a part of Elizabeth resided inside her, then .... Then he’d figure that part out later.

\* \* \* \*

“So are you going to track this guy down, or what?” Brynn aimed her cue and sent the ten ball spiraling into the side pocket. She impatiently shoved her hair back from her face. “I mean it *was* him, right? You’re sure?”

Lanie nibbled on another onion ring and took the cue Brynn offered to make her shot. “I don’t know. Maybe. Or maybe I just projected the image of the dream guy on a complete stranger that just had similar features.” She missed her shot and cursed as the white ball bounced off the table and rolled towards the bar.

Around them the bar had started to liven up with its regular Friday night crew. Country music rocked the jukebox, while a local band set up for later in the evening. Over half the surrounding tables were now occupied, and the smell of beer and deep fried food hung on the air.

Brynn replaced the white ball and took the cue from Lanie. “I’m cutting you off.”

Sighing, Lanie dropped onto the wooden chair next to the pool table and poked at the half-eaten plate of nachos they’d also ordered. She thought of the phone number in her pocket and the name of the man who had ordered the book. Surely he’d be able to give her Will’s number? But they lived miles away in New York. What was the point? And just what the hell would she say to him if she tracked her mystery man down



anyway?

*I dream about you. I feel this undeniable connection to you. I want to know if you're as good in bed as you are in my dreams.*

"Do it," Brynn said. "Try to find out who he is."

Lanie pushed the nachos away. "I don't know. Maybe I'm just crazy, and that's all there is to it."

Callie, the bar's head waitress, stopped at their table. "Finished, hon?"

Lanie nodded, unfolded the napkin in front of her. "Can I borrow a pen, Callie?"

"Sure." She dug into her apron and handed one to her. "Another beer?"

Brynn slid into the chair opposite her. "How about something stronger? We'll have two shots of Tequila."

"I don't think ...," Lanie began.

"You're crazy, remember. Who cares what you think? Two shots of Tequila," Brynn repeated to Callie before she leaned closer. "Is that him? Looks a little different than the others."

Lanie glanced down at the quick sketch she'd done on the napkin, his face already starting to take form. Instead of drawing him the way she usually did, according to how he appeared in her dreams, she drew him the way he'd looked more than a week ago. But the eyes--seductive and haunting--were still the same. A shiver skimmed over her skin and sped up her heart. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine him there with her, feel his breath on her neck as he whispered the wicked things he wanted to do to her.

"Earth to Lanie."

Opening her eyes, Lanie glanced awkwardly over to where the band was setting up. "So who's playing tonight?"

Brynn laughed. "You really need to find out who this guy is."

"I have the number to call," Lanie admitted. A number she had been carrying around for nearly a week and still hadn't been able to drum up enough nerve to call.

Brynn cocked her head doubtfully. "Sure you do."

To prove it, Lanie dug it out of her pocket.

Brynn snatched it out of her fingers. "Well, well. Someone was telling the truth."

Lanie reached out to snatch it back.

"Uh-uh." Brynn dangled it out of reach and moved with lightning reflexes when Lanie grabbed for it.

She watched Brynn open her bag and rifle through the contents. Even without lifting her head an inch, her friend knew the exact moment Lanie made a last ditch effort to reclaim the piece of paper that was wrinkled from constantly staring at it with one hand on the phone.

The sight of the small cell phone in Brynn's hand sent Lanie's pulse racing.

"No way."

Brynn grinned mischievously. "So should I tell this guy you think his friend is hot when I get him on the line?"

"I am perfectly capable of making my own damn phone calls."

"As evident from your recent attempts."

"I'm going to call," Lanie insisted, helplessly watching as Brynn punched in the

numbers.

"When hell freezes over maybe. And I'm not letting you wait that long." Brynn stood up and walked away. Probably because she knew Lanie was within an inch of tackling her friend for the phone. Jesus, it was like junior high all over again.

Lanie stared as her friend, knowing she should go after her. If anyone should call to find out about this guy, it should be her. Knowing that, Lanie still didn't move. What if he didn't want to see her again? What if he thought her some kind of psycho for tracking him down? Maybe it was better to let Brynn look like the nutcase, which Lanie must be to think the man from her dreams was real flesh and blood?

"He's away on business," Brynn said flatly as she settled back in her chair a few minutes later.

"Oh." She tried to convince herself the uncomfortable tightening in her stomach was not disappointment.

Brynn smiled. "But I did talk to his friend Gabriel. Sexy as hell voice by the way, and he did admit you made quite an impression on Will, too."

"Oh," she managed again, this time with a little more enthusiasm.

"So I left your name and number so Will could call when he gets back."

"What?"

Brynn stood, picked up her cue. "Don't worry. I'll think up a good way for you to thank me." She motioned to the pool table. "You want to break, or should I?"

Lanie shook her head and took the cue. "I can't wait to get the chance to start meddling in your love life."

"So it's progressed to a love life already. That was quick."

She pointed the cue at Brynn. "You better watch it ...."

Callie paused next to the pool table on her way to deliver a tray full of food. "Harold just called. Says he hears your dog barking up a storm, and it's driving him nuts."

Lanie rolled his eyes. "If he was at home instead of in the shop when it's closed, there wouldn't be a problem."

"A chipmunk is probably sitting on the window ledge, taunting her." Brynn laughed.

Undoubtedly. It took little to set her dog off. Chipmunks were the biggest source of aggravation. "I guess I should get out of here then. You staying a while?"

Brynn nodded. "I'm gonna see how many fools in the place I can take money from."

"Didn't they all learn their lesson last weekend?"

"Men never learn," Brynn said simply, then gave Lanie a quick hug. "Call me tomorrow."

"Okay. Night, Callie." Lanie tugged on her jacket, picked up her napkin sketch, and left the bar. A sharp breeze stole her breath as she started across the gravel parking lot. Shivering, she burrowed deeper in her coat.

A curious awareness trickled across the back of her neck. She glanced over at the parked cars next to the bar.

There, leaning against a dark green sedan and looking every bit the dark, tortured

lover, was Will.

## Chapter Four

Lanie sucked in a sharp breath and blinked, half convinced her imagination had kicked into overdrive as she watched Will's casual stride eat up the distance between them. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them slowly, just to be sure.

Lanie grinned. He'd come back.

Then the reality of the situation set in, and her heart fluttered nervously in her chest. Her breath clouded on the cold night air, whispering out in uneven measures. Heat bloomed in her cheeks as memories of her dreams swirled through the back of her mind as she watched him approach. Memories of him naked. Very naked.

She swallowed, and mentally tried to push the butterflies somersaulting through her stomach back in their box. Like a bad blind date, she scrambled to think of something clever to say. But who could think about stringing two sentences together, let alone getting them past their lips with such an attractive man so close and staring so intently?

Lanie couldn't help but wonder what he was doing here, foolishly hoping it had something to do with her.

Oh, God. Had she sold him the wrong book? It wouldn't be the first time Harold got his notes mixed up. That would be her dumbass luck, no doubt. To see the man of her dreams again and have it turn out he just wanted a refund. Trying to stay optimistic, she figured it was best not to jump to any conclusions. If the book had been the wrong one, surely she'd have heard before now, and he wouldn't track her down at a bar to talk about it?

Will stopped less than three feet away. She couldn't stop from scrolling her gaze up the length of him, drinking in every masculine inch as though he might fade away as he did every time she woke from another dream.

"Hi," he said simply, his voice deeper than she remembered.

Those rabid butterflies slammed into each other as she fought to get a grip on the raging hormones his actual presence kicked up inside her.

"Hi," she murmured back.

His lips curved gently, the soft smile a thousand times more potent in the flesh. "You're leaving? I thought I might be able to buy you a drink."

"Yes. I mean no. I mean ...." She clamped her lips together and tried again. "I'd like that, but I have to check on my dog."

One black brow arched skeptically. "If that's a rejection, you need to get some more convincing material."

"That was *definitely* not a rejection." She couldn't get the words out fast enough. God forbid now that she had him here, she'd say something stupid and he'd be on his way. "I thought you were away on business?"

His handsome face deepened into a frown. "Business?"

Lanie nodded, then glanced away embarrassed. "I had your friend's number, the one who ordered the book, and I ... my friend actually ...." She shivered as the wind picked up.

"It's cold out tonight," he said, stepping closer to shield her from the frigid blast of winter air. The rumbling concern behind his words warmed her from the toes up.

She couldn't contain the smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth. She'd stand naked out here all night to hear that soothing tone of voice again. "I'm okay, but aren't you cold? Your jacket looks awfully thin."

Will shrugged dismissively. "I'm used to the cold. If you're not up for a drink, can I drive you somewhere? Home?"

And a gentleman to boot. "I live above the bookshop so it's just a few blocks up the street. You can walk with me, if you like."

She watched his gaze fall briefly to her lips. Hazy desire darkened his eyes as he edged closer. A slow flame licked its way through her veins. Even in her dreams she couldn't remember her heart drumming so wildly at being this close to him. She knew nothing about the stranger in front of her, and yet she responded to him as though there was far more between them than one up-close encounter that spared her a very nasty headache.

Recalling the hard feel of him pressed against her from chest to shoulder and every place in between made her duck her head before another telltale blush gave her thoughts away. She was hardly a skittish virgin with her first teenage infatuation, but she couldn't seem to get her body to remember that fact.

Another sharp breeze penetrated her jacket, and she glanced back at the bar, half-expecting to see Brynn watching her from the doorway. She nodded down the street, and said, "It's this way."

"Wait." He caught her hand, his fingers firm as his thumb stroked a velvety line the length of her palm. "I still don't know your name."

"Lanie. Sullivan," she added almost as an after thought. It was a wonder her tongue cooperated at all when the simplest touch of his hand captured her complete attention. This was way worse than any high school crush.

Will fell into step beside her, his boots crunching over the snow-packed sidewalk. A hundred sentences flitted through her mind, each one more ridiculous than the last, which forced her to keep quiet lest she frighten the man off by her crazy talk. What sane man wouldn't run if he discovered the woman he had met a few days before claimed to have dreamed about him for the last five years?

Despite the fact that she'd like to think she wouldn't be foolish enough to mention anything along those lines so soon, she was on unfamiliar territory here. Every time Lanie felt him watching her, she couldn't help but sense he was waiting for the same sign of recognition she craved herself.

"So what brought you back to our cozy little town?" Lanie asked, sneaking a sidelong glance at him.

He came to an abrupt stop behind her. She turned around, wondering why his gaze seemed to touch everywhere but her.

Curious about the guarded expression that tightened the lines around his eyes, she

took a step towards him. "Did I bring up a sore subject?"

Will shoved his hands deep in his pockets. "There's some unfinished business for me here."

"You don't sound too certain." Or was it more like worried?

He tilted his head to the side, studying her closely. "It's complicated."

Lanie took a step back, the sudden intensity in his expression startling her. Her foot skimmed a slick spot of cement. She flailed an arm out to maintain her balance.

Will caught her, his tight grip above her elbow keeping her upright. "Whoa."

His attempt to keep her on her feet brought her within inches of a sturdy masculine wall of muscle she could all too easily imagine snuggling up against, just to see if it felt the same as it had last night.

She felt his attention focused on her, but couldn't drag her chin up to meet his gaze. If she did, she'd want to kiss him and she didn't know how well that would go over, seeing as this was their first real conversation. She knew every intimate detail about him. Her dreams convinced her of that. Standing so near him felt so exciting and achingly familiar she had to force herself to take a step back before she gave into the urge to ....

"Seems serious."

Blinking, Lanie glanced up at him. "What does?"

"That look on your face. What were you thinking about just now?"

She didn't care if he thought she was staring as she absorbed the clear-cut lines and blatant sensuality that awakened some part of her she hadn't realized existed until this moment. She paused on his full lips, imagining the exquisite pressure of his mouth slanted across hers.

"It's complicated," she settled on before smiling at him. Very complicated. Maybe it was better not to actually dream about your fantasy man before you met him? In her dreams, his kiss melted her soul. Talk about high expectations for the real event.

"So," Lanie said, steering them towards her apartment as she tried to steer her thoughts away from kissing him. "What do you do, Will?"

"Whatever I want."

"Rich playboy or carefree drifter?"

Will moved easily beside her, his strides fluid, powerful. "Neither. Both." He shrugged. "I own a few companies, but they all have a board of directors and pretty much run themselves."

"So what do you usually do with yourself most days?"

His mouth dipped into a deep frown. "I've asked myself that a lot lately."

She heard the barest trace of loneliness before he redirected the conversation back to her. "Have you always lived here?"

"Yep. You're looking at a bona fide hometown girl. Born here, raised here. Hell, I'll probably die here, too."

The look on his face bordered on dread before it disappeared into another puzzled frown. "No urge to see the world?"

"Not really. I have a great job, good friends, and Harold sort of needs me."

Will stopped. "Is he your boyfriend?"

Lanie tried not to smile at what couldn't possibly be jealousy. "God, no. He's more like an uncle and part-time dad. I'm the only family he has, and he's not doing so well these days. He's been fighting off cancer for the last couple of years." She shook her head as they reached her apartment. "Sorry, you probably don't want to hear this."

Again, Will caught her hand. His piercing blue eyes tunneled into hers. "No, I do. I want to get to know you a lot better actually."

Her heart slowed, the seconds they stood staring at each other dissolving together until Lanie wasn't sure if she was even breathing. He tipped his head down, his mouth hovered above hers.

Upstairs, her dog whimpered. The spell holding them in a delicious limbo broke. Frowning, Lanie dug through her bag for the key. Odd. It wasn't like Salem to whimper like that. Bark her head off, yes. Whimper? Not so much.

Will glanced up, his brows knotted together as he reached past her and tried the knob. It turned easily in his hand. "Did you forget to lock it?"

Lanie shook her head. "No."

"Stay here."

His sharp tone combined with the way he surveyed their immediate surroundings with no small amount of suspicion sent a shiver slithering down her spine. Alone she just might have blamed the unlocked door on her own forgetfulness. Taking in his alert gaze and rigid posture, she wasn't so sure. "You're not leaving me out here by myself."

The more she thought about it, the more certain she became that she'd locked it when she left with Brynn earlier. Harold had called about the dog, which told her he knew she'd be by to handle it and wouldn't have troubled himself to use the spare key she left downstairs. So who had unlocked her door, and how had they done so when nothing pointed to a break-in? At least not at this entrance.

Will scanned the deserted street once more, then nodded. "Stay close."

Inside the door, Lanie wondered why her dog didn't meet them at the bottom of the stairs. A chill pushed the hair on the back of her neck to full attention, and she inched closer to Will. The stairs creaked under their combined weight, and she knew if anyone was inside, they'd hear them coming.

At the top, Will flipped the light switch, blasting the darkness with bright light.

Lanie's black Pug sat perfectly still in the middle of the kitchen floor, her eyes glued to them. A second later the dog turned her head and growled as if she heard something moving in the apartment behind her.

Lanie searched the dark hall beyond the kitchen. "Salem. Come here, girl."

The dog jumped up and trotted over, her pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. She burrowed her head between Lanie's legs and whimpered. Kneeling in front of Salem, she rubbed the dog's head. "What's wrong?"

Will strode past them, his shoulders squared as though he expected someone to jump out at them waving a machete. He cocked his head, and she too strained to hear any out-of-place sounds in the apartment. What did he pick up on that she clearly missed? Lanie gave the surrounding area a quick pass, but nothing felt strange or out of place. It was just home.

Visibly relaxing, Will turned around. Salem lifted her head as if she noticed him

for the first time. Lanie braced herself for the unusual deep barks that always followed her meeting someone new. Only the chipmunks seemed indifferent and stubbornly unaffected by Salem's barking. Instead of charging toward Will, Salem ambled over, nudged her head against his legs, and whimpered again.

Very weird. First Salem hadn't greeted them downstairs, and now this oddly submissive behavior. She should be pouncing all over Will.

Will crouched beside her, smoothed a hand down the shiny black coat. He laughed when she rolled over so he could get her belly too.

*Okay.* Very, very weird. Salem always preferred a deep back scratch to having her belly rubbed.

"She has one blue eye, one brown. Hey, is the blue one crossed?" Will asked, clearly amused.

Watching him in her apartment, seeing him play with her dog, left Lanie with a bottomless contentment she'd never felt before. "Salem's a bit of an odd duck."

A disturbed frown cut sharp lines across his forehead. "You named your dog, Salem? Of all the names you could choose, you picked Salem?"

Not sure she understood the mix of disbelief and disgust in his voice, Lanie shrugged. "I know it's more of a cat name, but it just sort of fit."

She could have sworn he shuddered before standing up. Salem followed at Will's heels as he crossed back to her side.

"Now that you have me up here...", he said, with a grin that was equal parts teasing and sexy.

Banked desire swirled in the blue depths, and Lanie's body responded in kind. A tingling rush tightened her midsection, before it burrowed deeper. Much deeper.

"How about a cup of coffee?" he finished.

*Right.* Coffee. She nearly tripped over the black lump sprawled adoringly at Will's feet. Lanie caught herself and managed to reach the cupboard, tugging off her coat as she went. She switched on the coffee pot, felt the heavy weight of his stare. From the corner of her eye, she knew he followed her every move as he had the night in the bookshop, as though she was a glassed-in exotic dancer and he couldn't figure out how to reach her without shattering the window separating them.

"Why don't you ...." She stopped, noticing he had already removed his coat and laid it over the railing. He flashed a soft grin and walked purposefully towards her. With every step, her lungs worked harder to draw in a steady breath. He stopped less than two feet away.

She skimmed her gaze up his long legs to a trim waist and a powerful chest she'd happily spend hours draped across. Hell, in her dreams she already had, dozens of times. His arms looked incredibly strong and his hands all too capable of ushering her most wicked dreams into reality. He hadn't shaved recently, judging by the shadowed jaw that gave him an edgy appeal, and made him even more attractive, if that was possible. He smiled knowingly as she continued to take him all in, his eyes bright with a longing that tightened her throat.

She took a step towards him, anticipation humming through her veins.

Will rocked back on his heels. "Where's the bathroom?"



Lanie blinked. "At the end of the hall," she answered automatically and quickly turned back to the cupboard to dig out mugs so he wouldn't see that the obvious dismissal stung a little. Good thing she hadn't kissed him outside after all. Maybe she just needed to take a step back here, and not let herself get caught up in some naïve expectation of experiencing firsthand those steamier moments? She hardly knew the guy, and yet, she couldn't make herself care about that. Brynn would have her ass for the lax attitude. Lanie preferred to think of it as trusting that gut instinct that never misled her.

Will didn't move, and she waited for him to say something. When she finally turned back around, she discovered he'd soundlessly left the room. Lanie shook her head. Being alone didn't help her reason with the raging hormones whipping through her system. Her body craved him, wanted him in all the ways it already knew him.

She closed her eyes on a sigh. She was definitely a lost cause.

Down the hall a door opened, and she knew instinctively it wasn't the bathroom.  
*Shit.*

\* \* \* \*

Will stared at Elizabeth's back--Lanie's he mentally corrected with a curse--wanting to say something to .... Hell he didn't know. One minute he wanted to do nothing more than simply stand there and look at her. He couldn't begin to try and untangle the emotions knotted in his chest. The two women looked so much alike, and yet there were differences. While he remained determined to find out if there could be any truth to Julia's theories, more than once his body wanted to skip ahead to the part where it decided for itself what the truth was.

One touch, one kiss, one moment, would put his doubts to rest one way or another, wouldn't it?

He couldn't convince himself that was the case, not objectively. And right now objectivity was the only thing keeping him from daring to hope. Hope could be just as dangerous and devastating as despair--even to an immortal. Having traveled both those roads more than he'd cared to, he was in no rush to make any immediate decisions.

Least of all on what to do with the knowledge a hunter had been in Lanie's apartment.

He senses heightened as he left Lanie in the kitchen and ventured down the hall.

Why? What would a hunter want with Lanie? The hunter's scent still lingered on the air as though he'd searched every room for something. A young one, Will decided. Careless. Had he been looking for something in particular or just Lanie? Will had only just arrived in town, so the hunter couldn't have been tracking him. The truce between hunters and vampires protected him as long as he didn't hurt an innocent. So why had the hunter been here?

He dug his cell phone out of his pocket and headed for the bathroom. He'd get Gabriel to make some calls. He didn't expect the hunter to return tonight, but if he did, Will would have enough warning to get her out of here. In the meantime, he'd have to find a reason to convince Lanie to let him stay the night. He wasn't letting her out of his sight. But how would he explain not going outside when the sun came up? It would be safest if they left, but she wouldn't go anywhere with him without an explanation, and the truth would have him tossed out on his ass. He didn't want to have to think about forcing

her to cooperate. Whatever the hunter's intentions were, however, they couldn't be good.

Will opened the bathroom door and turned on the light, only to retreat as he realized he was in the wrong place. Obviously a guest room, judging by the neatly made bed and lack of personal details that made a room look lived in. He had turned to leave when a drawing caught his attention.

He walked farther into the room. He heard Lanie rush down the hall and hover in the doorway as he picked up the first of dozens of sketches scattered around the room. His heart thudded in his chest, disbelief warring with undeniable proof about the connection between Lanie Sullivan and Elizabeth.

"Feel free to run screaming anytime," she said hesitantly.

Will studied the charcoal sketch of himself, noted his hair was the same length and style he'd sported hundreds of years ago.

"When did you draw these?" He picked up another drawing, this one done in pencil. The attention to detail was incredible. It took a gifted hand to be able to capture such likeness.

Lanie took her time crossing to his side, her stride hesitant. She glanced over his shoulder at the sketch. "I started almost five years ago. You sure you don't want to run?"

He set the drawing aside, picked up another one. "Do you believe in fate, Lanie?"

"I didn't until you walked into the bookshop."

Her brown eyes triggered a warm rush in his chest, and he turned towards her. She smelled so soft and warm and good. He ached to take her in his arms until she remembered him. But there was no guarantee she ever would. Elizabeth was dead, gone. Even if a tiny part of her was buried inside the woman in front of him, Lanie Sullivan was her own person.

So where did that leave him? Them?

Lanie tilted her soulful gaze up to meet his. "What about you? Do you believe in fate?"

Will shrugged and closed his eyes against the warmth radiating off her. If he moved another inch to the right, he'd be touching her, and her proximity was already playing havoc with his insides. He didn't need to look down to see exactly what effect she had on him. His aching erection told the whole story. Still, he couldn't drag himself away. "I've asked myself that since the other night."

She gripped his sleeve. "I've dreamed about you for five years, Will. What does that mean?"

*Five years?* Christ. He needed to sit down. He needed to get out of here. He needed to hold her in his arms and never let her go.

Will closed his eyes, waited for some sign to show him the right thing to do.

"Kind of overwhelming I know," Lanie said. Her voice shuttled over him in a seductive wave.

Will opened his eyes. Desire for this woman, sharp and soul deep, almost brought him to his knees. His arms slipped around her waist and he tugged her flush against him. He took a deep breath, his senses absorbing the scent of her, memorizing the feel her as if she might leave him again. Her head tipped back to expose the slender column of her

neck. Her pulse pounded fast and hard. The monster inside him smiled at the offering, dared him to take it from her. Helpless to fight her effect on him and the hunger inside him, Will bent his head and brushed his mouth across the tender flesh.

She trembled in his arms, tasted like the sweetest of sins and he meant to have her. All of her. Now.

He walked them back until Lanie's back hit the wall. Crushed against him, her every curve burned through his body from head to foot. Her pulse kicked up, and he felt a vein thump under his mouth. Just one nip of his teeth and he could taste her.

Her mouth grazed his jaw, and he momentarily forgot about the blood pounding through her. He slammed his eyes shut as she nipped a trail towards his mouth. Her soft mouth teased the edge of his bottom lip. Rock hard, he shamelessly nudged his cock against her belly. She responded by settling the center of her heat against his thigh. Growling low in his throat, he pressed her harder against the wall and took full possession of her mouth.

She tasted nothing like he remembered, but everything he craved. One slow stroke of her tongue against his and they both moaned. He angled her jaw upward, taking as much from the kiss as she'd give him. The newness of this warred with old memories that he forced to the back of his mind. At the moment he cared about nothing more than satisfying the growing need to consume every inch of her.

The shrill ring of a telephone dragged them apart.

Breathless, Lanie rested her forehead against his chest. "I should get that. It's either Harold or Brynn."

Nodding, he reined in his control, forced the monstrous hunger and staggering lust to retreat deep inside of him. He stepped aside, but held onto her hand for a second longer. She smiled up at him, then slipped free and left the room.

Will spied another sketch and picked it up. In this one Lanie portrayed his face with a gentle edge. Gentle had been the farthest thing from his mind seconds ago. He should have fed before seeing her, but he hadn't expected to wind up so close to her, so quickly. The urge to have her had almost swallowed him. Drinking from her when it wasn't knowingly offered .... He couldn't take advantage of her like that, no matter how bad he craved just one taste. She didn't know how much her nearness provoked him.

On every level.

Even being with Elizabeth the first time had not been so detrimental to his senses.

Shyly, Lanie entered the room. "Brynn," she said. "Just making sure I got home."

She looked so incredibly desirable standing there he had to turn away to focus on the bigger issue. "Someone was in here tonight."

"I'm sure I just forgot to lock the door. I was distracted earlier." She didn't sound half as convinced as she looked.

"No, someone was here. He might be back."

Lanie chewed on her bottom lip. "It was probably just some kids looking for something to steal. Salem scared them off."

Will shook head. "No. I don't think so." *Really* didn't think so.

"What makes you so sure?" The concern in her voice told him she wanted it to be

just kids messing around.

"Just a feeling. I'd like to stay the night." It crossed his mind to come right out and tell her he was staying, but something told him that would be pushing it.

"Just a second ...."

He cut her off. "I've been dreaming about you too," he added slowly, which was as close to the truth as he would go for now. "For as long as I can remember, you've haunted me." That part was most definitely the truth. "I'd feel better if you let me spend the night. Please. I'll sleep in here or on the couch. Whatever makes you most comfortable."

"I'm sure it's not necessary. If the kids even thought of coming back, Salem would scare them off again."

He contained a snort as the animal in question plunked down at his feet, having followed Lanie back in after the phone call. "If you had a Doberman you might be able to convince me of that."

"Or I could call the police and have them drive by a couple times tonight."

"Or you could let me stay and then we'll both sleep easier. Unless ...."

"What?"

"You don't trust yourself."

Lanie rolled her eyes. "I don't think you have to worry about me throwing myself at a complete stranger."

He nodded past her to the collection of drawings. "But then, we're not really strangers, are we?"

Her brows drew together in a familiar gesture that tugged at his heart. He waited to see if he'd pressed too hard. The longer she thought it over, the more frustration ate him. With everyone else it took little concentration to know what they were feeling. Lanie--like Elizabeth--was much harder to read, leaving him with little more than her facial expressions and body language to go by.

Will eased closer, pleased when she didn't back away. "I just want to make sure you're safe."

With her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, she nodded slowly. "You do realize my best friend will have my hide for not calling her about someone skulking around my place tonight?"

"It can be our little secret," he said.

She turned around, pausing in the doorway to glance back at him over her shoulder.

"Well, this is the guestroom. The mattress is a bit on the lumpy side, but it's more comfortable than the couch."

"It'll be fine. I do need to get a couple things from my car though." Like some blood. With a hunter lurking about, he needed to stay strong, focused.

"Okay. Let's have that coffee, and then we can walk back to the bar for your car. Salem needs to stretch her legs anyway."

"I'll be along in just a second. Still need to use the bathroom." Will waited until Lanie returned to the kitchen, then called Gabriel.

After he quickly explained to his friend what he needed done, Will headed back

down the hall, hoping he could keep the hunger for Lanie under control. At least until he knew what they were up against.

## Chapter Five

*Standing in the open doorway, she stared out into the night. Was William safe? Had the hunters managed to finally catch up with him? Her throat pinched shut, fear of losing him making it difficult to breathe. The thought of living her life without him wrenched her insides, and she closed her eyes. She needed to have faith he'd always find a way back to her unharmed. With a helpless sigh, she turned back to the dishes she'd stacked beside the washbasin. Her grandmother and sister had already retired for the evening, leaving her alone with her troubled thoughts.*

*"And here I was hoping to find you already naked and waiting for me in bed."*

*Her heart pounded in relief, and thankful tears shimmered behind her eyes. She would not let him leave her again. Before she could turn to take her first look at him in days, he crowded her back, his breath warm on her neck.*

*"Don't turn around. This spot suits me just fine."*

*She tried to twist in his arms, desperate to bury her face against his chest, but he kept her caged between him and the edge of the counter. "The hunters ...," she began.*

*"Shhhhhh." His deep voice rumbled across her skin. "We'll talk about them later. Right now I find myself desperate to touch you, to hear you moan my name over and over."*

*"We should go out to the loft."*

*His teeth nipped her collarbone. "Here is fine. You'll just have to be quiet. I wouldn't have your grandmother interrupt us." His hands traveled down her sides, untied the apron she wore over her dress. Setting it aside, his mouth continued to tease and nibble. Heat coiled low in her belly, and she leaned back. His hard length teased her bottom, nudging against her in deliberate strokes. Her inner muscles clenched, aching to feel his fingers slide along her sex, to feel him to sink his cock deep between her thighs.*

*The night air drifting from the open doorway caressed her skin as he lifted her skirt. She tried to turn around again only to be pinned in place.*

*"No. Right here, like this."*

*"But--" He brazenly cupped her breasts and she bit her lip on a moan. Through the fabric he sought her nipples, catching the tight peaks between his fingers and tugging gently. Her knees trembled.*

*William pushed the top of her dress down, exposing her breasts. He slowly rubbed his thumb back and forth across the tips. "I hunger to taste them. To taste you." He dragged his teeth across the vein that pulsed for him.*

*"Please."*

*"I will. Soon. But first...."*

*In less time than it took for the fire in her blood to reach all her limbs, he tugged her dress all the way down and let it drop to her feet. Naked, she dropped her head back,*

*eased her thighs apart. If he didn't touch her soon ....*

*"Much better," he murmured. He massaged her hips, bottom and thighs, the kneading soft one moment, ruthlessly hungry the next. But that wasn't where she wanted to be touched.*

*"William." Breathless now, desire thundered through her. Rocking her hips back, she pressed against his hard length.*

*One finger stroked the inside of her thigh. She pressed them closer together to soothe the steady ache building within her core. William cupped her sex, brushing the swollen knot with lazy precision.*

*"More," she begged. "Please. More."*

*His seductive laugh echoed in her ear. "As you wish." With no warning, he sank two fingers deep in her heat. She jerked back against him, and thrust her hips upwards in a silent plea for him to continue. Slowly, he withdrew and pumped into her again.*

*Yes, that was what she wanted. "Harder."*

*He groaned against her neck, his teeth scraping the spot she knew he craved. "Like this," he taunted a moment before he plunged deep inside her once more. His thumb circled her clit in practiced loops, spiking the sensations tunneling through her. "Yes, you like that, don't you?"*

*Her body jolted with each slick invasion, pitching her against the erection digging into her bottom each time. Sparks shot along her nerve endings, aiming for the deepest parts of her sex.*

*"You're almost there. I can feel it. Come for me." He ruthlessly pumped harder, deeper, until she was mindless to everything but the tremors humming through her blood.*

*"I ... William," she moaned. Her body tensed, then erupted in a million glowing pieces.*

*Before she had time to sag back against him, he whipped them around and draped her belly down across the table. She heard him loosen his pants moments before the tip of his cock probed her damp folds.*

*"My turn," he growled.*

Lanie rolled over, and cursed the phone and whoever was on the other end. She didn't appreciate the interruption just when she was at the really good part. Sunlight streamed through her bedroom window, warming her skin to mix with the all too real memories of Will's hands on her last night.

Sighing, she pressed the cordless phone to her ear. "Hello."

"So?"

Lanie smiled at the sound of Brynn's voice and snuggled back in bed. "This had better be good." She already knew why her friend was calling, but it would be more fun to pretend she didn't.

"Do I have to ask?"

"I'm not sure I'm following," Lanie said innocently.

Brynn sighed. "Did you two hook up or what?"

"No."

"That's it? No more details?" It was more of a whine than a question.

"We didn't have sex, if that's what you're fishing for. He slept in the guestroom."

"He stayed the night," Brynn repeated slowly, "but you didn't have sex with him. I'm not sure whether to commend you or ask you what stopped you. Not that I'm one for recommending you sleep with anyone on the first date, but this situation is unique."

"That's putting it mildly."

"So, what's wrong with him then?"

Lanie laughed. "Nothing. He's just ...." She trailed off, her mind searching for a word that would accurately describe Will. "Different," she settled on.

"This coming from the self-proclaimed crazy chick. I guess you guys are a match made in heaven."

Sitting up, Lanie glanced at the clock. "I think the power went out last night. My clock is wrong. What time is it?"

"You're still in bed? My God, woman. It's three-thirty in the afternoon. If you didn't sleep with him, what the hell have you been doing?"

*Three-thirty?* Lanie shoved herself up to her elbows. No. She couldn't have slept the whole day away. It had been after two when she finally turned in for the night, but she rarely slept past nine o'clock on her days off, and never past the lunch hour. She must have been more tired than she thought.

Brynn continued, "So when do I get to meet this guy in person?"

"Why? So you can interrogate him?" Lanie grinned.

"I like to think of it as more of a casual one-on-one."

"Uh-huh." Lanie rolled her eyes. "Well, I'm not sure what his plans are, so we'll have to play it by ear."

"I'll give you a little bit of time, but I'm hunting you both down if you keep me waiting for too long."

"Bye, Brynn," Lanie said, cutting her friend off before ending the call.

Staring at the ceiling, bits of the scorching dream floated back to her. Hunters? What or who were they, or what did they represent? And her grandmother? No one else had ever been mentioned in her dreams. It was always just the two of them. Something had definitely been different about this dream. Something ....

The more she tried to pinpoint it, the foggier the details became.

Giving up, Lanie tugged on her T-shirt and underwear. Living alone afforded her the privacy to sleep naked and walk around that way, too, if she felt like it. But with Will just down the hall, she found her modesty jumped a few notches. Although it would be fun to see the look on his face if she passed him in the hallway without a stitch of clothes on. Heat bloomed between her legs as she imagined him scooping her up, wrapping her legs around his waist before he crushed her between him and the wall, and drove himself deep inside her.

Salem stood up from her bed on the floor and stretched.

"You're a big sleepyhead too, huh? I bet you have to pee pretty damn bad." The dog padded over to her and sat back on her haunches, her head cocked as if to say, 'so what are you still doing sitting there then?'

Stroking the sleek black head, Lanie smiled down at her. "Let's go." Tail wagging, the pug trotted down the hall and straight for the back door. She opened the



door, and Salem ran down the wooden steps to the fenced-in backyard.

In the kitchen, she started up the coffeemaker, grabbed fresh clothes, and headed for the bathroom. Lanie kept her shower short, pausing from time to time to listen for any signs of Will moving about in the apartment. It was still quiet when she finished dressing and applied a touch of makeup she normally wouldn't have bothered with. Smiling at the combined results of the faded blue jeans and pink T-shirt along with the touch of lip-gloss, she shut off the light.

She paused in front of the guest room door. A little peek couldn't hurt, right? Lanie cracked open the door and squinted through the darkness. Realizing he'd secured a dark sheet--with duct tape?-- over the room-darkening shades, she guessed he wanted to make sure the sun didn't wake him up. Obviously not a morning person.

Her gaze moved over the bed, and the sight of his sleeping form kicked her heart rate up. She inched farther into the room. Naked from the waist up, Will was stretched out on his stomach, his face turned away from her. Did he have anything on under the blankets?

She gripped the door handle, prepared to leave. The man was asleep. He should be left alone. It was bad enough she stood there all but drooling over him. She turned and faced the hall, intent on a full retreat. The image of him from her dream washed through her mind, flickering a slow burning fire to life in her midsection. Glancing back over her shoulder, she decided a closer look would satisfy her curiosity.

She left the door ajar and crept to the bed. The even sound of his breathing assured her he was sleeping soundly. Her eyes drawn to his bare back, she took her first real glimpse of the strong, exquisitely male frame. If she could be certain it wouldn't wake him, she'd slide her palm along the smooth planes.

Lanie kept her hands fisted at her sides. With her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, she leaned over to peer into the deep shadows under the blankets. No doubt Brynn would laugh her head off if she could see her now.

Breath lodged in her chest, Lanie curled a finger around the edge of the blanket.

An arm snagged her around the waist and flipped her onto the mattress. Will hovered over her, a fierce vision of stark masculinity that forced every coherent thought right out of her head.

"Do you always spy on your house guests like this? Or am I special?" His low voice was cloaked in a sleepy sensuality.

Fireflies swarmed her insides. Raising her eyes, she found he was watching her intently, and his predatory grin devastated the last of her senses.

"You are definitely special," she admitted, half expecting him to bolt. Instead, she sensed satisfaction in his expression.

"I'm glad we're on the same page. But that still doesn't tell me what I should do with you now that you've found your way into my bed."

The dark promise in his voice was like a match to a stream of gasoline. "I suppose you want to have your way with me." A girl could dream.

Will's grin widened. "I think I want a whole lot of things from you. I suppose your body is as good a place as any to start."

Nodding her head, Lanie challenged him. "So what are you waiting for?"

\* \* \* \*

Will stared down at the tempting vixen beneath him. What was he waiting for indeed? He lowered his head and skimmed his lips along her jaw. Her eyes fluttered shut on a shaky exhale as she slid her hands up his back. Careful not to break the skin, Will nipped a path down her neck, drawing the skin at her pulse into his mouth.

Lanie moaned, the shivery sound somewhere between a sigh and a plea. Her hips swayed upwards, chafing her sweet center against his aching cock. He was long past talking himself into holding back until he heard from Gabriel. Deep down he knew that nothing his friend had to say would stop him from having Lanie now.

Lanie. Elizabeth. His mind had no trouble distinguishing the two women, yet to his heart they were one. One soul meant for his. Forever. Right?

He ignored the small flicker of doubt. This was the first time his body, mind, and his heart had craved someone so much in over three hundred years. Emotions--most too hard to pin down--rolled through him before he finally gave in to the raging desire.

Lanie shifted beneath him, her breasts a teasing softness. He wanted to rip her shirt open and coax the tight peaks deep in to his mouth. But the hunger for blood, her blood, thundered inside him. The very real possibility he might lose control and frighten her convinced him to take his time.

Keeping it light and slow, he swept his mouth across hers.

"I'm not going to break," she whispered and caught his face in her hands and dragged his mouth down to hers for a gut-wrenching kiss. He felt her desire intensify as her lips parted. The velvety tip of her tongue shot a sharp burst of lust down his spine and straight to the head of his cock.

He longed to sink hard and fast into the heat burning against his groin, lose himself inside her until she needed the connection as much as he did. Nestled between her thighs, he nudged her sex through her jeans. Her back arched in response as he continued to plunder her mouth. Or maybe it was the other way around.

*Touch me.*

Will broke away from her mouth and stared deep into her dark brown eyes. "Did you just say something?"

She shook her head, and reached for him. The provocative caress of her mouth captured his full attention. He slid his hands under her shirt to find her breasts. Her nipples pressed against the silky material. Reaching behind her, he unclasped her bra. Her breasts tumbled free.

*Yes. More.*

It took Will a second to realize Lanie hadn't spoken the demand aloud. He'd felt it. At no time, not even when he and Elizabeth made love, had the barrier that guarded her thoughts ever weakened enough to let him in.

"What is it?" Lanie asked, distracted.

Pleasure bloomed deep in his chest at this newfound connection. "Nothing. Everything is fine. More than fine."

Following her silent plea, he trapped one dusky crown between his fingers and tugged.

"Yes," she murmured.

Will circled her other nipple, ruthlessly teasing the hard bud until she bowed upward. Her hips bumped against his as she cradled his cock between her legs. The rough friction stirred the lust in his belly, and the sweet scent of her arousal pushed him as close to the edge as he could go.

*I need to feel your mouth on me.*

Stunned by the clarity of her thoughts, Will was slow to bend his head. When his teeth finally scraped the greedy points, laving them before he sucked them deep into his mouth, she dug her heels into the mattress.

Senses still attuned to his surroundings, Will darted off the bed when he heard the unmistakable sound of the front door being opened.

"You've got coffee on. Great," a deep voice boomed from the bottom of the stairs. A friend, Will realized. Harold? He relaxed against the guestroom doorframe, sifting through the older man's thoughts just to be sure.

*Bringing a boy up to her place. Him spending the night. Better be some damn fine young man, or I'm liable to break his neck for touching my little girl.*

Behind him, Lanie sighed. "That man's sense of timing needs serious work." She pushed herself to her feet and fumbled to refasten her bra and straighten her clothing. Her face was flushed, her damp hair mussed. She looked like she'd just crawled out from the backseat of a car.

She cocked her head, her playful gaze roaming over his body. "You might want to think about getting some clothes on yourself."

Will didn't move. Lanie continued to drink him in. Appreciation for his more prominent traits flashed in her eyes. If not for the sounds of Lanie's visitor digging through the cupboards, he would have dragged her to the carpet at their feet. The sultry expression on her face told him she guessed the direction of his thoughts and approved.

"Do you want me to pour you a cup, too?" the guest hollered out.

Smiling at Will, Lanie answered back, "You better make it three." Then she strolled out the door.

Will pulled on his pants to join Lanie and her guest in the kitchen. The sun had almost set, making it much easier to move around without fear of it bothering his eyes or catching a burn from sunlight streaming through a window. The sun was easy to avoid in his place because it had specially tinted glass and he knew the location of all the windows and how the sunlight shone in. Here, he wasn't fully familiar with the layout and could easily walk right in front of a window at the wrong time of day if he wasn't cautious.

Lanie and Harold's voices were hushed, and he pretended he didn't know they'd been talking about him as he approached and took the mug Lanie offered.

"Harold, this is Will."

Dark eyes narrowed beneath bushy gray brows. "You gonna do right by my girl?"

"Harold," Lanie scolded.

"What? A man walks into my little girl's kitchen half naked with obvious plans to finish whatever I interrupted by the look of him, so I have the right to ask."

"You don't have to worry about Lanie. She'll always be safe with me," Will promised.

Harold grunted as though that was yet to be determined. He grabbed his mug and paused at the top of the steps to look back at Lanie. "I'll be downstairs, if you need me." And with another meaningful glance in Will's direction, he started down the stairs.

*He might be doing things to my little girl I do not want to know about, but at least he's not trying to pretend otherwise. Damn well better treat her right or I'll cut off his dick and feed it to Salem.*

"Nice meeting you," Will called out, smiling as the frail man jogged down the steps. He might not have all his strength, but Will didn't doubt the old man would step up to kick his ass if he thought Will had wronged Lanie in any way.

An answering grunt echoed up the stairs before the door slammed.

Grinning, Will leaned against the counter and took a sip of the coffee Lanie handed him.

"Harold is pretty ... direct sometimes," Lanie said.

"You and he are pretty close?"

"My parents died in a plane crash five years ago. He was my dad's best friend and the only real family I have left. He's extremely forgetful, cantankerous most of the time, and very opinionated. And I love him to death."

Will nodded. "I'm glad you have him to watch over you."

Lanie brows lifted. "Now you sound like him. I'm a big girl, Will. I can take care of myself."

"Good to know."

She backed away from him. "I have to give Harold a hand for hour or so; then maybe we could grab some dinner?" She looked undecided about whether or not she should have mentioned dinner at all. "I mean, I don't know what your plans are, of course ...."

He silenced her with a thorough kiss that left him rattled. "I'll be waiting."

"Good. Um, so think about what you'd like to have for supper and then we ...." Her eyes paused on his mouth, and he watched a slow blush creep up her cheeks. He'd give his immortality to know what she was thinking about. "Right," she said abruptly. "You think, I'll go, and later ...."

"We can pick up where we left off," he assured her, satisfied by the desire that flared in her eyes. His own body responded to the image of delivering on that promise.

Lanie shoved her feet in her shoes and fled downstairs as though she'd take him up on that right now if she didn't get a move on.

He smiled after her, feeling better than he had in too many years. He finished his coffee and called Gabriel on his cell phone. All the inquiries Gabriel had made had turned up nothing. No hunters had any beef with Will or Lanie as far as the elder Gabriel contacted knew of. He could offer no insight other than to warn them a small group of hunters had recently had a falling out with the council and were now considered rogue. The incidents surrounding the separation were still being investigated. Gabriel said he'd call the second he heard anything new, but for Will to be cautious. Like he needed to be told that. This turn of events didn't sit well with him. It would be best to get Lanie away from here until he knew what the hunter was after. Now ... how to convince her to go along with him?

\* \* \* \*

"Here, try this." Lanie held up her fork wrapped in strings of spaghetti and sauce. Will could smell the garlic from where he sat, and his throat burned just from the aroma. He could eat the stuff if he had to, but he'd be hurting until sleep healed the sores and serious indigestion the garlic would definitely inflict.

Will shook his head. "I'm one of those odd people who aren't crazy about pasta." He took another bite of the rare steak on his plate.

Lanie scrunched up her nose. "I don't know how you can eat that. It's hardly cooked."

Tossing her a ravenous smile, Will finished off the steak in two bites and pushed the plate aside.

Lanie raised a brow and picked up a smaller menu. "Dessert?"

He leaned across the table, took hold of her wrist. Stroking his thumb along her palm, he grinned. "I don't think they have what I want on the menu." He brought her hand to his mouth, wishing they'd stayed in after all.

She glanced around at the half-filled restaurant and tugged for him to release her hand. Will smiled at her embarrassment, and held it more firmly, scraping his teeth across the vein pulsing in her wrist. Her eyes closed in silent pleasure at the same moment his hunger reared to the surface. He felt his fangs lengthen as he nicked her skin.

Her lips parted in surprise right before he swiped his tongue across the minor scratch and sucked gently. Lanie's soft moan heightened his arousal. He paid no attention to the surrounding patrons. To anyone who took notice, they only looked as though they were simply caught up in an intimate moment.

The small taste of her was more a tease than anything else. They needed a little privacy to finish what they'd started earlier. Pressing his lips to her wrist, his gaze met hers. The deep brown depths pulled at his soul until his heart ached. How had he lived without her all this time?

Lanie's lips curved into a soft smile. *I think I'm half in love with him already.*

The words echoed clearly in Will's mind, yet it took a moment for them to fully sink in. And when they did, he stood up and hauled Lanie into his arms. He didn't care who watched as he held her close, his mouth capturing hers in a deep kiss. Her lips softened beneath his, and she gripped his shirt as she clung to him. A groan lodged in his throat when her tongue edged forward to tease the corner of his mouth. Her every curve burned down the length of him. If it wasn't for the crowd ....

Someone whistled and Lanie drew back, but he didn't release his grip on her waist. A pink blush colored her cheeks, her lips hovering on the edge of a smile.

She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Right here, in this moment.

"We should go," she whispered, ducking her head into the curve of his shoulder.

Will brushed a kiss across her forehead and nodded. "I'll take care of the check."

After they paid the bill, they walked back to her apartment to get Salem. The dog trotted ahead of them to the park where she tirelessly begged Will to throw stick after stick for her. Each time the dog obediently retrieved the stick, she dropped it back at his feet, and whimpered until he tossed it again.

Lanie stayed close to him, and he found his gaze continually drawn to her. She glanced up at the star-filled sky and his heart tapped nervously. It felt like he'd finally been given back the part of him he lost all those years ago. And for the first time in ages the thought of tomorrow and the day after that didn't seem so dark and empty. He wanted to fall straight into bed with her, and she seemed just as eager to take this connection between them to another place. The logical part of him demanded that he talk about it, but he was selfish enough to admit he didn't want to chance that getting in the way of what was to come. He didn't want to think beyond right now and what all this truly meant.

Linking their hands, Lanie said, "Maybe we should head back to my place?"

The sexy, suggestive tone sent fire crackling through his veins. He whistled for the dog and they walked back to her apartment. Quickly. By the time they reached the top of her stairs, need ravaged his system with deep raking strokes.

"Come here," he ordered.

Lanie shrugged out of her coat and angled her jaw a notch higher. A playful smile hitched up one corner of her mouth. "Say, please."

"Please." The word was closer to a growl, but she didn't seem to notice. He didn't wait for her to come to him, just gathered her close. His mouth dipped to taste the sweet curve of her lips.

Salem turned to leave, then froze. A menacing snarl erupted from the dog's small, tight body as she glared down the stairs.

Opening his mind, Will detected the threatening presence a second before the door opened.

## Chapter Six

Will felt the hunter below hesitate at the door. A second later he bolted.

Will started off after him, then whipped around. "Lock the door behind me, then take Salem into your bedroom. Lock it too, if you can, and put something against it. Do not open the door for anyone but me."

Confusion and fear blurred her eyes. "I don't understand."

"Just trust me. Please." He kissed her fast, hating to leave her, but he had to know what the hunter was after. He raced down the stairs, Lanie right on his heels. "Lock and bolt it. I'll be right back."

She nodded slowly, her brows scrunched together with questions he knew she wanted to ask, but didn't. He waited until he heard the latch slide into place before he opened his mind and tried to pick up the hunter's trail.

What could he want with Lanie?

A glimmer of the hunter's essence filled his senses. Fairly young, too. It would make him easier to follow. The younger ones were less skilled at masking their presence, and having been the prey of a particularly vicious group of hunter centuries ago, he picked up on them faster than most.

Taking off down the block, Will sifted through the voices and thoughts of people nearby on the street or tucked inside their homes, trying to isolate the hunter's presence. He was getting closer. The cold bit into his skin, more fiercely than it would a human, until he grew accustomed to it.

A narrow alleyway faded into the shadows on his right. Will stopped in front of it, detecting the faint scent that marked a hunter.

Cautious, he edged into the darkness. His age and experience were his only advantages. Even a young hunter could see as well as he could in the dark and move almost as fast.

A fist sliced through the darkness. Will jerked out of its path and whipped around, bringing his elbow down in a hard arc that nailed the hunter in the middle of his back. The hunter stumbled, but maintained his balance. He straightened, and circled menacingly.

Will watched him, waited. As expected, the hunter struck out. They always were too quick to make the first move. Arrogant. Every last one of them. They thought themselves so far above the creatures they kept in line. All of their young were born with the superiority complex that proved to be their downfall.

Will dodged a blow and grabbed his assailant's wrist, sending him smashing into the wall. He didn't wait for him to recover before he swung around in a roundhouse kick that knocked the hunter off his feet. Not long after he'd been turned he had had a brush with hunters that he had barely survived, proving to him that he needed to be able to defend himself against them. Especially the ones who stalked and attacked with no

provocation.

The smell of the hunter's blood awakened a vengeful appetite. Torn between wanting to rip him apart for threatening Lanie and draining him, Will waited. The hunter's eyes widened as though he read Will's intentions and didn't like the odds much. While hunters didn't share a vampire's ability to easily read the average human, they exchanged thoughts with their own kind and could pick up on enough details from others to assess any given situation. Judging by the nervous edge to the hunter's grim expression, he wasn't thrilled with what he was picking up from Will.

Expecting him to run, Will was ready and vaulted past the hunter, tackling him to the ground. Before the young one could defend himself, Will sank his teeth into the man's neck. Hot and sweet, the blood rushed through him, heightening his awareness. Anger and satisfaction pooled together in his gut. Once he was certain the hunter was adequately weakened, he forced himself to pull back, ignoring his body's demands for more.

He pressed his forearm under the hunter's neck. "What do you want with her?"

The hunter's eerie golden eyes fluttered. "Who?"

Will jabbed his elbow against the hunter's windpipe. "No games. Tell me why you're here."

The hunter shook his head.

"Need more persuading?" Will didn't wait for the protests before he returned his mouth to the hunter's neck and drained him further. Unlike when he fed from a human, no images filtered from his victim's mind to his. Normally he was thankful for such a thing. Tonight he wanted those details. Anything that would tell him what the hunter's purpose was.

He jerked the young one away from his mouth. "How much blood are you prepared to lose? All of it?"

The man had barely enough strength to shake his head.

"What do you want with Lanie?" Will repeated, then paused. A faint thread whispered through his mind. Concentrating Will pushed harder through the barrier separating their minds.

He heard two voices, not one.

Alarm rocketed through him as he tried to focus on the exchange. The hunter's eyes snapped to his as he realized Will was searching his mind. The exchange of thoughts was immediately silenced, but not before the severity of the situation hit home.

This hunter hadn't come alone.

\* \* \* \*

Lanie treaded back up the stairs, her heart knocking against her ribs.

What was going on? One minute Salem had growled and the next Will had ordered her to lock herself in her bedroom. Why? What did he and Salem know that she didn't? She paused at the top of the stairs and tried to fixate on whatever had sent off warning bells for them. While nothing looked out of the ordinary, her apartment suddenly felt uncomfortable, unwelcoming. Something was off. Telling herself it was just her imagination, she strained to confirm that she was alone in the apartment.

Nothing stirred.



Salem whimpered beside her feet. Eyes trained on the dark hallway, Lanie bent down and scooped the dog into her arms. She headed for her bedroom, grateful it was the room closest to the kitchen. Even though she didn't understand what was happening, she knew Will believed something was wrong. He was concerned for her safety.

But why?

A shiver snaked down her spine, and she shook it off. Inside her room, Salem didn't stop pacing until Lanie locked the door and dragged her bookcase in front of it. It seemed almost silly since it only came up to just above hip-level. One good shove would probably knock it over, but the lock alone would surely be enough to keep anyone out.

Maybe she should call the police. She could tell them she had heard noises outside. A passing patrol car would be enough to scare away whoever Will thought was lurking around.

Turning towards her nightstand, she noticed the cordless phone was not on its cradle. *Damn.* She must have left it in the kitchen earlier. She should go get it. She took three steps towards the door and stopped. Will had told her to stay put and wait for him, and Lanie trusted his instincts.

How long had he been gone? Two minutes? Three? Five?

Lanie glanced out her window, searching the dark yard below for any signs of movement. Not even one of the neighbor's three cats haunted the yard as they often did in the evenings, just to taunt Salem.

Salem faced the bedroom door, her fur bristling. A low growl began in her throat, and Lanie crouched beside her dog. "Easy girl."

A creak came from the other side of her door. Lanie jerked upright and took a step back. Salem's growl deepened.

Heart thundering in her chest, she waited. Will wasn't outside the door. He would have called out for her the second he returned. With a chilling certainty, she knew that whoever stood on the other side wasn't making a social call.

The doorknob turned slowly, carefully tested one way, then the other.

Trembling, Lanie backed up until she came up against the wall at her back. Salem's growls erupted into vicious barks. Abruptly the door slammed open, and the bookcase crashed to the floor. Lanie screamed, snatching up the baseball bat she used to hit balls for Salem.

Almost two feet taller than her, an older man walked into the room. He cocked his head and studied the bat gripped in her palms like he might a child with a balloon sword.

His amused smile didn't reach beyond his mouth. "You should put that down," he warned.

"Get out," she ordered, her voice steady despite the fear clawing at her chest. She tightened her knuckles around the bat until they hurt.

He didn't respond, his silence as terrifying as the cold edge to his eyes. Were they ...? No they couldn't be glowing. A trick of the light. Wasn't it?

The bat was ripped from her hands, tossed into the corner before she even saw him come at her. She darted to the side to avoid being cornered.

Salem launched her small body at the man and sank her teeth into his leg.

Without taking his eyes off Lanie, he booted the dog aside. Salem landed in a whimpering heap.

Lanie rushed toward her dog. The man stepped between them and reached for her. She jerked from his touch. "My purse is in the kitchen. Take my money."

A lecherous grin curled his lips. "I'm not here for money."

Her hands and feet skidded across the unmade bed she managed to get between them. "My boyfriend will be back any minute."

He looked amused at her efforts to evade him and shook his head. "Your friend is otherwise engaged."

Will? Oh, God, had he hurt him? Fear locked her insides even as she told herself he couldn't have had time to hurt Will. She hadn't heard him break down her front door, which meant he'd already been inside. "Where's Will?"

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about him." His cruel smile deepened, and his freakish amber gaze trailed purposely down her body.

Slivers of fear pricked at her skin. She had to get out of this room. Lanie darted a glance at the window, and when the man's attention predictably followed her gaze, she lunged for the door.

He caught her by the hair before she even crossed the threshold and yanked her back against his chest. Salem lurched to her feet, but the man ignored her, dragging Lanie into the hallway.

Adrenaline pumped through her fast and hot. She refused to let her mind dwell on what the man might have planned for her. Using all of her strength, she tried to wrench free of his hold, jamming her elbow into the his belly.

He grunted, but didn't release her, twining his fingers tighter until tears threatened to blur her vision.

"Let go of her."

Lanie jerked at the sound of the lethal tone.

*Will.*

Relief quickly mixed with concern from him. The man holding her, although older than Will, was taller and thicker through.

The man tightened his grip on her arm, his fingers biting into her skin until she cried out.

"Back so soon?" the man drawled.

Will took a threatening step towards them, his eyes dark with rage. "*I said*, let her go."

The man's brittle laugh rolled Lanie's stomach. "Or?"

"You die tonight."

He meant it, Lanie realized. Torn between an absurd sense of pride that Will would do whatever it took to keep her safe and wanting to smack him upside the head for blatantly provoking her captor, she did what any sane woman would do at that exact moment.

She screamed.

The man cut her off before she made more than a squeak with a leathery hand, then spoke to Will. "My dispute is not with you. Step aside and I'll consider leaving you

alive.”

“You’re not taking her anywhere.”

“If you insist,” the man growled, then shoved Lanie down the hall.

She slammed into the wall and pain erupted down her side, her legs buckling on impact. She landed in an awkward heap and jerked around just as the man lunged for Will.

Will dodged the attack and smashed his fist into the man’s face. The man staggered but managed to deliver a powerful blow to Will’s jaw that snapped his head back.

The phone. She needed the phone. Lanie scrambled to her feet, her slick palms finding little purchase against the wall as she regained her footing.

But she didn’t move an inch. Couldn’t. Rooted in place, she was riveted to the scene in front of her, stunned by the speed at which the two men dodged and attacked each other. Their feet barely touched the floor. Her rational mind fiercely argued with the information her eyes processed.

Will crashed into the wall, his mouth and nose bleeding. A gash in his forehead dripped more blood into his eye.

Jesus, were his eyes glowing, too?

Blinking, Lanie leaned against the wall, and grimaced as Will took another jab to his ribs and stumbled back. The older man grinned at her, and then delivered another blow to Will’s hunched over body. He crumpled to the floor.

“No,” Lanie shouted, darting forward.

The man swiveled around fully and advanced on her. She stumbled backwards, landing on her backside with a painful thud. There was nowhere to go. Her booted heels bit into the floor as she propelled herself backwards.

A fierce growl rent the air and it took a moment to realize it hadn’t come from Salem, but from Will. Behind her attacker, Will surged to his feet and launched himself at the man closing in on her. Taken by surprise, the man didn’t get a chance to block the blows Will delivered to his face, one after another.

Knocking Will off him, he leaped to his feet, glared meaningfully at Lanie before uttering, “We’re not done.”

So quick Lanie barely caught sight of him moving, he bolted across the room and down the stairs. Immediately, her attention shifted to Will. He sank to his knees and wrapped his arms around her. She closed her eyes and clung to him. The weight of his arms holding her tightly soothed her racing heart.

Tenderly, he tipped her head back. “You okay?”

It took another few heartbeats before she recovered enough to nod, shock from the last few minutes squeezing her throat. What the hell was going on? What would have happened to her if Will hadn’t stopped the man from taking her? She wanted to ask him, but hysterical tears lingered too close to the surface.

Blood trickled from Will’s split lip and a horrible bruise darkened his eye.

“We should get you to the hospital,” she began, drawing back enough to look him over for further injuries.

“I’m fine.”

"Will, you could have internal injuries. You need to get checked out." Lanie scanned his deep blue eyes and recognized a suspiciously familiar stubbornness, even before he shook his head.

"I'll be okay. We need to leave. Now. Pack what you need."

Her arms fell back to her sides. "Pack?" And go where?

He nodded absently. A look of concentration strained his expression before he returned his gaze to her face. "It's not safe here."

"I can't just leave. We need to call the police. Whoever he was ... he won't be back." She heard the tremble of doubt in her voice and added, "He won't," to convince herself.

"Lanie, do you trust me?"

"Yes." The response came instinctively and she realized that it didn't matter how short a time they'd known each other outside her dreams, she trusted him completely.

"Then, please, we can't stay here. They might be back. I need to get you somewhere safe."

"But the police ...."

"Won't be able to protect you from them."

Them? Who? Nothing made sense. There was no reason for anyone to want to hurt her. She had no enemies, nothing anyone would covet enough to hurt her to get.

He cupped her jaw. "I don't know what they want, but I'll find out. I won't let them hurt you."

"But ...."

His lips silenced the next protest and she held tight. Out of fear for his life, for her own, and for whatever was coming. She might not understand why she felt the unmistakable edge of darkness creep under her skin, but she damn well wouldn't be stupid and pretend it didn't exist.

"Can you find someone to cover your shifts?"

Lanie shrugged. "I don't know. Harold.... Oh, God, what about Harold?"

"He'll be fine. They have no interest in him. It's you they want."

"Why? And who are they? And why do you keep calling them *they* like you already know who they are?"

"We need to go."

She wasn't going anywhere until he told her something that could explain what had just happened. It didn't escape her attention that he dodged both her questions and her gaze.

Salem whimpered from her bedroom, and Lanie ignored the rising questions to check on her dog. Crouching next to Salem, she smoothed a hand over the black coat, and checked for any external injuries. Although shaky and undoubtedly bruised, Salem got to her feet, and walked without too much trouble. She would need to see the vet to be sure everything was fine.

"We need to go," Will repeated, clearly not about to let her sit there another second.

She frowned at him, determined to handle the situation, yet at the same time knowing how far out of her control it was. "I have to call Harold."

"We'll call him once we're on the road. Please, Lanie, we have to leave. Bring only what you need for the next couple of days."

Half numb, she moved back into her bedroom. As though her brain was operating on autopilot, she quickly gathered up a few items and shoved them into a bag. In the kitchen she grabbed Salem's dog food and dishes, and then her still swirling thoughts caught up with her.

"Are you sure we shouldn't call the police?"

Will shook his head. "They'll file a report and that will be the end of it. No one will be able to give a description."

"But I saw him."

He arched a brow. "Tell me what he looked like."

"He's ... well he was tall and...." The harder she thought about it, the more elusive the details became.

Will grabbed her hand. "Come on"

She tugged her hand free. "Wait a second. No. I need to know what's going on. I saw that man. I know I did. I looked right at him, and now ... I ... Something isn't right here. You ... and your eyes...."

It seemed almost foolish to say it aloud, but she clearly remembered Will's eyes taking on an eerie glow. Although impossible, she knew it hadn't been a trick of the light after all.

"Damn it. I didn't want to have to do this," Will said regretfully.

Lanie took a step back. "Do what?"

He moved so quickly--but that, too, was impossible wasn't it?--she felt him behind her only seconds before a firm pressure near the base of her skull clouded her vision. Her limbs unlocked with the sensation of falling, before everything faded to black.

\* \* \* \*

Will gazed down at the woman stretched out on his bed, still asleep. They couldn't stay here. Once the hunter tracked down who exactly he was, and he eventually would, it would be easy for them to find Lanie here. But right now this was the best place to be to get answers. The sun would be up in another hour or so, and he could only hope Lanie would sleep long enough for his body to heal most of the injuries.

Will's entire body ached from the confrontation, his limbs weakened further by the approach of the sun. Normally sunrise didn't affect him, but he needed the rest to heal. His determination to keep Lanie safe had made him push himself. He would not lose her again.

Leaning down, he brushed a kiss across her forehead. She sighed long and deep, but didn't open her eyes. He imagined the strain of the night had exhausted her. And it was only the beginning. How would he explain his lack of injuries in the morning? She was bound to notice the bruises gone and his swollen lip back to normal. Of course the upside was that she might be too pissed off at him for kidnapping her to pay attention.

As if on cue, both injuries throbbed. They were lucky he had been able to keep himself conscious on the drive home. One wrong move and they would have ended up in the ditch. He turned away when his attention was caught by the pendant peeking out of

the top of her shirt. He scooped up the black opal in his palm and tilted it towards the light, watching the colors bounce off it.

Elizabeth's?

The more his thumb slid back and forth across the smooth stone, the more convinced he became. But how did Lanie end up with it? He hadn't noticed it this morning. He would have woken her to ask except for the dark circles under her eyes. She'd been through enough already.

In the kitchen he drank to replenish his strength and then left a message on Gabriel's cell phone to let him know he was back. Lost in thought, his mind focused on the black opal Lanie wore around her neck, he barely heard Julia knock on the door. There were times when he wished that she had to do more than take a couple flights of stairs to reach him.

"Jesus, what happened?" She walked towards him, a sisterly frown curving her brows as she examined his wounds. "I thought you weren't big on contact sports?"

"I tangled with a couple of hunters tonight."

"Two? And one of them an elder," she said, picking up on the images in his head. "You're lucky you're not in worse shape. What did you do to them?"

"Not much. They were after Lanie."

Julia's hands dropped from his face. "What? Is she here with you?"

Will nodded. "She's asleep. For now. She's been dreaming about me for five years."

"What have you told her?"

"Not much." He ducked his head. "She didn't exactly know I was bringing her here."

Julia cringed. "That's not going to go over well, is it?"

"Doubt it. And if I tell her everything, she'll probably suggest I commit myself to the nearest sanitarium." And that was probably the best case scenario. He'd watched more than a handful of humans not take easily to the truth that the creatures they thought only existed in cheesy movies were very real.

"Something else is on your mind," Julia said, then quickly added, "I wasn't poking around, honest."

"What if she's not Elizabeth?"

Julia frowned. "You've learned something that makes you doubt it?"

Will shrugged. "She's wearing the pendant that looks exactly like one Elizabeth wore."

"You think it's the same one?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Will rubbed his hands over his face. More certain of the connection between Lanie and Elizabeth than ever, he perched on the edge of the closest stool.

"Couldn't that mean that she had simply inherited it?"

"I don't know that I ever mentioned it, but Elizabeth was a gifted healer, and she would have these ... visions."

"Of?"

"People's futures."

Julia waited for him to go on.

"She believed that her ability to see those visions was tied to the pendant she wore. Her grandmother disagreed, but Elizabeth believed it." He shifted on the stool. "What if the dreams Lanie's had have only been because of the pendant--assuming it's the same one. Maybe she is simply a descendant and shares a likeness to Elizabeth and that pendant brings it all together."

And what if Lanie wasn't Elizabeth? What if his feelings ....

"You're worried you might still be in love with Elizabeth's memory and not Lanie," Julia said softly.

At Will's look of semi-annoyance, Julia grinned. "Sometimes I can't help myself. Besides, if I waited for you to verbalize it, we'd be here past dawn."

"Right now I don't know what the hell I'm feeling." He pushed to his feet and circled the island in the middle of the kitchen. "I just met her and yet .... I never expected this."

"If you knew for certain she wasn't Elizabeth, would you have left her to the hunters?"

"No."

"Then does it matter who she really is. It's obvious you care about her."

He nodded down the hall. "Say I do figure out how the woman lying in there makes me feel, how will I know if my feelings for Lanie are about her, and not because she reminds me of Elizabeth?"

"It may not come to that."

"But if it does?" Will pressed.

"Then you'll ... just know." Julia folded her arms around his neck. "It'll work out. I promise. I'm just glad you came home in one piece tonight."

"Me too." Now all he had to do was keep Lanie safe until he could find a way to tell her the entire truth.

A piercing scream ripped through the air.

## Chapter Seven

Even before he opened the door, Will knew Lanie was alone in his room. Safe.

"It's fine," he said to Julia before he slipped inside.

Julia's voice echoed in his mind. *I'll check back later.*

*Tell Gabriel to make sure our security is online. I don't want any unexpected visitors without knowing they're coming.*

And they would. The hunters were an extremely proficient group who used technology to their best advantage, which included extensive databases on all the vampires they'd come across. It might take them awhile, but eventually they'd find out who he was.

Perched on the edge of the bed, Lanie ran her hands through her mussed blonde hair, repeatedly pushing a wayward strand behind her ear before giving up. He hovered by the door a moment, in silent awe of how good she looked sitting there, how much she belonged. She looked up when he crossed the room, her eyes a mix of relief to see him and confusion about where she was. Her brows drew together as she absently rubbed at the side of her neck where her pulse pounded fast.

He sat on the bed next to her, hoping she was still a few minutes from flipping out. He wasn't about to kid himself that she was going to let her new location slide. Elizabeth had expressed her displeasure over his actions with softly chastising words and disapproving looks. Lanie had listened to him and locked herself in her room with few objections, but carting her a few hours away was a little different. Without a doubt, he knew she'd be very clear on what she thought.

Only once on the trip here had she woken up. He'd thought about having the conversation about her safety in the car, but with the numerous injuries he'd been trying to ignore, he'd chosen to *help* her back to sleep. It was much easier to convince her she needed to stay once she was already here. He had a feeling she wouldn't see it quite that way, though.

"Bad dream?"

"I guess. I can't really remember ...." She broke off and stared hard at the lamp-lit surroundings. Her spine snapped straight. "Where are we?"

He braced himself for the expected--and fully warranted--anger. "My place."

Her eyes widened. "New York?" She bolted to her feet and moved to the window, yanking back the curtain. He automatically stepped back. He knew the sun hadn't risen yet, but dawn was close enough that his instincts always played it safe.

Lanie whipped around. "Did you drug me?"

He tried not to smile. "No."

"But you did do something to me."

Lanie's sharp glare had the desired affect and guilt stabbed at him. "I know a few pressure points," he said.



Her eyes narrowed before she glanced around the room. "Where's Salem?" A faint thread of panic slipped into her voice.

"She's asleep on the sofa. I think she likes it here," he added, moving towards her.

"Well, maybe being kidnapped doesn't bother her."

Will snagged Lanie's elbow, turning her towards him when she might have sprinted for the door. "It wasn't safe. We couldn't stay there."

She paused a moment, then jerked away from him. "So you've repeatedly mentioned. Tell me what's going on. Now."

There was so much to say, and so much he couldn't say, at least not yet. Will did the only thing he could do. He ignored her plea. "Come here," he whispered gently.

Lanie shook her head. "Will, please tell me what's going on. Meeting you after dreaming of you for so long was surreal enough without what happened in my apartment. That man didn't want money. He was after me, wasn't he?"

"I think so."

"Why?"

"I wish I knew."

She angled away from him. "But you knew him, didn't you."

"No," he said quickly before she jumped to conclusions. "I know ... people like him." That was the best answer she was getting out of him, tonight anyway.

"Did you lie to me about what you do? Was that man in my apartment there because of you?"

"No." That much he was fairly certain of.

"I don't understand why he was there or what he wanted from me."

Will didn't understand it either, but instead of admitting it, he coaxed her into his arms, half-expecting her to push him away.

She didn't.

Will buried his face in her honey-blond hair and breathed deep. He had come too close to losing her tonight. Again.

"I'll always keep you safe," he vowed, a vow he hadn't been able to keep before, he thought bitterly.

Her fingers gripped his shirt over his heart. "Promise?"

"With my life."

Will wasn't sure how long he stood like that, holding her so tightly he wondered why she'd didn't object. Her heart pounded against his chest, her breath whispering out in even measures that comforted him. She was fine--maybe still angry and worried--but fine. That was all that mattered.

Lanie tipped her head back and studied his injuries. "Does it hurt bad?"

"I've felt worse."

She arched a brow. "We should go to the hospital."

He shook his head. "I just need some rest." Badly. The need to sleep steadily crept over him, towing him under when normally it wouldn't have bothered him until the sun was fully up. As much as he wanted to make love to her--not that she'd even let him--his body needed to heal. The injuries on the outside of his body were nothing compared

to the battering his insides had taken. The first hunter had succeeded in getting in a few hits, but the second had been far more precise, repeatedly striking in places already hurting.

“Will, I need to know what’s happening. And you.... I didn’t imagine what I saw. The way you and that man fought. It was ....”

If he hadn’t thought she would see a kiss as the distraction it was meant to be, he would have attempted it. “I know you have questions. And,” he continued undeterred by the protest poised on her lips, “I promise I’ll answer every question I can in a few hours. It’s late. I’m hurting, and I just need time to rest. You’ve dreamed of me, trusted me only hours ago, please just trust me a little longer. And if I haven’t answered everything as well as I can, I’ll drive you back to Lake Falls myself.”

That last part was a bit of a stretch, but needing sleep as badly as he did, he’d say whatever he thought he could get away with. “Can you lay here with me for a while?”

Indecision flickered across her face before she glanced tentatively at the bed.

“I won’t jump you.”

Lanie looked skeptical.

He grinned. “Okay. So if everything didn’t ache from the inside out I would, but I’m too sore to think about much beyond crawling into bed and not moving for a few hours.”

“Why won’t you let me take you to the hospital?”

Will pretended not to hear the question, figuring he might be able to get away with that kiss now. Her lips parted beneath his, and she gradually relaxed against him. The soft kiss ignited his blood, but he drew back before it could consume him completely. Judging from the last couple of days, he knew just how easy that would be. It helped that his shoulder throbbed like a bitch where she held on to him.

She allowed him to lead her to the bed.

“You know, I’m not really that sleepy.”

“Just lay with me awhile.” He stretched out on the mattress and settled her beside him, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Their fingers linked across his chest. Will closed his eyes, felt her body relax against his.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

“For?” he asked groggily, his eyelids already heavy.

“For saving me.”

His mind flashed back to over three hundred years ago. Sharp pain sliced through him. He hadn’t saved Elizabeth.

Tugging her closer, Will smoothed her hair back from her face. “Nothing will ever happen to you.”

“A regular knight in shining armor out to save the day, huh?” He heard the smile in her voice.

“Something like that.” The warm weight of her snuggled next to him unfurled a soothing contentment inside him. With her head tucked close to his, his muscles melted into the mattress as sleep took hold.

*She stood before him in nothing but her nightdress. The gauzy cotton material*

was nearly transparent, leaving little to his imagination.

*"Take it off. Slowly."*

*Smiling shyly, she untied the lace at the top of the gown and dragged it over her head, inch by thrilling inch. He studied her full breasts, the soft satiny skin that sloped to her trim waist, and curvy hips he would soon grip as he drove himself deep inside her.*

*A triangle of soft curly hair hid the object of his deepest lust. His cock hardened.*

*"Come here," he ordered, forcing back the carnal craving that threatened to overtake him like an avalanche. He would hear her pleased cries first.*

*She stopped in front of him. Seated on the edge of the bed, he drew her between his parted thighs, and slid his palms up her back, then back around to cup one firm breast. Her head dropped back. A luscious sigh fell from her parted lips.*

*"Do you want me to touch you?" He caged one plump nipple between his finger and thumb and tugged gently.*

*"Yes." She shuddered as he rubbed first one pebbled tip, then the other.*

*"Where?" He leaned forward and swirled his tongue across each hard peak.*

*"Here?"*

*"More," she whispered, her voice thick with desire.*

*Clamping a nipple between his lips, he sucked deep and hard.*

*Her hands tangled in his hair and she rocked up on her toes. "Don't stop. More," she demanded.*

*"If you rush me, I might forget a spot." Moving lower, he kissed a trail from her breasts to her navel. His hands cupped her bottom, sliding down the backs of her thighs. At her knees, he circled the smooth flesh in tantalizing circles, then inched upwards each time she sighed for more.*

*Impatient, she caught his hand and guided it between her legs. "Here. I need you to touch me here."*

*He smiled, then flicked a finger across the damp flesh, and parted the folds in search of her clit. He stroked the tender nub, and she moaned.*

*"That's what you want, isn't it?"*

*She nodded, swayed her hips closer. With her hand over his, she urged him inside her. "Please."*

*Obedying her wish, he sank two fingers deep inside. She gripped his shoulders, her nails sinking into his skin. Her hot walls squeezed around him as he withdrew and pumped into her again.*

*His cock strained to be free of his pants. If he didn't ease the tension a little, he wouldn't last more than a few moments inside her. Keeping the movements slow and soft, he plunged into her, and each time she rocked harder against his hand.*

*He withdrew and stared up into her face. "Get on your knees."*

*Her lips curved in a wicked smile before she knelt in front of him. She slowly unbuttoned his pants, but before she tugged them down, she gripped his cock through his pants.*

Will slowly came awake, immediately aware of the softness nestled against him.  
Lanie.

Images from the fleeting dream tortured his body into full wakefulness. Lanie stirred in her sleep, a dreamy smile tugging at her lips.

Had they shared the same dream? Had images from her mind reached into his as they had the first night he found her?

Eyes still closed, Lanie slid her hand from his chest to below his waist. His jaw clenched at the surge of lust that made him want her naked and writhing beneath him. He ached to savor the tempting spot underneath her jaw where he could already hear her pulse climb to a faster rhythm.

Will managed to lie still--right up until the second she worked the zipper down on his pants and delved inside.

The harsh groan that escaped his lips brought Lanie's eyes open.

A siren's smile transformed her expression from one of innocence to downright *bring-his-cock-to-complete-attention* naughty. "I had the sexiest dream about you just now."

"Did you? What was I doing in this dream?" He expected her to look away or blush.

She did neither, and simply met his gaze with unabashed longing. "I could tell you ...." Her fingers grazed him through his boxers. "Or," she added, slipping beneath the thin fabric to stroke his arousal, her palm hot against bare flesh, "I could show you."

His hips jerked at the purposeful caress, and he reached out automatically to touch her in return.

Grinning, she slowly sat up, and just when he thought she was about to evade him, she crawled over and straddled him. He sucked in a sharp breath at the first brush of her sex against his cock.

Lanie used her knees and thighs to keep his arms trapped at his sides.

"So, what's it going to be?" Her mouth came down on his, sinking deep.

He clenched his fingers into the blanket, thinking how much he'd rather have them locked at the back of her neck, anchoring him to her.

"Tell you? Show you?" she whispered against his lips, tugging his bottom lip between hers in a teasing pull.

"Show me." And he barely got that much out. One more provocative arch against his cock and he couldn't be held responsible for his reaction.

She slid her hand under his shirt. The heat from her touch almost seared his skin. She circled his nipple, teased a finger over the tip. He bit down as she again cupped him through his boxers. Red hot lust streamed along his nerve endings.

Her lips curved in a wanton smile that suited her entirely too much. "Lift your hips."

Will complied, watching as she worked his jeans and underwear down his legs. His cock sprang free, aching to feel her luscious lips wrap around the length of him. She didn't immediately turn her attention to his arousal, instead stretched on top of him and caught his mouth in another sizzling kiss. His arms weren't locked beneath her now, so he used his hands to massage her back, then slipped beneath her shirt in search of the soft flesh.

He grazed the sides of her breasts, and she pulled away.

“If you do that, I’m going to forget all about what I want to do.”

He rocked his hips, his cock bumping between her thighs. “And what do you want to do?”

“Taste you.”

Lanie wriggled down his front, rubbing all the right places as she went. The first hot stroke of her tongue nearly undid him. If not for the quaking desire to feel more of her mouth on him, he would have come right then. Nudging her mouth, he urged her to continue.

She caught the head of his erection between her lips, flicked the tip of her tongue across the sensitized flesh. He groaned at the sweet contact and opened his mouth to beg her to take him deeper, only to swallow the command as she did just that.

Her hot mouth teased and sucked, but not for nearly long enough. Lanie licked her way up and down his shaft. Her eyes told him she knew exactly what her touch did to him. And each time the hot friction pushed him higher, she slowed the rhythm until he thought he’d die before he climaxed.

Will didn’t know how long she simply traced the edges of his cock with her tongue before again sucking him deep between her lips. His orgasm loomed and he couldn’t take it any longer. He caught her hair in his fingers, pushed his cock into her mouth. “Deeper. Faster,” he commanded.

Greedily, she obeyed, intensifying the pressure of her mouth and tongue.

Like a gunshot, his orgasm snapped through him with a wicked recoil. He closed his eyes, his straining muscles uncoiling.

She moved over to collapse beside him. The sly grin of a woman satisfied with her abilities curved her lips.

He rubbed his thumb along her bottom lip. “You’re pretty good at that.”

“Good? You damn near went up in flames. I think I was better than good.”

Will smiled at the sassy tone, reached over and caught her smug smile with his mouth. He rolled atop her, the feel of her beneath him stirring his cock to life again.

Her hands locked around his neck as she dragged him deeper into the kiss.

Beside the bed, Salem whimpered.

Tearing his mouth away, Will turned his head and found one crossed, blue eye inches from his face.

“Go away.”

Salem wagged her tail.

“I think she wants to get on the bed, too,” Lanie said.

The mood killer didn’t wait for an invitation before she dragged herself onto the mattress beside him. She circled twice, digging a spot in the blankets before flopping down. It seemed she was a day-sleeping creature now, too.

Will pressed his lips to Lanie’s cheek, then rolled over. By his guess it was still early morning. He felt better, but he needed still more time to heal completely.

Lanie kissed his cheek and curled against him. Drawing the blanket up over them, he closed his eyes. He knew the second Lanie drifted back to sleep, but it took him longer to control the lust and hunger for blood raging inside him before he could fall into another deep sleep.

\* \* \* \*

"How is it possible that we dreamed of each other long before we met?" Lanie perched on the edge of the kitchen stool, looking on as Will make her an omelet. He was more proficient in the kitchen than a lot of men.

He faced her, and she watched a series of emotions play across his handsome face.

"I don't know."

Lanie waited for him to add to that, felt that he wanted to, but he said nothing further.

"Have you called your friend yet?" She'd had been waiting nearly an hour for some kind of answer to what the hell was going on. Will had promised to explain everything as soon as he heard from Gabriel. She couldn't wait much longer. If he didn't call soon, she'd be calling him.

"Are your dreams always the same?" Will asked.

"They used to be, or they seemed the same ... but the ones I've had since we met face to face are different somehow. More real and yet ...." She shrugged. "I can't really explain it."

"Do you believe in reincarnation, Lanie?"

She picked up her fork, but didn't take a bite of the food he'd placed in front of her. She tilted her head in consideration. "Past lives?" A few years ago she might have simply believed it was nothing more than a fanciful notion. Now she was considerably more open to the possibility. "Meeting you after I've dreamed about you for years, I think I could believe in just about anything."

A deep frown drew his brows together.

She straightened. "You think these dreams are more than dreams?"

He shrugged. "Like you said, anything is possible."

Lanie mulled that over, thinking about the details of the dreams. Could they be memories? Was it possible the dreams hadn't been the creation of her sleeping mind, but images of a time in the past when they'd been together? It seemed too surreal to believe. And yet as she tried to latch onto the fuzzy details from her dreams, it almost made sense.

"I noticed your pendant. Where did you get it?" Will asked.

"It was my mother's. I found it among some of her belongings after she died."

He studied the dark stone she tipped towards him, appeared confused, then turned away. "Eat your eggs before they get cold."

"You're not having any?"

"I'll eat later."

Lanie didn't have much of an appetite, but ate because she guessed he'd harass her until she managed to get something down. She'd already called and left messages for Harold and Brynn. Lanie only hoped they'd assume she'd been too preoccupied with Will to call them before and hadn't stopped by her apartment. If they had, then the police were probably already looking for her. She'd barely had time to process the scene last night when Will did his pressure point thing. The next thing she knew she'd woken up here. She was still annoyed about that. Annoyed about a lot of things actually. Her frustration at being left in the dark continued to eat away at her.

The only thing that kept her from demanding to go home was the fact that Will made her feel safe. He cared about her. She felt it in every lingering glance, every soft touch. His dark blue eyes seduced her every time she met his gaze for longer than a second. Did she mean as much to him as he already did to her?

It was that same feeling, that impossible to ignore connection they seemed to share that kept her from being afraid of him. She hadn't imagined the speed with which the men had moved when they fought last night, or how their eyes seemed to glow. She almost wished she had imagined it and could avoid the darkness she felt hovering by simply checking herself into a padded room complete with a fashionable straight jacket.

This morning--no evening, seeing they'd somehow slept until nearly five o'clock--she had noticed his face carried no trace of the previous night's injuries. Given everything else, it had spooked her a little, but hadn't really surprised her. She wasn't sure what could surprise her at this point. Of course, Will had avoided her questions about that, too. The man was gifted with an ability to effectively steer a conversation away from any topic he didn't want to touch on. And while she fought with her rational side for plausible explanations for all that had happened, part of her was reluctant to push the issue with Will just yet, afraid the real truth would be more than she could handle.

Having only taken a handful of bites, Lanie pushed her plate aside. At her feet, Salem whined and propped her front paws in the air. Lanie rolled her eyes and scooped the last of her eggs into the food dish Will had set out for Salem.

She watched her dog devour the treat before she turned back to Will. "How about you start by telling me who that guy in my apartment was?"

Will hesitated, and she could almost see him trying to decide how much to tell her.

"All of it," she insisted.

"I can only tell you what I know."

"Why does that sound like it won't be nearly enough to satisfy me?"

His half smile was almost as devastating as the full deal, and she suspected he tried to use it to distract her, much the way he'd tried distracting her after she'd awoken to find herself here.

"So what do you know?"

"That the men last night were looking for you."

Lanie sighed inwardly. "Tell me something I don't know. Like why? Why me?"

Will shook his head. "That's still up on the air. But they are dangerous, and if they want you, bringing you here won't stop them from looking for you."

An icy shiver snaked up her spine. "Okay. Tell me again why going to the police won't help." She had to do something. She couldn't just sit here and wait for them to find her, whoever the hell they were. Trying to find the motivation behind the man's actions last night left her with a monstrous headache, and she couldn't shake the feeling that both Will and the man's arrival in her life so close together couldn't be coincidence.

"These men are dangerous," he repeated.

"You keep referring to the man last night in plural."

"He wasn't alone. The one I chased kept me distracted while the other went after you."

The memory of the man's cruel smile reared up in the back of her mind, and she shook it off. "How do you know people like this? You said you didn't know them specifically, but of them, and I get the impression there's more to it."

"Until we hear from Gabriel, it won't do us any good to speculate on what they were after."

His tone told her a completely different story. From the thread of frustration that skirted his voice, she imagined he'd been running the possibilities through his head, too.

"Are they spies or something?" The keyword there being *something*. No doubt it sounded as ludicrous out loud as it did in her head. Desperate for answers, she was willing to consider the most unlikely ones. The other potential careers for her assailant had ranged from corrupted law official to Mafia hit man, but none of those explained how the man had possessed such surreal abilities to fight Will off.

A hint of a smile touched Will's lips. "Not quite. They're definitely working for themselves. But what their interest is in you ...."

Lanie crossed her arms. "So what do I do?"

"We," he corrected. "We'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

"And that means what? Hiding? For how long? I have a life. People who depend on me. I can't just sit here." Sitting here meant continuing to be left in the dark about why the men wanted her and whether or not they were tracking her down right now.

"I'm no one special. There's no reason to want anything from me. I have nothing worth taking. I don't know anyone powerful they could ransom me for. I'm just ... average. What you see is what you get."

Leaning across the island counter that separated them, Will brushed a kiss across her forehead. "I'll get this figured out. I promise."

He'd told her virtually nothing. He was still holding back, she could feel it. Why wasn't he being honest with her? Was he worried she'd panic if he told her everything? Maybe if she promised not to freak out, he'd open up more? But fear that she wouldn't be able to keep such a promise forced her to let it drop for a little longer, at least until Gabriel called.

When Will disappeared into his home office, she took the time to have a quick shower, and spent it wondering why she'd slept through another entire day. She hardly slept more than six hours at a time, let alone through entire days, and she'd done it twice now. After dressing in clothes she didn't remember packing--another thing to be annoyed with Will about--she familiarized herself with Will's apartment.

She'd gotten a quick look around the outside of the brownstone apartment he shared with his two friends when she'd taken Salem outside. His apartment was in the middle. Gabriel's below, and Julia's above. She hadn't met either of them and looked forward to introductions, especially with Julia. Recognizing the jealousy, Lanie laughed at herself. Good to know that she could still get herself worked up at the thought of another woman laying a claim to her man.

Her man.

But he wasn't truly, was he? They'd had similar dreams of one another, but that didn't mean they were in love so soon after just meeting. Her heart disagreed the second



the thought crossed her mind. So maybe she did care far more than she should in such a short period of time, but the entire situation was far from reasonable to begin with.

The real question was--did he feel the same way?

After a quick tour of the rooms she'd already seen--the bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom--she poked around the main living room and guestroom before settling in front of the television. Nothing like watching some brain-wasting entertainment to pass the time.

Lanie flipped through channel after channel, her mind everywhere but on the scenes on TV. Giving up, she shut it off and lay there, letting her mind drift back to Will's theories of reincarnation. Could they have shared a life together in the past?

Lanie's eyes felt itchy and heavy. She thought about getting up. Having already slept for more than twelve hours, she shouldn't be tired. She shifted to a sitting position, but found herself leaning against the butter-soft leather, lost in thoughts of reincarnation.

The edges of sleep inched closer, and she allowed her eyes to close, trying to pull details from her dreams together to help her get a clearer picture of what was happening to her. The harder she concentrated on bringing the images into focus, the deeper she felt herself falling.

*His hands were everywhere, skimming down her back, caressing her waist before he cupped her breasts and tugged her nipples until she thought she'd scream. His hot mouth devoured one tight bud and heat pooled low in her belly.*

*He yanked her down, draping her thighs over his. A moan built in the back of her throat as she gripped the back of the chair and impaled herself on his hard shaft in one smooth stroke.*

*Desire arced through her blood as she shuttled up and down, squeezing her hot walls around his cock. His expression was strained before he caught her mouth, and she closed her eyes as his tongue plundered her mouth.*

*He moved lower, to her jaw, her neck. His mouth hovered, the tips of his teeth scraping the sensitive flesh there. She waited in exquisite anticipation, rocking up and down. She sucked in a breath when he pierced her flesh with his teeth and soul-deep pleasure whipped through her in vicious waves.*

Lanie bolted upright, the images fading from her memory even as she grappled to retain them. Touching her neck, she felt a fierce hunger pitch through her. She stood, and paced, clinging to the one detail that excited as much as it confused and frightened her.

Will had bitten her.

## Chapter Eight

Heart thumping wildly in her chest, Lanie wrapped her arms around herself. Fear for her own sanity tramped through her brain, froze her in place.

She needed to get a grip. Will was not ....

Lanie wouldn't even think the ridiculous notion hovering at the outskirts of her mind. They were just dreams, nothing more. She couldn't let herself believe for a second they were memories, because if they were ....

A shiver skated down her spine. Lanie moved around the room, rubbing her arms in search of warmth she couldn't find. She started towards Will's office, and stopped. She couldn't go in there and--what? Demand to know if he was a vampire?

The urge to laugh at the state of her thoughts tickled the back of her throat, but something stopped her. What exactly? Everything that had happened had been far-fetched. Now this. Surely he'd check her into the closest psych ward if he could read the squirrely thoughts going through her head.

But what if she wasn't crazy at all?

She knew she hadn't imagined the way Will's eyes had shimmered when he fought with the hunter. And she sure as hell hadn't imagined the injuries from the fight. They had healed in an impossible space of time.

Lanie paused. Hunter? Was that what the man had been? The same hunters she'd dreamed about before? She combed her memory for these hunters, but hit another brick wall. She cursed under her breath, furious with the dreams that seemed to tie her to Will, but held no clues to piece everything together.

She tried to slow her thoughts down. What if her dreams were memories? What if she wasn't crazy and Will really was ....

"Lanie?"

Lanie whipped around. Will was leaning in the doorway. His brows snapped together in concern before he pushed away from the door and walked into the room.

She instinctively took a step back, shaking her head.

"What's wrong?"

*Everything.* She didn't know what was happening. She wanted to leave, but was afraid to. She wanted to stay, was afraid of that, too.

"Tell me what's wrong," he pleaded.

Deep down, Lanie knew that despite everything, the connection between them was genuine. That realization suddenly terrified her as much as everything else.

"Open your mouth," she said abruptly, striding towards him. She needed to know. No matter how stupid it sounded, she had to be sure.

Lanie tipped his chin back. "I need to see them."

Wary, he edged out of reach. "See what?"

Something in his voice told her she might not be as insane as she feared.

"Your teeth. I want to see your teeth."

He forced a laugh. "Why?"

"Oh, for God sakes, Will. Just show her."

Lanie turned her head at the sound of the feminine voice. The woman in the doorway looked to be about the same age as Lanie. Dressed in a white halter top and fitted black pants, her green eyes sparked bright against the smooth olive complexion.

She pushed away from the doorway. "She knows. Look at her. She's not stupid."

Will glared at the woman. "Now's not a good time, Julia."

From the *you're an ass* look on Julia's face, Lanie guessed the woman didn't care what Will thought just then.

Julia crossed her arms. "And when is it going to be the right time to tell her the truth? And you already know what that is, don't you?" Her voice softened as she directed her last question to Lanie.

Lanie glanced between the two of them. "I'm not crazy, am I?" She waited, breath held, part of her wanting to hear she was. Stress. Lots and lots of stress.

Julia shook her head. "No, but in a few minutes you'll probably wish you were."

Lanie focused her attention on Will. "You're a ...." She still couldn't make herself say it. Vampires didn't exist. They were simply an exaggerated myth Hollywood glorified to make money. Weren't they?

Will didn't move. A swirl of emotions played over his face. He glanced helplessly at Julia, then back to Lanie. He raised a hand to touch her, then thought twice and drew back, looking more uncertain than even the day he had walked into the bookshop.

Was he scared? He couldn't be. There was nothing for him to fear. If this was all true, then nothing changed for him. He knew as much now as he always had. She was the one who had just been slapped with an impossible reality.

"We both are," Julia answered, finishing Lanie's train of thought. "Vampires," she clarified when no one said anything.

"Vampires," Lanie repeated like a first-grader testing out a word heard for the first time. It felt strange to say it and know it might mean more than something fictional. And while a voice screamed in the back of her mind that it was all true, the rational part of her brain refused to believe she could have shared a past with creatures that went bump in the night, refused to accept that the two perfectly normal looking people in front of her were vampires.

Vampires existed in books and movies. In people's imaginations. They weren't real. Lanie shook her head. "It's not possible." She looked to Julia for confirmation. She didn't trust her instincts where Will was concerned, and knew her feelings ran too deep to allow her to be objective about him. Especially now.

Shrugging, Julia perched on the edge of the sofa Lanie had vacated moments before. "Sometimes things are true whether you want to believe them or not."

Another hysterical laugh bubbled up, and she sandwiched her lips together. "This can't be happening." And now she sounded like the in-denial brain-dead heroine that trooped up into the attic when everyone knew the psycho was waiting up there to gut her.

More and more her life was starting to resemble a horror movie that refused to end.

Will took a step towards her, and she shied away from him. Hurt flashed across his face at her rejection, but it couldn't be helped. As much as something inside her ached for him to hold her, there was now a part of him she didn't know, didn't understand.

Jesus. She was losing her freaking mind.

Dream men, vampires, hunters.

Hunters. Will had been afraid of them in her dreams. Were they some kind of vampires, too?

Fuck, she needed a drink. She needed air. She needed to get the hell out of here.

"Lanie, wait." Will reached for her again, but she pushed past him and continued toward the door.

She didn't know where she was going, but heard Julia close on her heels. Was Will following too? She hoped not.

On the street below, Lanie paced the sidewalk, barely registering the cold night air as her brain scrambled to process everything.

"It's not very wise to be out here," Julia said gently.

Lanie didn't so much as glance in her direction. "Because of the hunters?"

Julia stepped up beside her, nodded. "It's a bit to take in, huh?"

"Ya think?" Lanie winced at the sharpness in her tone, then swallowed the apology that automatically rose to the tip of her tongue. Right now the last thing she needed was another one of them trying to defend Will. Julia might not deserve her animosity since Will was the one who had hidden the truth, but that didn't mean Lanie had to play nice when her world was wrenched out from under her. Will should have told her the truth. He wanted her to trust him, but he hadn't been so quick to trust her.

"And would you have believed him before now?"

Lanie gazed at Julia in disbelief. "You read my mind?"

Her smile wasn't the least bit apologetic. "Does it bother you? It does a few of my mortal friends."

Mortal. Immortal. Like vampires.

"Exactly," Julia said. "Will cares for you. He just wanted to protect you."

Lanie wondered if that was the only reason he hadn't been honest with her.

"Well, he was probably afraid you'd turn away from him."

Lanie closed her eyes. And she had. Guilt swirled in her stomach. *No*. She wouldn't feel guilty. How could she be expected to discover something like this and not be a little freaked out? She just needed time to work it out. Time to ....

"He knows that. He'll give you your space."

Lanie scowled at Julia. "Is it so damn easy for you to read everyone's thoughts, or am I just lucky?"

"You're upset right now. When a mortal's emotions run high, they aren't as guarded."

She shivered as a cold gust of wind swept around her. Still, she didn't move from her spot on the curb. "Will can't read my thoughts, can he?" He wouldn't have looked so wary and perplexed moments ago if he had heard what she was thinking.

"There have been some mortals Will couldn't read easily. You're one of them."

"What about other vampires? Can you read each other?"

"Depends on whether you let each other in or not. Those that have a deep connection can read each other's every feeling, their every desire, every hurt."

Lanie heard the catch in Julia's voice before the woman--vampire, Lanie corrected--cleared her throat and glanced away.

Sighing, Lanie turned back towards the brownstone, but instead of going inside, she sat on the steps. "I just don't know--why didn't he tell me?" She voiced the thought aloud with no particular expectation Julia would answer her.

Julia paused at Lanie's feet.

Still a little unnerved by what she knew Julia to be, Lanie peered up at her.

"You're not hungry are you?"

Julia's soft laugh eased the tension in her spine. "Are you offering?"

Lanie balked. "No."

She laughed harder. "Even if Will wouldn't kick me to the curb for thinking about it, you're not my type."

Lanie let out the breath locked in her lungs.

Julia nudged her with her toe, waiting for Lanie to make room on the step for her.

It was strange to be seated next to a vampire on a freezing night trying to reconcile the truth with what she already knew.

"About Will," Julia began, "think what your reaction would have been had he told you the first night you met."

"But it wasn't the first time was it? These dreams I've had ... they really are more than that. Aren't they?"

"Possibly." Julia touched her shoulder. "Come back inside. Please. If anything happened to you, Will would toss me out on my ass, if he didn't kill me first, and I'm rather fond of my apartment. Plus I'm freezing my nipples off out here."

Lanie realized how violently the woman was shaking.

"You're cold?"

Julia arched a brow.

"But you're a vampire."

"So you've finally accepted it."

Lanie ignored addressing whether or not she'd accepted anything. "Shouldn't you be immune to the cold or something?"

Julia shook her head. "Doesn't work that way. We're actually more sensitive to extreme sensations until our bodies adapt."

"How long does that take?"

"Usually not long, but it's damn uncomfortable until then."

Lanie glanced over her shoulder at the door. "You and Will, you're ...."

Julia smiled knowingly. "He's like an older brother."

Nodding, Lanie stood up, but hesitated to follow Julia inside. If she did, exactly what was she letting herself in for? And if she didn't, if she ran, how far would she get? Without asking, she sensed Julia was fiercely loyal to Will. Was she willing to find out exactly what the vampire was capable of if she bolted? Somehow she doubted she'd get

far if she tried it. But would she even be better off if she ran? Hunters, whatever they really were, wanted her for some reason. The man from last night had made it clear he had no problem hurting her to accomplish his task. Will, on the other hand, had done nothing but try to keep her safe.

"It'll be okay," Julia said softly.

The reassurance did nothing to convince her, but it did help her take that first step back inside.

Outside Will's apartment, Julia paused. "It just takes time. He'll answer questions when you're ready."

Ready for what? Ready to accept the fact that she might have a past life she remembered only in bits and pieces of? Or that she'd shared it with a vampire?

Will was still in the living room where they had left him. His expression remained guarded when he spoke to Julia. "We need to go to the club. We're meeting Declan in an hour." His gaze flitted to Lanie, and his lips curved in a cautious smile. "Would you like to stay here? Julia can stay with you."

Lanie shook her head. Regardless of his being a ... vampire, he made her feel safe. With the hunters looking for her, she didn't have any choice but to trust he planned on keeping that promise to watch out for her.

"Always," Julia murmured softly behind her.

"How long before it drives your other friends crazy?" Lanie was quite sure she didn't like anyone reading her thoughts so easily.

"Now you sound like Will."

"Stay out of her head, Jules," Will warned.

Rolling her eyes, Julia laughed. "Two peas in a pod. I'll grab my coat and Gabe, and then we'll go."

Alone again, they stared at each other.

"Sunlight burns you?" Lanie asked.

He nodded, but kept his lips pressed in a firm line. Was he afraid to say something that might scare her off? "And it screws with our vision."

"How so?"

"You know those movies where people wear the night vision goggles, and then they can't see a damn thing when someone turns the lights on? That's what sunlight can do temporarily if we're not careful."

"Holy water and crosses?"

"I like them as much as the next guy."

Lanie chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip, her heart slowly resuming its normal pace. "What about garlic?"

"Very bad indigestion for some apparent reason."

"Stake through the heart?"

"Kills me only if I bleed out faster than my body can heal itself."

The last image made her chest clutch. She edged farther into the room, closer to him, but didn't reach for him. There was still so much she needed to know, wanted to know. She felt somehow detached, and at the same time closer to him now that she knew his secret.

"They're waiting for us. We should go." He retrieved her coat, held it out. Turning, she let him slip it on. His hands rested on her shoulders. He leaned forward, his breath warm on her neck.

"Will," she whispered.

He pressed a soft kiss just below her ear. "Yeah?" His voice deepened, and she relaxed against him. She wanted things the way they had been, wanted to feel those emotions from her dreams and not be shoved into the shadows of something so incomprehensible.

"So this is her, huh?"

Lanie shifted her attention to the door. Tall, fair, and cute enough to make a novice nun rethink her vows, a man lounged in the doorway. Gabriel, she presumed.

Gabriel grinned. "She's smart too. Will, how come you didn't mention how beautiful this creature was? Maybe I should have made that book shopping trip myself."

Will tugged her close to his side. "Flirt with someone else's woman."

A rich, masculine laugh erupted from Gabriel. "You see this, Jules," he called over his shoulder. "I think he feels threatened by me."

"I'm going to do more than threaten if you don't get your ass in the car," Julia hollered at him.

Gabriel winked at her, then disappeared down the stairs. She and Will followed, and she couldn't help but smile over the possessive tone she'd heard in Will's voice.

In the car she started out on her side of the seat, but each block seemed to close the distance between them. She didn't know who seemed to be doing most of the inching closer, but she didn't object when she found herself nestled against Will's side. The weight of his arm across the back of the seat gave her some small measure of comfort.

By the time they arrived at the club, a small group of people looking to party were lined up. Lanie followed the others as they headed straight through the main door, watching other people's reactions to the vampires, wondering if anyone picked up on something different she'd missed. She would never have expected such beings to be so ... normal.

Music pumped from the club's speakers, and strobe lights flashed periodically, giving the entire club a ghostly feeling. How many other vampires were here?

"Only a couple," Julia answered.

Will shot her a warning glance, then guided Lanie to the stairs leading to the office. Julia and Gabriel filtered into the door ahead of her, but she wasn't ready to be in the same room when they could so easily read her thoughts. Unnerved and thankful Will couldn't, as well, she edged down the catwalk that overlooked the crowded club pounding to life beneath them. Lanie tried to let it all sink in, all too aware Will stood beside her, watching her.

Motioning to those below, she asked. "Can you read their minds like Julia can?"

"Yes."

Lanie pointed below them. "That woman there, in the green tank top, what is she thinking right now?"

He cocked his head and answered. "She has her eye on the guy near the DJ, hopes he'll finally buy her a drink tonight."

She motioned to another woman. "What about her?"

Will's tone carried his amusement. "She's wondering if her boob job looks as phony as the girl dancing opposite her."

"And her," she asked pointing to yet another woman.

"Sex."

He moved behind her, set his hands on the rail on each side of her blocking her in.

"Really." Lanie turned her head, found his mouth inches from hers.

"Would you like the specifics?"

Lanie found it impossible to look away from his mouth. How had he managed to hide his teeth? She had seen no glimpse when he smiled, and not once when they'd kissed had she felt them.

She lifted a hand and traced his bottom lip. "Can I see them?"

"As long as you promise not to run screaming in the opposite direction."

His teasing tone brought a smile to the surface. "I promise."

He widened his playful grin allowing two tips of his incisors to peek out.

"They're not as long as I thought they'd be." Not nearly. Not more so than the average person's unless they looked closely.

"They lengthen when they're needed."

Intrigued, she touched the tip, only to have her next breath catch in her throat when he closed his lips around her finger.

"You don't ever need to be afraid of me."

"I know." And she meant it. Whatever Will was, he cared about her, and she refused to let her growing understanding of him make her forget that.

Lanie resumed testing his ability to read the patrons below, marveling at a skill so many would kill to have.

A woman leaning across the bar, her breasts pouring out of her shirt, caught her attention.

"What about her?"

Will skimmed his mouth down the side of Lanie's neck. "She's thinking about how she can't wait until her boyfriend arrives and they can fuck in the bathroom."

A delicious shiver worked down her spine. Will inched closer, and she felt the unmistakable pressure of his cock nudge her bottom.

The erotic images he painted with each person's thoughts--some no doubt exaggerated just for shock value--ignited her blood.

Lanie turned in his arms. "And what about me, what am I thinking?"

He tilted his head. "You're wondering what it will feel like when we make love and I drink from you."

*When.* Not *if.* Her pulse pounded and he rubbed his arousal against her.

"Am I wrong?"

She raised her head and met his hungry gaze. Her attention drifted to his mouth, and she leaned into him. "Maybe you can read my mind after all."

A low growl rumbled in his throat before he took full possession of her mouth. Fire licked through her veins, warming her midsection before it spiraled lower. A soft ache throbbed between her legs, intensifying the moment he pressed his hard length



between her thighs. His hands slid into her coat, and he tugged up her blouse. Lanie glanced over her shoulder, knowing they were in full sight of anyone stepping out of the office.

He pushed her bra aside and cupped her full, aching breasts. His fingers traced the contours, teasing across her nipples until she wouldn't have cared if he took her right there for everyone to see.

"Slumming it tonight, Will?" a woman's voice asked.

Lanie felt Will tense before he moved to half hide her.

"Evening, Charlotte."

\* \* \* \*

Will edged closer to Lanie, keeping a firm grip on her waist. Tonight was not the best time for Charlotte to make an appearance. No night was a good night, but then she couldn't seem to get that through her head.

"Who's your friend?" Charlotte asked, her tone velvety and laced with acid.

"Do you care?"

Charlotte kept her smile intact, but the brittle curve of her lips didn't fool anyone. "Oh, my. Well, aren't we being a tad overprotective?"

"You can never be too careful these days," Julia said, stepping up behind Charlotte. She circled around, positioned herself on the other side of Lanie.

"I thought you left town?" Will said.

Charlotte shrugged and gave Lanie a once-over that mirrored disgust. "Thought I'd stop by once more and see if you weren't ready for a real woman in your life."

Julia arched a brow. "Real bitch, you mean."

A scowl twisted Charlotte's face. "I guess we all can't just sit back and pine for the men who desert us."

Will felt the sting of hurt swim through Julia before she took a menacing step towards Charlotte. "I suggest you find another place to cause trouble."

"No problem. I find this place a little too trashy for my tastes, anyway." Blowing Will a kiss, she spun on her heels and disappeared below.

Will glanced at Julia. "I want her watched." He didn't need Charlotte making trouble for him and Lanie.

Julia nodded. "Declan is here."

"We'll be right there." Will tugged Lanie closer. Tucking the stray hairs back behind her ear, he trailed a finger down her jaw.

Lanie's brows scrunched together. "You two have a history, don't you?"

"Unfortunately."

"I think we're going to have a lot to talk about tonight."

Tonight and every night. He wanted to say the words aloud, but after the last hour he wouldn't push her into accepting more than she could handle.

She'd been right all those years ago. They really were meant to be together.

Gabriel poked his head out of the office and waved at them.

Will steered her towards the open door. "This won't take long."

Inside the office, Julia stood at the window while Gabriel perched on the edge of her desk. Declan stood in the middle of the room. Nearly three hundred years old, but

looking just over thirty in mortal years, Declan regarded them curiously.

Will crossed the room and embraced Declan. They had been through quite a bit both before and after they tried to kill each other. Just another story Lanie would ask him about later if the concern on her face was any indication. "It's been too long."

"The council keeps me busy."

Lanie took a step back, her body tense. "He's one of them, isn't he, a hunter?"

Declan's lips parted in a deep grin. "I'm not contagious. I promise."

"But you're not a vampire, are you? You have the same color eyes as the other man who came after me."

Declan shuddered, then cast the three others an apologetic look. "No offense." He looked back at Lanie. "Definitely not a vampire, and all of my kind have the same color eyes."

"Your kind? You're not vampire, but not human either?"

Will grinned. Lanie wasn't kidding when she said she had lots of questions.

Crossing his arms, Declan settled back on the couch. "More of a hybrid of the two races actually."

She opened her mouth, then decided to hold any more questions for later, slipping her hand into Will's. The fact that she allowed him to touch her at all when she'd so recently learned the truth about him unleashed some of the tension in his chest.

Keeping her close, Will switched his attention to his old friend and got straight to the point. "Why do they want Lanie?"

Declan smiled. "Three weeks ago five council members and a dozen others went rogue. Two of them, the ones who attacked you both, are now in our custody. They claim they were paid to abduct your friend."

"By who?"

"They insist they don't know. One of the elders leading this little faction gave them their orders apparently. As we speak, they are being *persuaded* to remember any other details that could prove helpful."

Gabriel spoke up. "But Lanie is an innocent. What would possess them to even attempt this?"

Declan stood up. "Believe me, I've been asking myself that. And I will find out."

This time Julia addressed Declan. "Will they try again?"

"My guess would be, yes. If they wanted her enough to risk tangling with Will to get her, then someone wants her badly. And I don't imagine they'll give up so easily."

## Chapter Nine

On the ride back to their apartment, Gabriel made idle conversation, asking Lanie about her life back in Lake Falls. Will registered the details in the back of his mind, but found himself too preoccupied watching Lanie to contribute to the conversation. Her brown eyes shone as she spoke about Brynn and Harold. God, she was beautiful. He studied her face, admiring the freckles on the tip of her nose, the dimple in her left cheek that winked every time she smiled, and the entrancing curve of her mouth.

Lanie caught him staring and smiled shyly.

Did she have any idea how much that small gesture affected him? He shifted to ease the tightness his erection caused against the seam of his jeans. If Charlotte hadn't interrupted him, he might have been tempted to take Lanie right there on the catwalk, onlookers be damned. He had felt Lanie's excitement as clearly as if she'd voiced her feelings aloud. She had wanted him as badly as he wanted her. He didn't need to be able to read her thoughts to know that.

Gabriel turned a corner a bit fast, forcing Lanie against his side. He draped an arm around her, keeping her close. She relaxed against him, resting her head against his shoulder. Her hair tickled his nose, but he didn't brush it away. Instead, he inhaled deeply, absorbing the scent of her. He heard her soft intake of breath, knew his proximity affected her as strongly as hers did him.

He inched his hand up the inside of her thigh, massaging the soft skin.

*You can't wait until you get back?* Gabriel's thoughts echoed in Will's mind.

*Have some mercy on me.*

Will met Gabriel's eyes in the mirror. *Be a pal and tune out for a couple minutes, okay?*

*You are not going to have sex in the back of this car unless I get to pull over and watch.*

Will smiled back at him. *Stop being an ass.*

Gabriel shrugged, subtly adjusted the mirror so he couldn't see them, then turned on the radio.

*Good man.* Will returned his attention to Lanie. Following the inside seam, he brushed her sex through her pants. She shot him an incredulous look and motioned to where Gabe sat in front of them.

She squeezed her thighs together, closing off his access.

*Someone is thinking about me at least.*

Will groaned at Gabe's thoughts. *Shut up. We both know you've done a lot worse with me close by.*

*That was different.*

*Just pay attention to the road.*

Beside him Lanie frowned and tried to pretend she wasn't aware of the slow

circles he drew up her thigh. He smiled, reached up, swept her hair aside, and pressed his lips to her neck. Lanie trembled, but remained silent. Her lips were pressed together in a firm line, and he knew she would have moaned if Gabriel wasn't in the car. Her thighs inched apart, and he took the invitation to tease. He kept the caresses light and soft, his only goal to get back the trust that had been shaken by the last twenty-four hours.

He nudged his hand under her shirt, and cupped her breast through her bra. Her nipple pebbled under his touch, and he lightly pinched the firm crown. A tremor moved through her, and she arched against the back seat. Will wished they were alone. Their first time together would not be all roses and champagne. He wanted her too badly. But it would damn well not be in the back of his car with his best friend at the wheel.

*Don't hold back on my account,* Gabriel piped up.

Scowling at his friend, Will removed his hand from Lanie's shirt before he caught her mouth in a gut-scorching kiss.

"We'll be picking this up as soon as we get inside," he whispered.

Her lips turned up in a *you-bet-your-ass* smile.

The remaining drive was tense with anticipation. Will thought about telling Gabriel to hurry the hell up. He wasn't *Driving Ms. Daisy* back here. He ached to strip every last bit of clothing from Lanie and finish what he'd been desperate to since he pushed her against the wall in the bookshop. If her response in the club and now were any indication, whatever her hang-ups might be with what he was, she wasn't going to let that stop her from being with him.

As they turned down their street, he knew Gabriel purposely slowed down further to annoy him. Gabriel eventually parked the car and tossed Will the keys. He headed up the walk ahead of them as Will helped Lanie from the car. She didn't quite meet his eyes, but her racing pulse and the scent of her growing desire were impossible to miss.

They left Gabriel in his downstairs apartment and walked the one flight up to his. He would have swung her over his shoulder, but the sight of her sweet ass ahead of him on the stairs proved to be too good to pass up. Will opened his apartment door. Salem trotted past their feet, clearly snubbing them for leaving her behind, before she trotted downstairs as if the routine was always the same.

Giving Lanie a look that promised they were only seconds away from the best sex of their lives, he started after the dog. He was halfway down the stairs when Gabriel's voice filtered into his thoughts.

*I'll watch the dog. You take care of your woman.*

*I owe you one.*

Gabriel's laugh filled his mind. *Just one? Seems to me you're pretty much indebted to me for the rest of our immortal lives since I sent you to Lake Falls in the first place.*

Will headed back up the stairs. *Why do I get the feeling you're fishing for something here?*

*Talk to Lanie. Get her to hook me up with her friend Brynn.*

Will shook his head. *You don't even know her.*

*So. She sounded hot on the phone.*

*I'll see what I can do,* Will promised, wondering if Gabriel would ever settle

down. The man hadn't spent more than a few weeks at a time with one woman, human or not. Gabriel joked that serious relationships cramped his style. Will figured it was just a matter of time before the right one came along. Or maybe that was his own recent optimism coming through.

Lanie stood rooted in the same spot just inside his apartment. "Where's Salem?"

"Gabriel is looking after her." He closed the door, and hauled her into his arms.

Lanie wrapped her arms around his neck, then dragged his mouth down to hers. She sighed against his lips, the sound torturous to a man poised so very close to the edge.

The kiss wasn't soft or teasing, but wicked and downright sinful as her tongue swept inside his mouth and claimed it as her own. Every inch of her ground against him expectantly.

*You feel so good.* Lanie's thoughts melted into his mind.

"You do, too," he said, tearing his mouth from hers just long enough to rip at the snap on her jeans, yanking her pants off as though they were made of paper. Her excited moan echoed against his mouth. Memorizing the intoxicating taste of her, he skimmed his lips along her jaw, her chin, down her neck.

Lanie worked his coat over his shoulders, then gripped his shirt and tore it open. She smiled in delight. "I've always wanted to do that."

"Oh yeah?" He did the same to her blouse. Her bra came next. Her breasts were heavy in his hands. He bent and drew one puckered nipple between his lips with a long, slow tug.

Her back arched, her fingers gripping his shoulders in a silent plea for more. He scraped her breast with his teeth, before moving to give the other the same worshipful treatment.

*Oh, God, yes. Harder. Please.*

He laved and nipped each tip, gladly giving her exactly what she wanted.

Lanie dropped her head back and threaded her fingers through his hair. Abruptly, she pushed him away, undid his pants and tugged them down. He stepped out when they tangled around his ankles, almost tripping when Lanie gently gripped his cock.

She pumped up and down the length of him, before circling the head in a lazy stroke. Her eyes flashed wickedly, and he realized she enjoyed teasing him.

He could sure as hell play, too. Kneeling in front of her, he slid his fingers into the waistband of her panties and split the lacy fabric in two. Her soft cry of surprise turned into a whimper as his finger traced a hot path down her cleft. Her thighs trembled, and he nudged them wider. He didn't need his heightened senses to tell him just how ready she was, how much she craved his touch. It was written over every inch of her beautiful face.

Will watched her brown eyes slide shut when he pressed his mouth to her sex.

*Taste me.*

Parting her damp folds, he obeyed, seeking the sensitive knot that would drive her crazy with desire.

Desire for him.

The first flick over the wet knot made her moan low and deep. He swirled the pad of his thumb around the perimeter of the aroused flesh, grinning to see her eyes snap

open at the way he slowly strummed her clit. Her knees weakened, and he slid his hands up the back of her legs to cup her ass, keeping her exactly where he wanted her.

His tongue again replaced his fingers, stroking upwards.

Her breath hissed out. "Will," she panted.

He swept around and over, again and again, latching on with his mouth to suck until her hips rocked violently against him.

*I want to feel you inside me.*

"All of me, or just this?" he taunted, pulling back enough to sink two fingers deep inside her as he continued to taste her.

*Oh, my. That feels ....*

Her eyes shot open, and she looked down at him. "Are you reading my thoughts?"

Will grinned up at her.

"You are, aren't you?" she said aloud. "How ...?"

The rest of her question faded away as he blew a warm breath across her clit. Slow pumps, one after another, long strokes with his tongue, short scuffs with the pad of his thumb across the aroused nub, and he knew she was ready to come.

Standing, he lifted her up, groaning when she wrapped her legs around his waist. He took three steps until her back came up against the wall. The feel of her naked, in his arms, shoved him to the edge of madness. The feel of her wet sex cradling the top of his shaft, her hard nipples rasping his chest, the hungry kisses she pressed to his throat made the battle to bury the darkness inside him a fight he was determined to win.

This time.

He caught her mouth in a searing kiss that she matched, and the intensity rattled him right to his soul. The tip of her tongue boldly traced his lips the same way his cock traced a path up and down her wet slit.

"Now," she demanded.

He drove deep, sinking into her slick heat on a groan.

"Yes," Lanie yelled, her voice half muffled as she bit his shoulder.

The long, slow thrusts quickly became shorter, harder digs. Will angled his thrusts to rub against her already highly sensitized nub, and Lanie thrashed her head to the side, her inner muscles clenching around him.

He gripped her ass tighter, needing to slow things down. Every time he withdrew and sank back inside her it pushed him closer and closer to losing control.

"No," she protested. "Hard and fast. Fuck me, hard and fast."

Growling, he slammed into her, praying he didn't hurt her. Her fingers tightened on his arms, and he knew she was close.

She pushed her hair back, tilted her head to the side. "Do it."

Will paused, and the hunger he clung to by a very short leash jolted to the surface. "You're sure?"

"Do it," she ordered, deliberately contracting her hot walls around him until he thought he'd detonate on the spot.

Clinging to the last shred of restraint, he searched her face.

The come-hither smile and her softly whispered, "I know you'd never do anything

to hurt me,” were his complete undoing.

Driven by the profound trust she showed in him and a ravenous thirst for her, Will thrust hard and deep. Her thighs cradled him close as he found her throat. First with his lips, then with his tongue, he sampled the tempting flesh, aware of her orgasm thundering closer.

Timing the moment perfectly, he sank his teeth into her neck as her climax hit hard. She tensed at the pressure, then moaned as her body shot into the stratosphere.

Her blood filled his mouth, and his senses exploded as his own orgasm tore through him in a blinding rush. The intoxicating taste of her launched him above and beyond anything he'd felt before. Her stunned cries of release echoed in his mind long after she fell silent and collapsed against him. Gently, he drew back and pressed his lips to her neck, knowing the regenerative properties in his saliva would seal the wounds. He rested his forehead against hers as her breathing ragged in and out, her heart thumping in her chest.

Will tipped her face up and kissed her soft and slow. She clung to him as he dragged her deeper, desperate for her to feel all the desire, love, and eternity in that one kiss.

She was his.

Now.

Forever.

\* \* \* \*

“To the vampire and his ... adjusting lover,” Lanie toasted, clinking her glass against his.

Will leaned forward and slanted his mouth across hers. A heady combination of love and bone-deep lust stormed through his system. His cock lengthened, as he wondered where he'd take her next.

“So,” Lanie said.

Her tone alone told him she wanted some answers. He took a seat on the stool, adjusting himself so the seam of his pants didn't dig into his erection. He settled in, prepared to answer as many of her questions as he could, until she was completely comfortable with the whole *vampire thing*, as she'd called it.

“The hunters?” Lanie began. “What are they exactly?”

He had half expected her first question to be about them.

“It's good to be familiar with one's enemy, isn't it?” She asked, almost reading his thoughts as clearly as if he'd spoken it aloud.

He nodded. “As far as anyone knows, hunters have been around as long as vampires.”

“They live forever?”

“No. They are still very human, but have a longer life span along with certain other abilities. Declan is an elder hunter, and is almost three hundred years old. One of the oldest council members.”

“And they've always hunted your kind?”

“Since as long as I can remember. Nearly a hundred years ago we came to a truce of sorts. Vampires agreed not to drain the innocent, and the hunters would leave us be.

But if someone breaks the rules, then the hunters are well within their right to punish the offender in whatever way they see fit.”

“They keep you all in line then.”

“You could say that.”

“And what about vampires? How did you come to be? I have to say my knowledge is limited to Bram Stoker and Buffy the Vampire Slayer.”

Snorting out a laugh, Will pushed aside the bag of chips she’d found in the cupboard and had been snacking on for the last few minutes. “Even to our own kind, vampires are still very much a mystery.”

“No history book?”

“Nope. Only a handful of stories, which most believe are nothing more than just that.”

“Stories such as ...?”

“The most prevalent one, one that leads many of us on a merry goose hunt when we get desperate for answers, is the Key.”

“What is it?”

“Exactly. No one knows for sure. Some speculate it’s the source of vampirism, others think it’s the first vampire, and still others believe it may free us from our weaknesses.”

“The sun?” Lanie guessed.

Will nodded. “And our need for blood.”

“And you’ve hunted for this Key yourself.”

“Not long after I was turned.” He shrugged. “I was curious.”

“But you didn’t find what you were looking for.”

“Actually I did. Looking for The Key does one of two things for our kind. It proves to us that it doesn’t matter how we came to be, only that we are what we are. No demonic possession, no being cursed, no predestined paths of redemption. We just ... are. Those who fail to learn that important truth spend their immortality continuing to hunt for the Key, or they slowly go mad, afraid of the unknown we come from.”

Lanie cocked her head. “How old are you?”

“Four hundred and thirty six.”

“You’re serious?” A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth.

“Yeah.”

“Seriously? Four hundred and some?”

“Right,” he said slowly, trying to figure out the cause of the amused look on her face.

“So that must still make you pretty young in the grand scheme of all things vampire and immortal.”

Will frowned. “In a manner of speaking.”

“So then, I’m dating a baby vampire, metaphorically speaking?” She didn’t even try to cover her laugh.

Will snared her wrist and pulled her towards him. “Let me assure you, there is nothing babyish about me.”

She tried to squirm free of his hold and ended up in his lap for her troubles.



“Okay, I give up. Not like a baby.”

He brushed his lips gently across hers. “I’m glad you see it my way.”

“More like a pre-teen.”

Before he could threaten to shut that sassy mouth of hers, she looped her arms around his neck. “Kidding aside, was becoming a vampire scary?”

“I wasn’t really given a choice.”

She ran his fingers through the ends of his hair, her dark eyes loaded with sympathy. “I’m sorry.”

“I was, too, for a brief time, but I got over it.” Mostly.

“I guess there would be some perks to living forever that might make it bearable.” She slipped off his lap and wandered around the kitchen. “You, I’m beginning to understand. But the hunters.... If I’m an innocent then they should be protecting me, not trying to hurt me. I don’t understand what they could possibly want with me.”

“It doesn’t matter, because they won’t get near you.”

“I know,” she said quietly, then hopped on the edge of the counter, toying with a spoon. “If I am ... If we were ... How did we meet? Before. Did I look the same? What was my name?”

“Your name was Elizabeth.” He stood and crossed the short distance. “And I think you’re even more beautiful in this life. I was hiding from a small band of hunters. I was hurt, and your grandmother, although I’m certain she knew I wasn’t quite human, agreed to let me spend a couple of days in your barn. You waited until your grandmother wasn’t around and then sneaked out to the barn to see me for yourself. I took one look at you and never left.”

*Until you died.*

He didn’t say those words aloud. She’d get around to asking about it herself eventually. There was no point in upsetting her more than he had to. Especially when he wasn’t one hundred percent certain she had been Elizabeth in another life. If she knew everything now, she might fear--the same way he did--that death would separate them again.

“Gabriel and Julia. You’ve been friends a long time?”

He grinned. “Yeah, I can’t get rid of them now.”

“Outside when I was with Julia, for a moment she seemed so sad, alone. Someone hurt her, didn’t they?”

“She was turned by a man who loved her. They weren’t together long before Brody just up and left with no word, no explanation.”

“Bastard,” Lanie muttered.

Will smiled, knew Julia would approve. “My thoughts exactly.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Almost a hundred years ago.”

“But why is she still alone? She’s gorgeous. Men must trip over themselves to get to her.”

“It doesn’t matter. She and Brody made love after he turned her. Once you drink from another vampire for the first time during sex, you crave their blood like no other. Even if Julia met another of our kind, or a human she wished to turn, that secondary

connection would never come close to matching that initial intensity she shared with Brody.”

“Bastard,” she snapped again. “Good to know that if she can’t find that kind of happiness again, neither can he.”

Her speed at catching on pleased him.

“But you can be with normal people, mortals, and there is no bond?”

Will smoothed her hair back from her face. “We are not true life-mates in the vampire sense, but we have a bond, Lanie. I’m yours in every way. And if and when you’re ready ....” He trailed off, letting his meaning hang in the air.

Her brows drew together thoughtfully, but she didn’t say anything. He knew she needed time. And he would be patient. For now.

“So what about when you saw me in the bookshop?”

“I thought I was dreaming.” He brushed a finger down her cheek. “But you’re very real. Either that, or I must be dead and this is heaven.”

“Do vampires go to heaven?” she teased.

Will shrugged. “Well, I haven’t heard from the great beyond to know one way or the other.” His hands drifted down her back, slipped under her shirt. “I’d like to think I’ve got my own little piece of heaven right here.”

“Oh yeah, how about I show you my idea of heaven?”

His cock twitched at her siren smile. “You have my undivided attention.”

\* \* \*

*She watched him go, and gripped the bars to keep from reaching out to him. Fear stabbed her chest in an icy wave.*

*She would see him again, she would.*

*Around her, the huddled and sleeping forms of her friends and neighbors offered little comfort. Taking her place on the cold floor, she closed her eyes and pictured Will’s face.*

*When she next opened them, the sun was shining bright outside their prison. Footsteps echoed in the corridor, and she stood up with the others. Men, some she had called friends, others who had arrived shortly after the first whispers of ‘witch’ had swept their small town, stood at the door. Two pairs of eyes singled her out. She shivered under their combined scrutiny, but didn’t look away. They spoke quietly to each other, then turned and left. Moments later the door opened. Her name and two others were called forth.*

*Was she being released? Her heart pounded with hope and with apprehension. No one spoke to them as they were ushered out of the cell and into the blinding sunshine. The small street leading to the courthouse was littered with townspeople. As a group, the three girls pressed inward, and she was thankful for the small measure of comfort.*

*In the courthouse, they were guided to a small back room and ordered to undress. Stunned, she hesitated and was again ordered to remove her clothes or someone else would.*

*Refusing to show her fear, she boldly met every pair of eyes in the room as they examined and poked at her body. Nausea curdled in her stomach with every cold hand that gripped her skin and every needle that pricked her flesh. She didn’t know how long*

*they questioned and examined before appearing satisfied. Hate, for the people who had subjected her and the other two to their scornful glances and rough handling, kept her increasing fear from taking hold.*

*She expected to be returned to the cell or released when they were allowed to dress. Instead they led her and the others back into the courthouse, now filled with the townspeople. Outside, the sun was high in the sky.*

*She sat stiffly as the trial began, afraid to look around the room, afraid not to. Why wouldn't someone stand up and admit how outlandish this all was? She had done nothing wrong. With every passing moment her dread thickened until her throat was tight and her lungs could scarcely drag in a breath.*

*All too quickly, the trial was over without her even being questioned. The decision was read aloud, and she reeled from the declaration.*

*Guilty!*

*Mixed cries of despair and heated demands for justice riddled the air. The other girls sobbed beside her, but shock kept the tears locked behind her eyes.*

*Will.*

*The three of them were forced to their feet and outside, before the reality of the situation sank in.*

*A makeshift platform had been erected while they were inside. Three ropes hung from an overhead beam as though whoever constructed it knew they would be found guilty.*

*She was propelled forward. Her heels bit into the dirt.*

*She couldn't die now. Not today. Not like this.*

*Will.*

*She couldn't leave him. She wouldn't. She yanked at the hard grip the men had on her arms, yelling there had been a mistake. Those she knew averted their eyes as they poured from the courthouse and gathered around the square to watch. She tugged as hard as she could. If she got away, she could run. She could make it back home. Back to Will. He could save her from this. Will....*

*Oh, God, they'd know then. Defeat rooted her in place. If she ran, they'd know what he was. What he could do.*

*And they would kill him.*

*She couldn't let that happen. She wouldn't.*

*The image flashed through her mind again. William and the woman that looked so much like her, but wasn't. A woman he was destined to love. His true soul mate.*

*Abruptly she stopped fighting, allowing herself to be led atop the staging. Tears burned her eyes and throat as the rope was looped over her neck. She barely registered the sobs on either side of her. She heard nothing but the pounding of her own pulse and the promise in her heart that she'd make sure William found his soul mate.*

*They were destined to be together.*

*The ground fell away beneath her feet, and her world faded to black.*

## Chapter Ten

Lanie bolted upright, clawing at her neck. Air refused to squeeze past the barrier wrapped around her throat. She stumbled out of bed, ignoring Will when she heard him call her name. She wrestled with the lock, then shoved the doors open. Unsteady legs crumpled beneath her as she staggered out onto the balcony. Cold rain needled her naked skin, and she dropped to her knees dragging in gulps of cold night air. The pressure on her throat subsided enough that she stopped tugging at the invisible bond around her neck.

“Lanie? Lanie, baby, what’s wrong?”

Will knelt beside her and pulled her into his arms.

Images from the dream stormed through her mind, and she clamped her eyes shut to erase them. The fear, the loss, the shattering heartbreak. All of it assailed her as she was helpless to stop the scenes from replaying over and over. Tears ran down her cheeks, and she couldn’t stop rubbing at her throat. Her chest ached, her heart threatening to pound right through her ribs. She couldn’t stop shaking and buried her face in the curve of Will’s throat.

How long they sat there, her half curled in his naked lap as the freezing rain poured down on them, Lanie didn’t know. She was thankful when the cold finally penetrated her skin and her mind focused on something else other than the dream.

The *memory*, she realized with perfect clarity.

The memory of her death? But Lanie saw herself, the real her as she was today. That didn’t make any sense. She only felt the dreams from her point of view and saw Will, but never herself. The perfectly clear image of her and Will, a scene she didn’t even recognize and that lasted no longer than a few seconds, felt out of place in her head, out of place in a memory from the past.

She’d been executed.

Lanie pushed to her feet, grabbed the balcony rail and leaned close to it.

She didn’t turn towards him, as the images jumbled in her mind like fragments of a puzzle she’d never fit together. “Why didn’t you turn me? It can be done, can’t it? You can make me like you?”

“Yes.”

Lanie whipped around. “Then why didn’t you before? Why did I ... why did I die?” Her voice cracked, and tears burned behind her eyes.

“Lanie, let’s go inside. You’re shivering.”

She ignored his outstretched hand. “No. What happened? You didn’t want me with you?”

His eyes darkened with remorse. “Of course I did.”

“Then why did they take me? They ...” She gripped her neck. The words lodged in her throat as she felt the noose tighten. “They hung me,” she whispered. “People I

knew, they watched. I was so scared, and I wanted to run. I tried to get away.” Tears streamed unchecked down her face. “I knew if I could make it back to you, you’d protect me.”

“I’m so sorry.” He cupped her face in his hands. The pain etched in his face raked her insides.

She shook her head. “But I couldn’t really go. Then they would have learned what you were. They would have taken you from me. I ....” Her body trembled from the cold, from the pain lashing through her. And the tears wouldn’t stop falling.

“You couldn’t save me before. Maybe you can’t this time either.”

With a fierce growl, Will scooped her into his arms and carried her inside. She shivered so hard, she had to press her lips together to stop her teeth from rattling with tremors she felt all the way to her toes.

Warmth from the bedroom blanketed her, but he continued past the bed and into the master bath. She kept her face tucked against his neck, breathing deeply to calm her thundering heart, even though it felt like a useless effort. The soft scent of him relaxed her, but nothing eased the fear still pumping through her body. She’d been taken from him once. Was history repeating itself? Would she lose him again when they’d only just found each other?

In front of the deep whirlpool tub he sat her on the edge. Her arms remained locked around his neck, anchoring him to her as he started to back away.

Soothing blue eyes probed hers. “I’ll be just a minute.”

She forced herself to ease her hold on him. The cold slipped back in, sinking deeply as he moved away from her. Her throat was no longer tight, but she continued to rub absently at it as she watched him turn on the water. He grabbed two large towels and set them close by. The water was only a few inches deep when he stepped into the tub and tugged her down to sit opposite him. He settled her legs around him then grabbed the cloth. First he gently washed her face, erasing the tears that had thankfully stopped falling.

Whispers from the courtroom floated through the back of her mind, and she glanced sharply at her arms, half expecting to see marks from where they used needles to test if she would bleed. And she had, yet they’d been convinced it was all a trick. Something she’d done to make herself appear innocent.

Lanie lifted her gaze to his. “Was I a witch?”

Will smiled softly. “Bewitching yes, but a real witch, not exactly. You were more of a seer. Sometimes you would get these flashes, images from people’s lives. But you didn’t worship the devil or anything, if that’s what you want to know.”

“But they thought I was a witch, didn’t they?”

Sadly, he nodded. “I was away for a few days. Hunters were close, and I wanted them far away from you. When I returned everything had fallen apart, and a large group of women had been arrested for suspicion of witchcraft.”

“You came to see me,” she added, surprised at how clearly the details came to her now. “I made you leave.”

Regret hardened his face. “I shouldn’t have. I should have torn the door off right then and got you out of there. Had I known what they planned .... I tried to get back to

you, but I was too late.” The words scraped from his throat and for a moment she tried to imagine what would have gone through her mind if she found him locked away like that.

Framing his face with her palm, she stroked her thumb along his jaw. He hadn’t shaved yet, but the dark stubble suited him. “It doesn’t matter. None of it does anymore. We’re together now.”

He caught her hand and kissed it. “No one will come between us again.”

She prayed he was right.

The tenderness in his gaze as he continued to study her face unleashed a warmth in her heart. His eyes held hers for endless seconds before he leaned forward and slid his mouth across hers. The kiss was soft, sweet, reassuring.

Hoping he was right, that this time she wouldn’t be taken from him, she leaned into his embrace. The hot water diminished the chill that had made her teeth chatter only minutes before, and her pulse no longer rocketed in her ears.

When the water reached just beneath her breasts, Will shut off the faucet. He soaped the cloth, then reached behind her and trailed it down her back.

Sighing at both the warmth and the soothing caress, she rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

“Does that feel better?”

“Mmmmm,” was all she managed as he circled and massaged his way up to her shoulders. She straightened as he slipped the cloth down the front of her and across the tops of her breasts.

Desire flickered in his eyes, but he kept his caresses soft and gentle. Even when he washed between her breasts, his actions betrayed nothing of the increasing arousal he felt, if the erection bumping the inside of her thigh was any indication.

He inched back and pulled her feet in front of him. Will set the cloth aside, then lathered up his hands and kneaded her feet. The soapy lather made it easy for his fingers to sink into her skin as he massaged away the lingering tension. Slowly working his way up her leg, Will’s expression turned hungry. A slow heat simmered to life in her midsection under the ravenous glances. Her lips curved as his hand inched closer to her sex.

His grin bordered on wolfish. “Lay back,” he demanded, his voice too low, too sexy to be ignored.

Easing back against the sloped ceramic, she didn’t object when Will draped one of her legs over the edge of the tub. Cupping her ankle, he slid his hand up her leg. Lanie watched it disappear under the water as he edged closer to her very aroused core. The first brush through her wet curls brought a moan to her lips.

But he didn’t stop there.

Following the deep cleft, he tunneled through the folds and circled her clit in a wide stroke. Her back arched, his touch sizzling her insides. His finger swirled around the swollen knot in a precise and ruthlessly lazy rhythm.

“You like it when I touch your clit, don’t you? When I rub it, like this.”

Lanie jolted as the pinching pleasure almost split her in two.

“How about when I do this,” he provoked, right before he slipped one finger inside her. Her hips swayed upward to meet the slow thrust. But it wasn’t enough. She

wanted more.

“Another one,” she whispered, parting her thighs further.

His deep laugh sent goose bumps racing across her skin. “Don’t talk, just think about it. Imagine what you want me to do. Let me feel it.”

Aroused more than she could ever imagine, Lanie kept her eyes locked on him as he slid another finger into her heat.

*God, yes.*

“Come on, Lanie. Picture it in your head. Picture what you want me to do to you. Do you want me?”

*Yes.* She shook her head. *Not yet. First, touch me.*

“Where?”

*My breasts.*

Keeping one hand between her thighs, his other trailed up past her navel, outlined her breast, skirting the tip of her nipple when she would have begged him to touch her.

“You’re getting the hang of it now,” he whispered, drawing a sluggish figure eight around the aching tip. “What about my mouth? Do you want me to use my tongue?”

Her nod was shaky, her body trembling now for a far different reason. Each scorching caress was too slow, but too damn good to protest.

Will bent forward and stroked his tongue around her nipple. The wet friction made the muscles deep in her sex clench. With a series of slow, damp tugs, he drew it deep between his lips and sucked hard. At the same time, he drove his fingers into her, harder than before.

Her head dropped back.

“No. Watch me, Lanie. I want you looking at me when you come.”

Powerless to deny him, she met his intense gaze. With his eyes fastened on her, Will teased and plucked her other nipple before he trapped it in his mouth like a man starved. His lips burned into her skin, and with every sweep of his tongue, every deep plunge into her sex, her eagerness for more intensified.

Through the water she searched and found his cock. He groaned as her hand wrapped around the engorged length and glided upward. In measured strokes, she matched the pace at which he plundered her core, teasing the head of his cock the same way his fingers teased her clit to a raging firestorm. She shuttled her hand up and down him, felt him straining higher towards release. Locked onto his turbulent blue eyes, she rocked her hips to meet the faster, deeper thrusts. With his mouth on her breast, her nipple trapped between his lips and tongue, his fingers deep in her, she combusted in a flash of spikes and shimmering lights.

Will didn’t wait for the waves to diminish before he scooped her up and carried her back to the bedroom.

Pressing her mouth to his neck, she scraped her teeth across his collarbone. His gut-deep groan thrilled every nerve ending. She skimmed her hand down his chest, reveling in the power rippling beneath her palm.

Lanie landed on the bed, Will on top of her. His mouth claimed hers, devouring her with a tenderness and possession that touched her soul.

"I'm sorry, I can't wait," he breathed, then surged into her with a powerful thrust. Digging her heels into the bed, she angled her hips up, taking him deeper. Her sex stretched and flexed around the sweet invasion. Soft, deep, and slow, each thrust raked her sensitive flesh. Pitched higher and higher, Lanie wrapped her arms around him, drawing him closer. He felt so warm, so male, so ... hers.

She lifted her head, and her breath caught at the intensity swimming in his gaze.

He stilled, his lips whispering over hers. "I love you."

Lanie's heart flipped in her chest and she squeezed him tightly. "I love you, too."

Satisfaction flashed deep in his eyes, and he kissed her with a hunger than matched her own. With more fire than gentleness, she rocked her hips up to meet his increasing tempo. Reaching beneath her, he cupped her bottom and lifted her, deepening his penetration. The bottomless thrusts hit the hot spot deep in her core, and her body jolted and spun. She tilted her hips, desperate for the deep friction.

His teeth punctured her skin seconds before her world exploded in shimmering waves that crashed through her body. The feel of his mouth, the erotic pull as he drank from her, shot her far beyond awareness. For an instant her mind melted into his and she felt what he felt. The tight fit of her sex as he pounded into her, the low growl that rose in his throat as his body shattered in a white-hot explosion of passion.

Abruptly, the merging of their minds and bodies ended as he collapsed beside her, kissed her neck firmly, and tucked her into his arms. Heart pounding so furiously she had trouble remembering to breathe, Lanie closed her eyes. Never in her wildest fantasies could she have imagined anything like that. Her body tingled with the aftershocks.

And he loved her.

Nestled against his chest, Lanie pushed aside all thoughts of the dreams and promised herself that the past would not repeat itself.

She would never again let Will go without a fight.

\* \* \* \*

"Where are you going?"

Will leaned up on his elbow, admiring Lanie's backside as she shimmied into a pair of his sweats.

"I'm hungry. Unlike you, I haven't had anything to snack on."

Her devilish grin made him smile back at her. "Well, if you hurry back I might be able to come up with something for you to nibble on."

She tossed a pillow at him before darting out the door. He tugged on a pair of pants, dragged a T-shirt over his head, and followed her. Dawn approached, and he could feel his limbs thicken. He'd make her an omelet and then drag her back to bed.

He was half way down the hall when Gabe's voice roared through his head.

*Will. Get out. Now.*

His senses flared to life, but picked up on nothing.

*Gabriel?*

He jerked around, halfway to the front door. *Gabriel?* He hadn't realized his friend had returned until the panic echoed in his mind.

*Go. Now.*



The thought was so weak, Will barely picked up on it. Elders. Only they would be able to get this close without him picking up on their presence.

“Lanie?” He darted into the kitchen.

She looked over at him from the fridge. “What’s wrong?”

“We’re leaving.”

*Talk to me, Gabe.*

No response.

*Jules?* Was she back from the club yet? Damn, he hoped not.

He didn’t know what was happening, and didn’t have time to think about it. He had to get Lanie out of here. Grabbing her hand, he hauled her after him, heading back towards his bedroom. They’d get out from the balcony. It was the safest way.

He’d pushed into the bedroom as he heard his front door slam open. The hair on the back of his neck prickled as he sensed at least five hunters in his home. Why had there been no warning from their security system?

Will gauged the distance to the glass balcony door, praying he could absorb enough of the impact on the short fall and still have enough strength to get them away. He tugged on Lanie’s hand.

“I wouldn’t if I were you, vampire,” came a voice from behind them.

Will spun around. He dragged Lanie behind him as the brown-haired elder stepped into the room.

Gabriel dangled by a firm grip between the two hunters who followed the leader inside. Unconscious, his bruised face dripping blood on the floor, Gabe didn’t respond when Will once more tried to reach his friend.

The leader of the little faction crossed his arms as though they were in heated contract negotiations in a board room. “Give us what we came for, and we’ll spare your life and that of your friend.”

Will bared his fangs, fury heating the hunger for blood that hammered him in vicious waves. “She’s not going anywhere with you.” Not with anyone. Ever.

The elder motioned to the filling room. “You are outnumbered. You’ll only wind up hurt, possibly dead, and we’ll still walk away with her. Your choice.”

He wouldn’t let her go. He’d given in last time. This time he’d hold on.

“Wait,” Lanie said from behind Will. “If I come with you, you won’t hurt him?”

“Ah. Someone wise speaks up.”

She tried to move in front.

“No.” Will’s iron grip kept her from moving more than three inches away from him.

“Promise me you won’t hurt him, and I’ll come willingly,” Lanie said.

“No, she won’t,” Will growled, gripping her tighter. He was *not* letting her go. He had promised to keep her safe, damn it, and he meant every word.

“I promise not to hurt him,” the leader vowed, then motioned with his hand. Gabriel was released, his body landing with a groan at Will’s feet. “A sign of good faith.”

Lanie tried to step around him, but Will blocked her. “I’m not letting you walk

out of here with them.” Didn’t she realize that whatever they wanted with her, it wasn’t good? He couldn’t lose her. Not again.

Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. His heart stopped as he realized she knew what she was doing, the sacrifice she made by going with them.

“And I won’t let you and Gabriel die to protect me. Without you, there would be no point. This way ... this way you live.”

“How touching,” the elder quipped.

Will refused to let go of her hand. He knew the odds were not in their favor. Not when two of the five hunters surrounding them were elders. And certainly not with Gabriel unconscious on the floor. He glanced helplessly at Lanie, fighting through the fear that locked his chest to find a way out of this mess.

The watery smile she sent him ripped him apart. “I’ll be fine.”

The past reared up, the same bravery forced in place as she begged him to let her go for now.

What if he lost her again?

He scanned the faces of those who surrounded them. Five of them. Five people to retrieve one woman. She was important to someone, otherwise she’d be dead already.

Maybe he’d be able to track them. Get her back.

Still he couldn’t bring himself to release her.

“I know you will do what you have to,” Lanie said softly before she pried her hand free of his and crossed the room.

Will moved to follow her.

“Easy ,vampire,” the elder said as two hunters pointed guns at him.

Will froze, his hatred for the elder chilling his own blood. “You better take good care of her. Otherwise I will hunt you down and tear you apart.”

The elder’s lips quirked up. “I don’t think I have to worry about you delivering on that particular threat.” He nodded to the hunters beside her.

“No,” Lanie screamed, imprisoned behind a wall of hunters as the two armed ones opened fire.

Will dove out of the way, but not fast enough. Bullets, three of them, speared through him.

He saw them drag her from the room, her screams echoing in his head. Blackness pitched his vision sideways and he slumped to the floor.

\* \* \* \*

Lanie?

Will stirred, consciousness returning along with the pain that burned through his chest and back. He sucked in a sharp breath as a bone-biting agony stretched the length of his limbs.

Where was Lanie?

He forced his eyes open. His vision was blurry. He blinked to clear it and tried to sit up. His muscles wouldn’t cooperate. From his prone position, he took stock of everything that hurt. It took him another full minute to work through the fog in his head to realize he was already upright.

And chained in place.

He yanked at his bonds, but the loss of blood made it impossible for him to put much effort behind the motion. Another few seconds slid by, and he didn't know whether to be reassured or not by the fact he was still in his own apartment. His office.

The motion of lifting his head and turning to gaze around required far more effort than it should have.

Gabriel sat awake in the chair beside him. Chained as he was.

"Looks like *Sleeping Beauty* has decided to join the living after all," a distinctly feminine voice said.

"Welcome to the real party," Gabriel muttered, beside him, not looking a whole lot better than Will felt.

Ignoring the black haired woman perched on the edge of his desk, Will stared at Gabriel. "Where's Lanie?"

Gabriel shook his head sadly.

*Fuck.* Will jerked at the chains holding him in place. "What the hell happened?"

"Oh, these?" Gabriel motioned with an air of boredom to the chains. His were wrapped more than three times around his chair. "That would be the sexy dominatrix who's looking to bleed us out before we can heal."

The woman in question stood up. "I've already told you. Tell me where to find Lanie, and you get to live."

"Funny, that's sort of like what your friends said to my buddy here, right before they opened fire on his ass. But of course we'll cooperate with you." Gabriel's tone dripped with sarcasm.

Will shifted his attention from his friend to the woman in front of him. Something familiar about her pulled at his memory.

He frowned, sifting through his memories, trying to place her.

The woman he'd passed on the street his first night in Lake Falls.

"So," she said, twirling the nasty-looking knife she held in her hand. "What's it gonna be? Are you going to tell me where Lanie is? Or do I make sure you bleed out before the day sleep gets a chance to heal you two?"

## Chapter Eleven

"I'm not going to ask you again. Where is she?"

Will stared up the black-haired woman in front of them. "I've seen you. In Lake Falls." He'd sensed something off about her then, too, but even now as he tried to read her, he couldn't get a solid vibe. His senses said hunter, but the woman in front of him was something he hadn't come across before.

"Half hunter actually," she answered. "Where's Lanie?"

*So you can read minds, too?* He let the thought ring loud in his head.

She nodded, then edged closer, dragging the knife across his chest. "I'm not in the mood to play games today. Where. Is. She?"

Something in her voice eased his mind. She was genuinely concerned about Lanie.

He took a shot in the dark. "You're Lanie's friend, Brynn, aren't you?"

"Holy shit," Gabriel said. He glanced over at Will. "I told you she sounded hot."

Leave it to Gabe to have a thing for the woman that held their fate in her knife-wielding hands. Will ignored the shit-eating grin on Gabe's face. "Are you Brynn?" he repeated. He needed to be sure. At the moment he wanted to wrap his hands around the woman's throat for holding him up when he should already be tracking Lanie, sun up or not. But if she was Lanie's friend, he certainly wouldn't hurt her anymore than he had to.

Brynn nodded slowly, masking her surprise at his guess with an icy glare. "Tell me where she is, vampire."

"I don't know." The reality of that statement left his insides cold. A too-familiar terror clawed through him. He shoved it away, and concentrated on the present threat. Brynn.

"Try again," she ordered, jabbing a finger into the bullet wound on his chest.

He clenched his jaw to hold back the grunt of pain that he felt all the way to his fingertips. Planting his feet, he shoved backwards. The chair skidded across the floor, putting distance between them. "Lanie isn't here. They took her."

"He's telling the truth," Gabriel added, his tone somewhere between disgust and awe of Brynn.

She tilted her head towards Gabriel. "Was I talking to you?"

"Maybe you should be, beautiful."

"Maybe you should shut the fuck up before I push you in front of the window so you can get a tan."

Gabriel grinned. "Jesus, Will. I think this chick is turning me on."

"And you were obviously hit on the head," Julia said darkly from the doorway. "I suggest you untie my friends."

For the first time since the hunters had barged into his apartment, it felt like he was catching a break. About damn time.

*Better late than never, right?* Julia's voice echoed in his head.

Brynn straightened. "I'll consider letting them go, if you tell me where Lanie is."

Eyes narrowed, Julia cocked her head. "Why, so you can kill her?"

"Julia," Will warned.

"Not now, I'm saving your ass," she snapped right before she launched herself at Brynn.

The two women hit the floor, rolled, then reclaimed their feet, circling each other.

Will pulled at the chains. "Cool it, Julia. We don't have time ...."

"Let them fight," Gabriel pleaded, his voice remarkably similar to a horny teenager. "Chick fights are hot."

Will would've punched him if his hands weren't locked behind his back. "Lanie needs me, so stop fucking around and get these things off me."

Julia didn't spare him a glance. "Keep your boxers on. This woman is not walking out of here after hurting my family."

Brynn's lips curved. "Wish I could take credit for that. Sadly someone beat me to it."

Will closed his eyes, concentrated and yanked hard on his bonds. They snapped, and the chains hit the floor behind him. He didn't move, the blood loss having drained what little strength he had left.

"Lanie needs me," he said loud enough to be sure he had everyone's attention. "She'll be dead soon if you two don't stop fucking wasting time."

Julia turned around abruptly, allowing Brynn to get a jab in that snapped Julia's head to the right. Growling, Julia whirled around, and with a vicious swing of her leg, knocked Brynn's feet out from beneath her. Another time Will might have admired her skills.

"What are you talking about?" Julia demanded, crossing the room to Will's side.

Gabriel tugged at his own bonds with less success than Will. "Hunters. They took her a few minutes before the woman of my dreams walked in."

Brynn stared at Will, her eyes wide. "Hunters took Lanie? Where?"

Will pushed to his feet, stumbled, and collapsed to his knees. He glared up at Brynn, then answered, "I don't know. You arrived just after they left."

"Easy," Julia ordered, crouching beside him. "We can't go after her now. The sun is up, and you both need to heal."

Brynn looked stricken. "I should have known. If I hadn't been convinced you two had her .... I should have known, should have felt ...."

Will heard the self-blame in her voice, but knew it lay at his door. He'd promised to keep Lanie safe. He'd let her down. Again.

"Why did they take her?"

"We still don't know," Will said.

The black-haired woman still clasped the knife in her hand. She followed his gaze and tucked it into the small sheath strapped to her thigh.

Julia glanced at him, having picked up on the one fact working in their favor. "If she's Lanie's friend and part hunter ...." She looked to Brynn for clarification, and Brynn nodded. "Then she can help track them."

Brynn shook her head. "I won't get very far. I can go out in the sunlight, but it exhausts me quickly. But I'll do what I can."

Will stared at Brynn, wondering at her comment. "No. No one is going anywhere until we get this figured out. I won't have you or anyone storming around during the day and risk Lanie's life. If they wanted her dead, they would have done it before now. We have a little time." Will just wished he could make himself fully believe it.

"I can't sit here and do nothing. Lanie is my friend," Brynn argued.

Locking his knees in place, he pushed up, leaning against Julia. "And she's the woman I love. No one goes anywhere half cocked until we at least know who has her or where they've taken her." Will felt his limbs drag and snapped his heavy eyes open. "I need to call Declan."

Julia looped an arm around his waist. "I'll take care of it," she said.

Brynn frowned. "Declan. As in the elder?"

"Hey babe, how about loosening my chains here? Unless ...." Gabriel trailed off, sexual innuendo hanging on the air as he winked at Brynn.

Will rolled his eyes and concentrated on remaining conscious.

Brynn leaned over Gabriel. "I tell you what, big guy. You make it across this room, and I'm all yours." She unlocked the chains and stepped back.

Looking cocky, Gabriel stood up, took three steps, and dropped like a ten-ton boulder. He didn't even open his eyes when he hit the floor.

Will noticed two bleeding bullet wounds in Gabriel's back.

Brynn half dragged, half carried him from the room. "I'll look after him." At the doorway she hesitated, met Will's eyes. "We'll get her back."

Will nodded, fighting the darkness that worked to pull him under. "Half hunter, so what's the other half?"

Brynn lips quirked in a weak smile. "Vampire, naturally."

\* \* \* \*

"Where are you taking me?" Lanie yanked at the stone grip on her arms. Neither one of her escorts seemed the least bit affected by her struggles. She might as well have been a fly trapped in a spider web. The more she resisted, the tighter their hold became, leaving her more exhausted from trying to break free.

They shoved her ahead of them up the stairs. The car they'd brought her in had pulled up in front of the sprawling mansion, and then sped away the second they stepped out with her in tow.

Lanie stood on the steps, staring past the thick columns and wrought iron. She sensed the evil within. The door opened, and they shoved her inside, the two monsters that had shot Will close on her heels.

Was he alive?

Again fear darted through her, fisting her heart. Had his injuries bled him out before he could heal? Had Julia found them, saved them? She hoped to God that was the case. She'd walked away to keep him safe, foolishly trusting the bastard not to hurt them.

What if she never saw him again?

Whipping around, Lanie bolted for the door. In three steps, they caught up with her, imprisoning her between them. Drawing in a breath, she yelled for help. One of them slapped his hand over her mouth.

“Quiet.”

She bit his hand.

“Bitch,” he snarled but didn’t strike her, though he clearly wanted to. Instead, they propelled her down a long hallway.

Where were they taking her? Outside Will’s place they had shoved her into the back seat of the car, but after a half a dozen turns, she had no idea what direction they had gone. At the end of the hall, a room opened up to a large living area. Chairs, leather sofas, and expensive antiques filled the room.

“Why am I here?” she demanded, for the hundredth time. “I haven’t done anything.” Her captors ignored her, as they had each time she sought answers.

“Oh, but you have.”

Lanie jerked at the feminine voice. She watched in stunned surprise as the familiar woman stepped into the middle of the room.

Charlotte.

Dressed in a burgundy velvet robe, the stunning brunette sipped at a glass of wine.

“You see,” Charlotte continued, her voice soft, as though it were inappropriate to show how annoyed she was, “you stole him from me.”

This was about Will, Lanie realized. She didn’t know if she should be relieved her abduction had stemmed from jealousy or afraid that Charlotte wanted her out of the way permanently.

“All of the above,” Charlotte mused, reading her thoughts.

Lanie concentrated on sealing her mind. She refused to cower from the woman ... creature in front of her. “He doesn’t love you.”

Charlotte’s lips thinned before she glanced away. She moved so quickly, Lanie didn’t have time to brace herself before her head snapped to the side. The sting of Charlotte’s palm on her cheek, stole her breath.

“You know nothing,” she spat.

Lanie remained silent. If she provoked Charlotte now, there would be no chance at escape.

Charlotte waved to the bottle of champagne on ice. “Would you like a drink?”

Lanie knew the other woman wasn’t really expecting a response. Charlotte was gloating, wanted to intimidate and see Lanie squirm. She wouldn’t give her the satisfaction.

“I have to say, you’re not looking your best.” With a haughty expression, Charlotte fingered Will’s faded T-shirt and sweat pants. “I believe the last time we met, you had better fashion sense.”

Lanie frowned. Something in Charlotte’s tone told her she wasn’t talking about last night in the club. Had they met before? Lanie scanned her memory for some indication they’d crossed paths before. Then it hit her.

They’d last met in another life.

“Good to see we’re on the same page,” Charlotte murmured, before she sashayed

away. "Of course I doubt you recall our last meeting."

"You don't like me," Lanie said simply. She didn't care to remember Charlotte before this. Charlotte obviously hated her relationship with Will.

Setting her glass aside, Charlotte turned around. "I wouldn't have a problem with you if you'd just stay dead."

"You think with me out of the way he'll welcome you into his life?"

Charlotte sneered. "He's mine. But you keep popping back up and ruining everything."

But Will hadn't mentioned coming across her since she died, persecuted for being a witch. She followed Charlotte's lithe movement around the room, aware of the way the two hunters nearby drank her up with their eyes.

"So if it's only my presence that's stopping him from being with you, why is it you haven't managed to snag him in the last three hundred years since Will and I were together last?" Lanie expected another blow, but Charlotte didn't move towards her.

She refilled her empty glass and spoke without turning around. "Deep down Will has a dark side. He needs to be with a life-mate who shares that darkness to be truly powerful. Together the two of us will be denied nothing."

Either Will was a master of disguising this darkness, or Charlotte only saw what she wanted to see in Will. She tended to believe it was the latter. "So this is about power? You don't care about him. It's what he can do for you that you're interested in."

Charlotte sighed. "I tire of hearing your voice."

"And you crave something you'll never have." Will.

Lanie saw the fist coming, and tried to dodge out of the way, but Charlotte was faster. Her fist nailed her in the stomach.

Doubling over, Lanie dropped to her knees, the air knocked from her.

"*Shut up.* I'm tired of having to deal with this. With you. For three hundred years you've been the thorn in my side, and it's time to change it once and for all."

Lanie stared up at her. "You've killed me before?" That explained how she and Will had never found each other before now.

"Four times. The last time I barely managed to keep your existence from Will. And like a curse you keep coming back around. No more."

Fear at what the woman planned for her was overshadowed by a growing hate. This woman had ruined her life over and over, keeping Will from her.

"Bitch," Lanie snapped.

Charlotte cupped her chin roughly. "We can't all be little Miss Sunshine, you know. Aren't you wondering how I did it? How I killed you before?"

Lanie jerked away from her. "Rot in hell."

The sound of Charlotte's high-pitched laugh grated down Lanie's spine. "This *is* hell, darling."

Charlotte stood up, and waved one of the nearby hunters towards her. After uttering something Lanie didn't catch, she swiveled back around. "Let's see, the last time I do believe I drowned you. Before that I tried stabbing and shooting you. The only one I didn't see to personally was the first, when they strung you up for being a witch." Charlotte toyed with the chain dangling around her neck and lowered her voice. "It is



rather interesting what a few doubts whispered to the right people can accomplish. The event was quite a sight from what I understand.”

Lanie didn’t respond. She wouldn’t. Charlotte was looking for a reaction, fed off it the way she did blood, no doubt. She’d get nothing from Lanie. The bitch had taken enough from her. It ended here. One way or another.

Charlotte’s gaze fixated on her chest. “What is that?”

Lanie instinctively closed her hand around her pendant.

The pendant burned in her palm, and the image of her standing on the staging, the rope looped around her neck, sliced through Lanie anew. The promise echoed in her ears as she clutched the black opal, a promise she’d make sure William found his true soul mate.

All the hurt, the fear, the love lashed through Lanie again, and she staggered under the intensity of the memory.

Scowling, Charlotte ripped the pendant off Lanie’s neck. “This damn thing again. How is it you’re always wearing this every time I find you?”

“Give it back,” Lanie warned.

“So it’s important to you?” Charlotte lips curled before she cocked her head. “It was your mother’s. How touching.” Her eyes narrowed as she came to the same conclusion Lanie reached a moment ago. “Descendants?”

Lanie didn’t respond as it all sank in. She wasn’t Elizabeth.

Elizabeth had known she wasn’t meant to spend her life with Will. She’d known before she died that Lanie was Will’s true soul mate, had envisioned her face.

It all made sense now. And Elizabeth had kept her promise, her memories somehow tied to the pendant that had been passed from one generation of her sister’s family to the next until it reached her mother, and finally Lanie.

“It changes nothing,” Charlotte spat.

Lanie smiled, her fear ebbing for the first time since her arrival. “It changes everything. Will and I are destined to be together. Elizabeth knew it. You’ve hunted my family down because of it. Nothing you do will change the fact that Will and I are meant for each other.” With every passing moment Lanie’s belief in that strengthened.

Charlotte’s palm cracked across her cheek. “I will decide your fate. Not a dead woman, not Will. Not you. *Me.*”

A man--a hunter, Lanie realized by the odd golden eyes that struck her as so familiar--pushed away from the doorway. “As much as I’d like to see how this turns out, I filled my end of our agreement. I trust you will honor your end.”

Charlotte turned her back on Lanie. “I will. Declan will be dead before the day ends.”

Declan? Will’s friend? What did he have to do with any of this?

The man inclined his head. “Then I’ll be taking my prisoner and be on my way. I have a Key to find.”

“No,” Charlotte said. “I need him for a few hours longer. Then he is yours. And I trust you will keep me apprised of your progress, as was our agreement?”

“I have no intention of going back on my word, vampire.”

“Forgive me if I don’t put a lot of stock on the word of a man who hunts my kind

as his calling.”

“We don’t all choose our paths,” the hunter reminded her.

Charlotte dismissed the hunter’s presence with a tip of her head. She nodded towards the main door, and one of the two remaining hunters rushed across to open it.

A man was dragged into the room. He’d been beaten, and blood oozed from his recent and many injuries.

Charlotte walked towards the man, and with a steely grip, yanked his head back. He grimaced but made no sound.

“You know what I want you to do?” Charlotte pointed his head in Lanie’s direction.

The man refused to look at Lanie.

“You will do it, or she dies,” Charlotte warned.

The pained look on the man’s face told Lanie her life wasn’t the one Charlotte threatened him with.

His gaze drifted between Lanie and Charlotte. “How long do you think to force my cooperation with such threats?”

“Probably until you actually refuse to cooperate and I have Julia killed.”

Lanie blinked. Julia? Will’s Julia?

“You touch her and I’ll tear your head off myself, you ...”

Charlotte punched him. The man’s head snapped back with a sickening thud. He growled in response and pulled at the two men who held him. They contained him as easily as they had Lanie. More hunters, she suspected.

Turning, Charlotte glared at her. “This will only hurt for ... forever. Give or take a few decades.”

The hunters shoved the man forward.

“Do it, Brody,” Charlotte ordered.

He approached Lanie, his fangs descending as he closed the distance between them.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Heart in her throat, Lanie scrambled backwards to escape him.

Even injured, he was too quick. He yanked her toward him, trapping Lanie in his embrace as his teeth sank into her flesh.

## Chapter Twelve

*I'm sorry.*

Will?

*I'm sorry.*

The voice came again, and Lanie fought through the darkness to reach it. Awareness returned slowly, and she realized she lay on her back, a soft mattress beneath her. Somewhere close, someone hammered like they were three months behind on a construction project due yesterday. She squeezed her eyes tighter with each drumbeat as the pounding radiated down the back of her skull.

Hushed voices reached her ears, and Lanie knew wherever she was, she wasn't alone. Opening her eyes, she blinked to focus. Red and blurred, her vision refused to clear. She closed them again, rubbing the heels of her hands against them. Her mouth was dry, her wrists heavy. All of her limbs felt the sluggish pressure of being weighed down.

A movement of her fingers, that took far longer than expected since her muscles were slow to cooperate, revealed nothing constricted her movements. When she opened her eyes again there was only minimal improvement.

Fear knotted her insides. Why couldn't she see? She tried again, concentrated, willing her vision to clear.

Abruptly, her focus shifted, pulling back until she clearly read the red digits on the alarm clock next to the bed.

Something was different.

On the far wall, she glanced at the impressionist painting hanging in the center. She studied the pastel brush strokes, her eyes easily reading the minuscule signature scrawled in the corner as though she were a foot away instead of twenty.

Lanie pushed up on her elbows and her arms quivered under her weight.

"Easy."

Lanie shrank from the hand that settled on her upper arm.

"I won't hurt you," the deep voice promised.

Turning her face, Lanie recognized the man in front of her. Brody. Julia's Brody?

She remembered him grabbing her, biting her. What had he done to her?

She jerked away from him, her hand going to her throat, feeling for the puncture marks. Belatedly she realized there wouldn't be any to find. Will's had vanished much to her surprise, as well.

Was that why she felt so weak? Because Brody had drank from her? She tried to move farther away, but her head spun and dipped as she clawed at the blanket to keep her steady.

He caught her around the waist before she tumbled off the bed, a wave of

dizziness threatening to bring what little food she might have in her stomach right to the surface.

“Careful. It takes a bit to get used to it.”

Lanie opened her mouth to ask what he was talking about, but clamped her lips together as another burst of nausea hit. Her heart picked up speed, racing as though she was running.

Her small sigh of distress brought his hand to the back of her head. Instinctively she tried to move out of reach. He held her still and gently pushed her head down between her legs. “Take it slow.”

Panic rode the back of her throat. Was he going to bite her again? Maybe killing her this time? Tears burned behind her eyes, and every effort to keep her rioting insides under control became more difficult. Her heart pounded nearly as loud as the hammering in her head.

“I’m sorry for what’s happened. I didn’t want to do it. Please relax as best you can. I won’t hurt you, and this will pass soon enough.”

Drawing a deep breath, her lungs contracted, and she felt every movement within her. Felt the rush of air slide down the back of her throat, the expanding of her lungs, the frantic pump of her heart, and the blood rushing through her veins. Every soothing brush of his fingertips as he patted her back, every rustle of the fabric over her skin made by movement of her shirt and Brody’s odd behavior.

Hell, the man had bitten her--how long ago had that been? Minutes? Hours? Days? And now he tried to comfort her.

Lanie stopped fighting him, and slowly sat up, welcoming his touch as much as she could until her center of gravity returned and the nausea passed.

“That’s right. Take it slow. There’s a lot to adjust to.”

She found herself relaxing against him a little, the sound of his voice helping to ease the tension. The faintest of accents clung on his voice. Irish? And what was he talking about? Adjust to what?

Calmer now, Lanie surveyed her surroundings more closely. A guest bedroom, decorated in light floral prints, with a closed door, an open door leading to a bathroom, and dark beige drapes tugged across a large window. Voices continued to reach her ears, but she saw only the two of them in the room.

Had she finally lost her mind? The pounding continued, and she tried to ignore it. At that moment she realized the room was pitch black. And yet she could see every detail of the room and the man next to her as though a light were on.

“It’ll be all right,” he repeated.

Lanie focused all her attention on Brody. Blood stained his lip, and the rusted scent reached her nose and she drew it in.

A ravenous hunger sliced through her.

*No.*

She scrambled backwards away from him. The bed disappeared from under her and she landed on the floor in a tangle of weakened limbs with a thirst like none she’d nursed before.

A thirst for blood.

Brody loomed over her, and she shuffled backwards, coming up against the wall. It wasn't possible. She couldn't be ....

Gingerly, she raised her fingers to her lips, probed past them. Fangs lengthened in her mouth of their own accord, almost like she couldn't control it. Or had she?

With a whimper, she ripped her hand away, and tried to stand. Shaking knees warned her that her upright position was precarious at best, and any second she could be dumped back to the floor without warning.

A vampire? She was a vampire?

She shook her head. No. She was alive. Human. Not ... dead.

"Oh, you're definitely not dead," the man said. He held out his hand. "I'm Brody."

She looked at the hand, would have preferred to shake hands with Lucifer himself over the stranger in front of her. He had done this to her.

"I didn't have a choice."

She glanced sharply at him. "So as a human, and a vampire, my mind is easily read."

"No. As a human, your ability to shield your thoughts is weak. As a vampire you can keep others out, let them see only what you wish them to see."

"I can read your thoughts then?" It was too surreal to believe. Knowing Will was a vampire was one thing, becoming one herself in the space of days, completely another.

He chuckled. "You can try. Most others will have difficulty reading you once you learn to guard your thoughts."

"But not you?" She guessed reading between the lines.

"I turned you, bonded us in a sense. You'll have to try harder to keep your feelings from me."

Lanie passed another quick glance over the room, searching for something she'd missed. Like a way around the vampire between her and the door.

Brody smiled. "You do realize you're a vampire too, now?"

If someone would just stop the damn hammering she'd be able to think for a minute.

"No one is hammering," Brody continued. "Water is dripping from the faucet in the bathroom. Your senses are magnified now. You need to learn to control them, tune out what you don't need to pay attention to."

Lanie laughed, the sound bordering on a mild hysteria. Given what she was facing, who could blame her? Maybe someone had written a manual she could read? Everything you need to know about being a vampire.

"Are you going to freak out?"

Lanie laughed again. "Now why would I freak out? Because yesterday I was ... not like this? Because not very long ago I had a normal life, and things like vampires didn't exist except in books and movies? Forgive me, but I think that would normally warrant a full psychotic break. So if I feel like freaking out a little, you'll just have to sit there and shut up while I do it." She closed her eyes, and wished Will was here with her.

"Whose voices do I hear?" she asked after a moment of tense silence.

"Charlotte's and her conspirators. If you concentrate, you can either turn their

voices up to hear them more fully, or ignore them completely.

Lanie closed her eyes and tried to push some invisible mute button on the pounding in her head. Slowly, the hammering softened to the point she could at least ignore it. It was Charlotte's voice she wanted to hear.

"Why didn't she kill me?" Charlotte had killed the descendants before her, those she felt would threaten the future the crazy bitch wanted with Will. "Why did she have you turn me into ... this? How did you do it?" Why hadn't he just drained her completely?

"I hope that's not a complaint."

"Can I get back to you?" She fired back, realizing he'd been in her head again. She had no clue how to guard her thoughts as it were, but concentrated on it all the same.

"Better."

She ignored the minor compliment and tried to process everything.

"I have no idea what Charlotte intends to do with you. You probably don't remember drinking from me. It's common not to."

"So that part of the myths are true? You do need to drink from a vampire to become one?"

"Yes."

Lanie clenched her eyes tightly, determined to focus on what Charlotte was up to. Did it involve Will? Were he and Gabe all right?

"Will? Will Matheson. You know him?"

Lanie cracked open an eye. "Okay, now it's just getting annoying. Can you stop listening in for a few minutes?"

"Fine. Will and Gabriel, what happened to them? And Julia ... was she with them?"

"No, she was at her club I think. Hunters came to the house and they shot him." Her voice started to shake, and she pressed her lips together until the fear that she wouldn't see Will again receded. "They shot him right in front of me. He wasn't moving when they dragged me out of there."

What if he was dead? What if they had killed him and she had to spend the rest of her life, an eternal life, alone?

Brody shook his head. "You'd know if he was dead. Sorry," he said quickly. "It's easier to read you than wait for you to say something. You love him?"

"Yes." The answer came to her lips automatically, and for the first time none of Elizabeth's memories clouded her mind or her heart. The love she felt for Will was her own, no longer influenced by a woman whose past had haunted her for the last five years.

But did Will love her? Would he love her when he learned she wasn't really Elizabeth? What if he turned away from her? How could she spend an eternity without him?

Brody frowned, and she waited, expecting him to comment on the thoughts playing through her mind.

He didn't. "When did they take you? How long until you arrived here?"

"I don't know. Minutes. Twenty or thirty maybe. Not that long."

"Then focus very hard. We can't be that far from him. You'd feel a deep

emptiness inside you if he was dead.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask if he’d lost someone important to know that to be the case. Instead, she tried to do as he asked, waiting for some magical switch inside her to flip and tell her what she wanted to know. Holding the image of Will in her mind, she waited. When no deep, echoing loss reached out for her, hope flared to life in her heart.

Maybe he wasn’t dead? Brody said she’d know if he was. She’d have to feel something if he was dead. But if he was still alive, would it stay that way if he didn’t get help?

“I have to get out of here.” Lanie pushed away from the wall, but another wave of dizziness had her grabbing for the bed.

“You are weak. You haven’t fed.”

Oh God. “I have to ... drink blood now, don’t I?”

“Afraid so,” he added with a rueful tilt of his lips.

“Well, I may be weak, but I’m not dead. Seems to me after watching Will go after that hunter a few days ago, I’m far better off than dead.” Or she would be when her head stopped spinning.

“Will hadn’t just been turned when he fought him, had he? You have a long way to go before you’re going to be fit to go after anyone.”

“I can’t just wait here and see what she plans for us.” On shaky legs she stood up and crossed to the small door. Her hand froze on the handle. “Hunters,” she whispered, backpedaling away from the door. Three of them stood outside in the hallway. It wasn’t that she heard them or saw them. She *sensed* them. What other things would she be able to sense?

“One thing at a time,” Brody advised.

Defeated, she returned to the bed, perched on the edge. Her eyelids sagged and her limbs felt heavier than before.

Brody touched her shoulder. “It’s the sun. It weakens us. You need to rest. Young ones can’t fight it as easily as those of us who’ve been around a while.”

Lying back, she curled her knees her chest, eyeing the man who had turned her into a vampire. “Why did you leave Julia?”

An unreadable emotion crossed his face, and she concentrated on reading his thoughts.

He smiled at her. “Don’t try so hard. You don’t want to be obvious about it.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“Some questions have more than one answer.” A trace of longing laced his voice before he changed the subject. “You need to rest. Charlotte will be back for you. You need to build your strength.”

Lanie barely heard the last few words as a slumber she was helpless to hold back tugged her under.

\* \* \* \*

*He squeezed Elizabeth’s hand, fighting the urge to rip the door from the hinges. He couldn’t leave her locked in here. He didn’t care that she insisted she would go free in the morning, he could free her now, take her away from this place.*

*Elizabeth's hands were cool between his, but before he could warm them, she tensed.*

*"What is it?" he asked, needing no other excuse to free her.*

*A pained expression crossed her face before a single tear slid down her cheek.*

*"Elizabeth?"*

*She brushed the tear away with the back of her hand. "I am fine, just worried about my grandmother and sister."*

*He didn't believe her. "You would tell me if you saw something?"*

*The smile she tried for did nothing to convince him, nor did the comfort she sought to give him by pressing her palm against his cheek.*

*"Tell me," he pleaded.*

*"Everything will be fine," she promised, but even as she spoke the words, she didn't sound convinced.*

*"I cannot lose you." If anything happened to her ....*

*A watery smile curved her lips, but didn't reach her eyes. "Some people are destined to find their true soul mates. You are one of those people, William."*

Lanie!

Will bolted upright, cringing at the tenderness in his chest. Lifting his shirt he saw his injuries had healed on the outside, but the muscles inside were still tender. He closed his eyes and focused on Lanie. Had he imagined feeling her a moment ago? Another dream?

No, he'd dreamed about Elizabeth. The images drifted back to him, and his chest tightened as her words replayed in his mind.

*Some people are destined to find their true soul mates. You are one of those people, William.*

Will frowned, the words playing through his mind again and again as he thought about the sad look on her face.

She'd known. Elizabeth knew that day in the cell.... All this time he had thought Elizabeth meant that he would find her again, but she'd known there was someone else he was meant to find.

Lanie.

He closed his eyes. For so long finding Elizabeth had consumed him, and then he had finally had let the hope die that they would meet again. Coming face to face with Lanie had brought it all back, but at the same time it had been so different. She'd been different, and he couldn't even say what it was that made that so clear to him.

Lanie wasn't Elizabeth.

Will waited, half expecting disappointment to reach in and squeeze his heart. Instead, fear for Lanie, a crushing darkness that he might lose her, clawed through his midsection.

Elizabeth was gone. Lanie needed him. And he loved her, so much that the thought of not seeing her smile again thickened the lump in his throat.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he scrubbed a hand over his face. He'd messed up. He'd finally found the woman he was meant to spend his immortal life with and he had



let those bastards take her. How the hell would he find her? Christ, he couldn't even bring himself to think about losing her.

"You won't," Brynn said from the doorway. "We'll get her back."

"Taking notes from Julia?" He stood up, stalked to his closet, and yanked out a change of clothes. "Have you heard anything?"

"Julia made some calls, but no one has returned any. It's only been a few hours. Both she and Gabriel are resting right now."

"The day sleep doesn't affect you the same way?" He had never heard of a vampire and a hunter mating, mostly because every piece of evidence pointed to all vampires being sterile. When they had more time, he'd have to learn more about that.

Brynn leaned in the doorway. "I'm not much of a day person, but I can be out in the sunlight. Drains me of energy pretty quick and I burn easily, but not like you would."

"Lanie doesn't know, does she?"

Brynn shook her head.

"She's gonna be pissed you didn't tell her." Will couldn't hold back his smile. Maybe that would make up for Brynn shoving her finger in his gunshot wound.

A brief smile touched Brynn's lips before her face clouded again. "The two hunters Declan assigned to watch over you were killed. I found their bodies when I scouted around right after you told me she'd been taken."

Damn. Declan was going to hit the roof. Having the others go rogue was one thing, but losing some of his men at the hands of their own kind .... Declan would be out for blood.

Will headed past her for the kitchen. As he passed through the living room, he noticed Gabriel crashed on his sofa, Julia curled up in the chair.

"Shouldn't you still be resting?" Brynn followed on his heels.

"I need something to drink."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Don't look at me, pal."

He rolled his eyes and opened the fridge. "Taken care of, thanks."

"Don't tell me you wouldn't offer a little of your blood to a dying man," Gabriel said from the doorway.

Brynn scowled at him, but Will didn't miss the unmistakable sexual energy bouncing between them. Interesting.

Will set a glass on the counter. "You look like hell. Go back to sleep."

Gabriel's smile widened as he eyed Brynn. "I know of something that will fix me up real good."

"That would be a swift kick in the ass," Julia said from behind him. "Better grab three glasses." She gazed at Brynn. "Or should we make that four?"

"No, thanks."

"She looks more like a vamp blood lover to me," Gabriel chirped.

For a man half dead on his feet Gabriel was incredibly cheerful, Will thought.

"She's half vampire." Maybe if Gabriel knew that, they would take their sexual sparring out of the kitchen. He needed to think, and right now the chatter in the room didn't help the pounding in his head.

Gabriel frowned. "*Half* vampire? How is that possible?"

Brynn shrugged and smiled enough to let a hint of her fangs peek out.

Gabriel groaned. "Don't tease me like that, its cruel."

Will stopped, cocked his head. Why was his head pounding? It hadn't been before he rested, and he wasn't underfed. It wasn't usual to simply wake up with a headache.

*Will.*

The glass of blood slipped through his fingers and shattered on the floor. *Lanie?*

"What is it?" Brynn asked.

He didn't move. Didn't breath. *Lanie?*

Frowning, Will bent down to pick up the broken glass. He reached out with his mind but still found nothing. Was he losing his mind? He could have sworn ....

The phone rang. All conversation stopped as he crossed to the cordless phone on the wall. Declan, probably.

"Hello, handsome." Charlotte's voice raked down his spine. Will knew it was no coincidence she had called just hours after Lanie had been taken.

"Where is she?"

"Who?" Charlotte innocently inquired.

"If you've hurt her ...." Even one little hair on her head, and Will would stake Charlotte out in the middle of the Sahara himself.

"She's alive. For now."

*"Where is she?"*

Julia touched his arm, and the gesture reminded him not to provoke Charlotte when he had no idea what she hoped to gain by doing this. "I want to talk to Lanie."

"I'm afraid that's not possible. She's ... resting."

"What have you done with her?" If he had to ask one more time ....

Charlotte laughed. "Well, that subject is up for negotiation, provided you do a little something for me."

"If this is some kind of game, I will enjoy making you suffer for it."

With a chiding *tsk tsk*, she spoke clearly into the phone. "I'm afraid this is deadly serious. If you want to see her again, you'll bring the hunter elder Declan to me. Tonight. Alone. Dead or alive, I don't care. Whatever is easiest for you. Clear?"

"How do you think I'm going to get an elder hunter to go anywhere with me?" Was Charlotte aware of his and Declan's friendship? He was certain he had never mentioned it during the few times he's been forced to put up with her presence. And he doubted Declan had advertised his friendship with a vampire. If Charlotte truly was oblivious to the connection, it could only work to their advantage.

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

Will gripped the phone tighter. "Where?"

"My place. No doubt you can find out easily where I'm staying," Charlotte said and ended the call.

Hanging up the phone, Will regarded the others solemnly. "She wants Declan."

Julia set her glass down. "Why?"

"I don't know. My guess would be it has to do with the renegade hunters."

"Who has her?" Brynn demanded.

"The one who turned me." Will paced the length of the kitchen. Charlotte would pay for threatening Lanie. "She hasn't hurt her. She wouldn't dare when she plans on making a trade."

"The bitch is going to pay for it anyway," Brynn snapped.

Gabriel leaned in towards her. "Please tell me you'll talk like that when I drag you to bed."

Brynn shoved past him and stalked into the living room.

Gabriel watched her go, grinning. "I think she likes me."

Julia shook her head. "You're hopeless."

Snapping up the phone, Will punched in a familiar set of numbers and waited for someone to pick up on the other end.

"Who are you calling?" Julia asked.

"The only one who can help me get Lanie back."

\* \* \* \*

Will stared at the front of the modest-sized mansion. Declan was slumped against his side.

"You ready for this?"

Declan didn't move. "As ready as I can be."

*Will?*

Frozen in place, Will paused. *Lanie?*

"What's wrong?" Declan whispered.

He ignored his friend and tried to focus. She was close. Definitely inside. He felt her presence as clearly as if she stood beside him. How was that possible?

*I'm here. Are you okay?*

"Will," Declan prompted.

Will continued up the front steps of Charlotte's mansion, but grappled to hold onto Lanie's voice. *Did she hurt you?*

He felt Lanie pause. *Not exactly.*

He wanted to ask why their connection had intensified, but now wasn't the time. By his guess, the last time they'd made love must have broken down the last of the barriers between their minds. But that didn't explain how she heard his thoughts. Something had changed.

Will had no time to think about it before the doors opened and two hunters--the same sick bastards that had put three holes in him--appeared. They reached for Declan.

"Back off," Will growled.

Neither moved.

Will stared them down. "If I did this to him, an elder, what can I do to you two when you're not packing?"

They glanced uneasily at each other, then back at Will.

"Let him pass."

Will glared past the hunters to where Charlotte stood in the middle of the dimly lit room. Her skimpy dress didn't surprise him, but the playful smile she aimed at him sure as hell did. What was she hoping to accomplish by playing dress up and looking primed to seduce him?

“I’m glad you came.” She sounded as though he’d accepted her invitation to come for dinner instead of to bargain with a friend’s life for the woman he loved.

He didn’t waste time. “Where is she?”

“You know, I’m not sure what you see in her.”

“Release her, Charlotte.”

She shrugged. “I will. I see you brought me a present.”

Will dumped Declan at her feet. “He’s yours. Lanie,” he demanded.

Charlotte inclined her head. Behind her the doors opened.

A pair of vampires half carried, half dragged Lanie into the room.

He moved towards her. “If you’ve hurt her ....”

Charlotte stepped between them before he could get closer. “Don’t worry. I promise you she isn’t dead.” Her lips curved. “Far from it.”

Will glanced at Lanie. Abruptly, his world shifted, knowledge sinking into his bones with sharp precision.

She’d been turned.

## Chapter Thirteen

Torn between relief Lanie wasn't dead and shock to find she'd been turned, it was anger that raged to the surface when Charlotte's vampires stopped in the middle of the room. Fisting his hands, he shot a look across the distance separating them.

Charlotte held her ground between him and Lanie.

He glanced over Charlotte's head, hating the woman who'd turned him for doing it to Lanie, too. How long ago had she been turned? Had she recovered enough to even be up and moving around? There were some who didn't handle the transition well and became ill, an enigma in the vampire world where their ability to adapt and regenerate made them what they were. What if Lanie had been among the small percentage that had a very rough transition?

*Lanie?*

No response.

*Lanie, baby. Please look at me.*

He glared at Charlotte. "You turned her against her will, didn't you?" He highly doubted Lanie had asked for it. He hadn't chosen this life, spent enough years hating this existence and the lack of answers. And now ...

Damn it, he hadn't wanted Lanie to be forced into it. He'd wanted her to choose it, choose him. Charlotte had taken that away from them.

"Well, not me exactly. I wouldn't poison myself with such tainted blood, but yes, she is like us. You're not pleased?" she asked innocently.

Did she expect him to believe she had turned Lanie for him? "What game are you playing, Charlotte?"

"No game," she answered.

Charlotte's heels clicked across the hard wood floor as she approached Lanie. The vamps holding Lanie propped her up between them. Her head lolled forward, her hair falling over closed eyes.

Charlotte cupped her chin, smoothed her hair out of her face. "Still out cold, poor thing." She lifted her palm and slapped Lanie across the face.

Lanie's face snapped to the side, her eyes fluttering open.

Will exploded towards them.

*Wait!*

Will barely registered the faint voice echoing in his head until he'd yanked Charlotte away from Lanie.

Charlotte nodded to the lackeys holding Lanie, and the tallest pressed a knife to her neck.

"One wrong move, Will," Charlotte said quietly. "How long do you think she'd last? Newly turned, hasn't fed yet. An hour? Maybe two? And with the day sleep hours away, she'd never make it."

The voice came again. *She won't kill me.*

Lanie.

Checking the impulse to smash Charlotte's face into the floor, he met Lanie's half closed lids, and knew she was more conscious than she let on.

Watching Charlotte carefully to see if she noticed their exchange, he opened his mind, and reached for Lanie.

*Are you okay?*

Silence. Then, *Define, okay?* More silence. *I'll survive.* He sensed sarcastic laughter. *Seems I'm immortal now.*

Charlotte's face remained impassive. He could barely get a read on Lanie as a human, and now as a vampire, he felt ... everything. Her fear for him, her uncertainty over her new fate. He even felt the slight ache in her thigh from where they had smashed her leg against the doorframe dragging her downstairs.

But most of all, he felt her power. Whoever had turned Lanie had been old, strong. Obviously not Charlotte's brightest idea. He probed deeper, searching for who had done it.

Brody?

Julia's Brody?

In front of him, Charlotte arched one glossed eyebrow. "Does she die tonight, Will?"

Will glared at her. "I brought you what you wanted. Let her go."

A brittle smile curled her lips. "I suppose you'd like that. You could spend eternity together. However," she added. "there's something else you have to do for me."

"I already filled my end of the deal."

"And I'm very thankful, but there's more." Charlotte slid her hand up Will's chest.

Two feet away, Lanie tensed, her anger rippling beneath the surface to the point Will felt her temperature jump.

Charlotte continued. "Life-mates. You and I."

*Hell, no!* Lanie's voice exploded in his mind. She tugged in vain at the vamps holding her, her knees buckling as Charlotte narrowed her eyes in her direction.

"I guess Lanie doesn't like the thought of us being bonded forever. Oh, well."

Will shook his head. "Forget it."

Charlotte shrugged. "Then she dies."

"No," Will shouted, advancing on Lanie's captors.

Charlotte tsked, grabbing his arm and slowing him down just enough to remind him of the knife they held close.

"Cooperate, William. Would you rather see her dead than be tied to me?"

He would rather see Charlotte dead, but figured to say as much would make her lash out at Lanie. He thanked fate that he hadn't slept with Charlotte after she'd turned him. Drinking from her the initial time of his change thankfully wasn't the same as drinking from another vampire in the throes of passion. Charlotte's venomous personality had emerged immediately after she'd brought him over, saving him from forever craving the blood of someone he despised.

*Don't provoke her, Lanie warned. Just play along.*

He wanted to smile at how easily Lanie now read him. But she was right. He needed to play along. Buy them some time. The others had dropped them off and drove away, but they'd be back. Soon.

He met Lanie's eyes. *Fine. Just don't watch.*

Will inclined his head towards the vamps beside Lanie. Charlotte nodded, and the knife was lowered and slipped into a back pocket.

Charlotte leaned into him, sliding her hand up his shirt. Her fingers curled around his neck. "I think it's long past time to get to know one another fully."

Fury rolled off Lanie in thick waves. Charlotte didn't seem to notice or didn't care.

Will caught her hand before it moved past his waist. "Now?"

"I've waited too long for you. We are going to fuck right here, right now, joining us together for all eternity."

Will found Lanie's eyes open and watching the two of them closely. *I told you not to watch.*

Charlotte cupped his jaw and brought his attention back to her. "Together we will have everything we want."

He frowned down at the woman he hated most of all. "How do I know you won't kill her after we've ...."

"Fucked? I give you my word."

Her word? As if that meant anything to him. Still he nodded, because failure to do so could mean Lanie's jugular being severed before he made it three feet.

He shot Lanie one last glance. *I mean it.*

*Then get on with it already.*

Jaw clenched, he grabbed Charlotte's dress at the collar and ripped. The dress split down the front, her breasts spilling free. Her wicked smile told him it was exactly the move she had hoped he'd make.

"Leave us," Will ordered the ones surrounding them.

Charlotte shook her head. "Not the girl. She gets to watch. Take Declan downstairs and keep him heavily guarded."

Lanie's legs buckled as the two vamps released her. She would have slumped to the floor if the one who'd held the knife to her neck hadn't caught her, lowering her before leaving the room with the others.

Lanie didn't move, but her thoughts were strong and clear. *Tell me you didn't come alone?*

Will wanted to roll his eyes. *How stupid do I look?*

Charlotte took his hand and led him towards the leather sofa in the middle of the room. She pushed him down, straddled him.

"Take me right here, so she can see your thick cock buried in me and know that when you drink from me it joins us forever."

Will gripped her hips, wondering where the hell the others were.

Charlotte grinned. "Just a warning lover. One thought from me and they'll be back in the room, her throat slit before you get anywhere near her. Just in case you were

getting any ideas.”

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

From the corner of his eye, he sensed movement. He scooped Charlotte’s breast into his palm. Her head dropped back, oblivious to Lanie. She didn’t perceive Lanie as a threat and had tuned her out altogether, it seemed.

Moving faster than he’d ever seen a newly turned vampire move, Lanie hauled Charlotte off his lap.

She whirled a stunned Charlotte around and shoved her across the floor. “Get the hell away from him.”

\* \* \* \*

“Bitch,” Charlotte screamed before she jumped to her feet and launched herself at Lanie.

Will jerked her out of the way, but not before Lanie struck out, her fist awkwardly connecting with Charlotte face. The blow knocked Charlotte off balance, and she tripped over her feet and landed in a pile on the floor.

Lanie glared down at her. Charlotte had come too close to taking away everything important to her. Again.

A familiar tingle swept through her, and Lanie snapped her head up.

It couldn’t be. Brynn?

Across the room, the door burst open. Gabriel, Julia, Brynn, and Declan stormed into the room.

Lanie searched her closest friend’s face. Brynn? A hunter?

Charlotte stumbled to her feet, her eyes wild with fury and panic.

Will stalked towards her. Lanie gripped his arm. “Will, don’t. I don’t know that I can start our life together with you killing her.” As much as she hated the woman in front of her, she wouldn’t have Will kill her. Given the hatred pouring off him, she knew he wanted to hurt Charlotte. Badly.

He hesitated, and Lanie stepped up beside him. “If you come near us again,” she warned Charlotte, “and I mean anywhere this side of the Atlantic Ocean, I’ll make sure you’re hung from a tree with a great view of the next sunrise.”

Charlotte glared at her, but jerked her head in affirmation, her hand rubbing her neck.

“Good,” Lanie snapped.

Will reached down and yanked off the black opal pendant Charlotte had put around her neck. Lanie felt what he was thinking, that Charlotte was damn lucky Lanie had such a tolerant nature, and he still wasn’t convinced she should walk away from this. If she had taken Lanie away from him ....

Lanie squeezed his hand, shared her thoughts with him. *She didn’t.* Smiling weakly, Lanie stumbled against him. The muscles in her legs burned under the strain of supporting her, but the power, the strength streaming under her skin was enough to keep her upright.

Will bent to scoop her into his arms. “You need to rest.”

She shook her head. “I feel good, just ... overwhelmed.” And afraid.

*What’s wrong?* Will’s thoughts echoed in her mind.



Lanie couldn't meet his eyes. She didn't want to see his disappointment. *I'm not Elizabeth.*

William caught her chin, bringing her gaze back to him. *I know.*

He didn't understand. *No, I mean I never was.*

His lips parted in the same smile he had given her the day in the bookshop. *I know.* He pressed the pendant into Lanie's hand. *Somehow, I think this helped me find you.*

Tucking the pendant into her pocket, half afraid Elizabeth's memories would swallow her again, Lanie tilted her head towards him. *I'm not sure I can live with another woman's ghost between us. I know you must still love her.*

Will smoothed Lanie's hair back from her face. *How could I not? She led me to you.*

Warmth flowed through her as he pulled her closer, and Lanie believed he meant every word. Cradled against his chest, she inhaled deeply, the strength of his arms making the aches and tiredness fade away.

She was like him now. She struggled with the realization they'd be together now. Forever. It seemed too surreal to contemplate.

"Anyone else getting the impression these two are in their own little world?" Gabriel asked.

Brynn stepped forward and pulled Lanie into a hard hug. "I'm glad you're safe."

Lanie eyed her friend curiously. "I guess we have some stuff to talk about, huh?" Staring at her friend, she realized why Declan's eyes had struck her as so familiar. Brynn's were the same hazy golden shade. How could she have forgotten that?

Will leaned towards Brynn. "Told you."

The back of Lanie's neck prickled, and she whirled around. She instinctively yanked the knife she'd lifted from the other vampire's back pocket from where she'd tucked it under her sleeve. Her own speed would have left her stunned, if she hadn't been focused solely on the woman who screeched her name.

Charlotte lunged at her and impaled herself on the blade.

Lanie tensed, stricken by how fast everything had happened. How had she .... What had she done?

Charlotte staggered back. "You bitch," Charlotte hissed, pressing her hands to the wound in her abdomen.

Lanie dropped the knife and stared down at the blood on her hands. Her stomach twisted, nausea curdling her insides.

Declan stalked past them, jerking Charlotte towards him. "I'll make sure she doesn't bother you two ever again." Without a word, he steered her toward the door.

"Declan," Will called out.

Declan paused.

"Thank you."

The hunter nodded, and was gone.

Lanie stared at the closed door, half expecting Charlotte to tear back into the room and succeed in ending her life as she had Elizabeth's and the others before her.

She gazed up at Will. "How did I do that?"

"The one who turned you was far stronger than most vampires. You've come by some of those strengths because of it."

Her knees quivered, and another wave of dizziness swirled through the back of her mind. She gripped Will's hand. "Maybe being carried wouldn't be so bad after all."

Will smiled softly and picked her up. She settled her cheek against his shoulder.

Julia walked towards them, her eyes widening with every step. "You weren't alone here, were you?"

Lanie shook her head sadly. "No. Brody turned me. Charlotte threatened your life if he didn't cooperate. They took him away before they brought me down here. I don't know where. The hunter who'd been waiting to take him said something about the Key."

Julia turned away, but Lanie didn't miss the tears shining in her eyes before Julia said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

\* \* \* \*

With Lanie tucked close to his side, Will followed the rest of them outside. The cold night air whipped across his face before he buried it in Lanie's hair. Vampire or not, she smelled the same. Sweet, sexy. His.

She gazed up at him, her brown eyes sparkling. "You still have to ask me to marry you, you know."

Laughing, he tugged her closer. "You don't miss a beat do you?" Will pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I love you, Lanie. I've been waiting for you my entire life and I'm never letting you go."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "I love you, too. I have since the dreams started, and I always will." She reached up, brushed her mouth over his in a soft kiss before rocking back on her heels. An excited smile curved her lips. "So, do I get to pick out the ring?"

Will snorted. "Do I get to see you in your wedding dress before you walk down the aisle?"

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, I get the point. But you're not going to make me wait for a hundred years or something, are you?"

Will didn't answer her. Instead, he claimed her mouth, lingering, savoring. He hadn't known it then, but long ago his heart had been promised to her. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, and all the days to come, he would love her with everything inside him.

Until the day he died.

\* \* \* \*

"You're not going back to Lake Falls?" Lanie watched Brynn set her bag by the door.

Brynn shook her head. "The only thing important to me there was you. But I'll visit you in your new place." Brynn glanced at Will. "You could have done a lot worse."

Lanie couldn't stop smiling. She'd been grinning like a fool for the last two days. Not the reaction she expected, considering her life had taken a one hundred and eighty degree turn. But she was happy--adjusting, but happy. She'd already called Harold and promised to come back for a long talk as soon as possible.

"Sure you can't stay a while longer, gorgeous? I have a readily available space

right next to me in bed.” Gabriel leaned on the doorjamb.

“Tempting, but I think I’ll pass.” Brynn turned back to Lanie. “Besides, Julia needs help finding Brody.”

Lanie wrapped her arms tightly around her friend. “I’ll miss you.”

“Don’t worry. We have lots of time left to hang out. You’ll be bored with me in a couple of centuries, I guarantee.”

“Never,” Lanie whispered fiercely, hugging the woman she’d come to love as a sister.

Brynn squeezed her back, but Lanie didn’t let go. This new life was as terrifying as it was exciting. She wished Brynn were closer. She still had so many questions.

“Wow, choking me.” Brynn stepped back. “We’ll talk soon. Promise.”

Lanie nodded, blinking back the tears she felt looming. “Be happy,” she ordered her friend.

Brynn nodded and glanced at Gabriel. “See me out, slick?”

He grinned at her, then winked at Lanie. “Absolutely.”

Brynn snorted. “I didn’t say anything about sex.”

“Can I pretend you did?” Gabriel asked as they left Will’s apartment.

Lanie still had to get used to controlling her new abilities, but she had Will and her new family to help her work out the kinks. And Brynn would be back.

“You’ll get the hang of it.” Will stepped up behind her and slid his arms around her waist.

“Weird. It takes some getting used to, having someone in my head, knowing what I’m thinking almost before I even think it.”

“So,” Will mused. “I think this is the part where I thank you for saving my life.”

Turning in his arms, Lanie frowned up at him. “Charlotte wouldn’t have killed you.”

He shook his head. “Not from Charlotte. Before you came into my life, I was getting a little too close to thinking about giving up on it all. You changed that. With your smile, soft words, killer breasts,” he teased cupping her through her shirt.

“Is that so?”

He smoothed the hair back from her face, his tone serious once again. “Yeah.”

“So how are you planning on repaying me for saving you life?”

“Well,” His lips skated along her jaw. “I was thinking you could be naked.” He scraped his teeth across her bottom lip. “And I could worship your body for the next oh ... thousand years or so.”

“Deal,” she murmured, meeting his haunting blue eyes.

On a growl, Will crushed her to his chest. Lanie clung to him as his mouth devoured hers with a passion that tunneled through her veins, curled up in her heart and whispered, *I’m home*.

THE END

