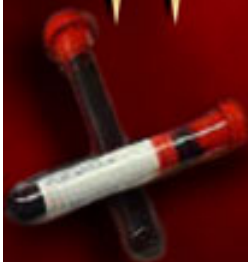


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

December Quinn

# BLOOD WILL TELL



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Blood Will Tell

ISBN 9781419911965

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Blood Will Tell Copyright © 2007 December Quinn

Edited by Briana St. James.

Cover art by Croco.

Electronic book Publication July 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

## **Content Advisory:**

**S - ENSUOUS**

**E - ROTIC**

**X - TREME**

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

*S-ensuous* love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

*E-rotic* love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

*X-treme* titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

# *BLOOD WILL TELL*

December Quinn

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Batman: DC Comics, Inc.

Coke: The Coca-Cola Company

Dr. Seuss: Dr. Seuss Enterprises, LP

Fontainebleau Hotel: Fontainebleau Resort Properties II, LLC

Jedi: Lucasfilm LTD

Kinko's: Kinko's Ventures Inc.

MAC Cosmetics: Estée Lauder Cosmetics Ltd.

Mercedes-Benz: DaimlerChrysler AG Corporation

*The E! True Hollywood Story*: E! Entertainment Television Inc.

Wile E. Coyote: Time Warner Entertainment Company LP

## Chapter One

The shadows moved.

Cecelia Barnes quickened her pace through the dark parking lot. *There's nothing there. It's just your imagination.*

But the night was closing in on her, airless and fetid like a tomb. Her car was only fifty feet or so away. It seemed an impossible distance.

Why had she let her assistant, Doug, go home? He'd left only half an hour ago. Her work could have waited. Hell, *he* could have waited.

Then she wouldn't be alone now, her breath unnaturally loud in her ears and her heart beginning to pound.

Something clanked, metal against concrete, to her left. She turned quickly, gasping, the South Florida heat searing her lungs, the sweat on her brow turning ice-cold.

The manhole cover on the pavement still vibrated in the foggy steam of the night, as if someone had moved it to climb into the sewer...or out of it.

Running now, she shifted the keys in her hand until the point of her car key protruded from between her index and middle fingers. She'd taken a self-defense class the year before. A key could scratch out eyes, or puncture a windpipe.

Unfortunately, she had not learned how to use a key to attack when grabbed from behind and dragged backward. She tried to scream but was able only to emit a choked-sounding squawk. She writhed against the arms that held her, her hands clawing ineffectually at them, her feet battling to kick or make solid purchase on the pavement.

Three men stood in a loose circle around her, their eyes gleaming as they watched her struggle. Another scream disappeared from her throat when the man closest to her opened his mouth in a wide, open grin, and she saw his fangs.

*Ohmygodthey'revampiresohholysshitthey're FUCKING VAMPIRES –*

There was a shout behind her. Cecelia tried to turn her head to see what was happening, but she was held fast. Her thin silk blouse tore as she tried to wriggle free.

Another shout, closer this time. The vampires looked up, tracking the source of the sound. Time slowed as the greedy expressions on their faces turned to fear. The arms holding her loosened, and as she fell to the hard pavement, just before her vision went black, she saw a man with a face like an angel's leap forward to attack her captors.

\* \* \* \* \*

That face was the first thing she saw when the world came back into focus.

"You're the angel," she said.

The man seated close to her raised an elegant eyebrow. "I know," he replied. "But we must never speak of it again."

This struck Cecelia as a rather un-angelic thing to say, and she frowned. "Am I dead?"

"Do you feel dead?"

She struggled to sit up, her elbows sinking into soft fabric. "Not really."

"Well then."

She frowned again. He might have the face of an angel—his dark hair framed perfect, strong features—but he was definitely not anything but a man.

"What happened? Where am I?"

"Clichés, clichés," he said, waving a pale, long-fingered hand. "Is this where I tell you that you're in heaven and the Kumbaya sing-along will start at any moment?"

"Excuse me, but fuck you," she said. "I'm in a place I've never seen before. I'm pretty sure I was attacked. I don't think it's untoward to ask where I am. Or who you are, for that matter."

"But you haven't asked who I am," he pointed out. His tone was reasonable and his voice mellifluous, with an accent that hinted vaguely of green fields and stone buildings.

"You're English," she said.

"Yes. Is that relevant?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

"Only if you'd like to discuss the Queen."

"I wouldn't."

"Well, I suppose it isn't relevant then. Shall we move on?" She was fascinated by his face as he spoke. His skin was smooth and pale, his large dark eyes expressive. He was at once very, very handsome—she had not been wrong to think he looked like an angel—and very haughty.

He watched her expectantly, his eyes gleaming, like he was waiting for—what? More questions? An accusation? Maybe he was waiting for her to throw off her tattered top and beg him to leap on top of her. Which, she was slightly ashamed to admit, was an option she could consider. He really was devilishly handsome.

"So who are you? And what the hell am I doing here? Where are the police? Did you call them?"

He smiled. His teeth were very white, and his smile changed his face, drove the coldness away and made him look almost wholesome. Her breath caught.

"My name is Julian Mansfield," he said. "And I saved your life."

When she didn't respond immediately, he asked, "What's wrong? No sharp reply?"

But she couldn't speak, not at first. It all came back to her, the horror of the dark, still night, the vampiric faces in front of her, sharp teeth in cavernous mouths like ivory

stalactites gleaming dully in the moonlight.

Not to mention that she'd never in her life met a man with such a flair for the dramatic. Something in the way he spoke made her itch to take him down a peg or two.

"Like yourself much, Mr. Mansfield?"

"As much as I like anyone," he said. "And do call me Julian. Most women do, when they're in my bed after I save their lives."

"You do this a lot?"

"I don't like to toot my own horn."

"I seriously doubt that," she said.

"Tsk, ts. We've only just met and you're already so judgmental."

Feeling that the whole conversation had somehow become absurd, Cecelia sat up completely. "No more jokes," she said. "Who were they? How did you come to be there and how did you beat them? And, since you didn't answer me before, where exactly am I?"

"You were attacked," he said. "In the parking lot of the Butler Medical Research Center. I'm not sure who they were. I was walking by with some friends and I suppose we scared them off. And you're at my house, as I mentioned, in my bed."

"But they were—" She stopped. Were they vampires? Really? She'd never believed in such things. She was a scientist. Scientists don't believe in vampires.

But she hadn't imagined those teeth. She knew it.

Julian was watching her expectantly. "They were—?"

She shook her head. She certainly wasn't about to tell this aristocratic, extremely good-looking man that she thought she'd seen vampires. He would laugh at her.

Then he would try to have her committed.

For reasons she couldn't quite explain, she didn't want him thinking badly of her.

*You can explain it very well, Dr. Barnes, she said to herself. You're already wondering if he looks as nice with his clothes off as he does with them on. Especially because part of you is still terrified and you can't think of anything better right now than to have a strong, handsome man make love to you until you can barely remember your own name, much less anything else.*

"Shut up," she whispered.

"I haven't said anything."

"Not you."

He looked around the room, his face a question.

"I was talking to myself."

"And telling yourself to shut up?"

"So?" She felt the blood rushing to her face. "I can tell myself to shut up if I want to."

"Can not," he said, his face solemn.

"Can too," she snapped back, before she realized he was goading her. She shook her head. "You're impossible. And I want the police."

"I haven't called them."

Fear slithered up her spine. It had certainly looked as if this man—Julian—had rescued her. But now she wasn't so sure. Maybe she'd been captured. "Why not?"

"Because the police wouldn't believe that you'd been attacked by vampires outside a laboratory that specializes in hematological research, that's why. So my friends and I thought it best to keep this under our hats."

The breath left her body in a whoosh. She hadn't imagined it.

Unless it was some weird plot to drive her insane, and Julian was part of it. Somehow she doubted it. He didn't look like he needed any sort of scam to drive people insane. He looked, in fact, like someone who managed to do that just fine on his own.

She felt certain he noticed her reaction, but he continued speaking as if he hadn't. "Of course, if you disagree, feel free to call them. Just leave my name out of it, please. I don't care to have a vacation in a padded cell."

"How did you know they were vampires?"

He laughed out loud. "Do I really need to answer that?"

"I guess not," she muttered.

"Good. At least you have some brains, then."

"Hey! That was uncalled for."

He sighed. "Fine. I suppose it was a little below the belt." As he spoke, his eyes raked her barely clad torso, and she crossed her arms over her chest, trying to pull the pieces of her torn blouse together. At the same time, little sparks of excitement shot through her body at the frank appreciation in his eyes. The man was certainly sexy enough, even if he was snide.

"More than a little. That was mean. If you're the hero, I think I'd rather side with the villain."

"Somehow I doubt that." His tone was dry, but there was an edge to it that made her wonder if this Julian was really as much of an innocent bystander as he behaved.

She didn't trust him, for all that he had saved her life.

And yet she also felt somehow that he was completely trustworthy. At least, if he thought it was worth his while to be.

It just depended on what he really wanted. She didn't believe his story about not wanting to tell the police she'd been attacked by vampires. That could have been left out, as someone of Julian's obvious intelligence would have known. So there had to be some other motive for bringing her here.

She intended to find out what that was.

She looked up at him, and was annoyed to see him watching her with a half-smile



on his face, as if he knew exactly what she'd been thinking and was daring her to say it out loud. She didn't. Instead she stared defiantly back at him, wishing that meeting his eyes didn't make her feel quite so warm.

"Are you hungry?"

Before she could deny it, her stomach rumbled. Her face grew hotter as she muttered, "I guess so."

"Then let me feed you. Please, don't get up." He held a hand out to stop her as she started to do just that. "Just give me a minute. They've been holding dinner in case you wanted anything."

"They?" But he was already walking out of the room, leaving Cecelia alone on the enormous bed.

Slowly, she climbed down from it and began to explore. Her shoulder and her head hurt, and there were raw and tender spots on her knees from her collapse onto the concrete. Carefully, she padded on bare feet across the thick gray carpet, noticing as she did so that her skirt was also torn. That was forty dollars she'd never see again.

It was a huge room. The king-size bed covered in a rich burgundy velvet duvet barely took up a third of it. The far wall housed a row of bookshelves and a doorway that she assumed led to a bathroom. A desk stood by the other door, ornately carved of dark wood and clearly expensive, and the chair that matched had a deep burgundy leather seat. A faint smell of smoke and soap hung in the air. From the way it all blended together and the art on the walls, it looked like an interior decorator had been called in, a very costly one too.

She walked to the open French doors and out onto a balcony that overlooked the ocean. The view was breathtaking. Despite living in Florida, Cecelia had never been one for beaches, but she had to admit that one's own private beach—as this apparently was—was a different story. She looked around her and saw that she stood on one of several balconies, overlooking a pool and patio and a guest house about the size of most of the houses in her neighborhood.

Julian was obviously a very wealthy man.

And one, she thought, who knew more about this whole vampire thing than he let on. He parried her verbal barbs very well, but she could tell there was something behind that smile.

This was surely the strangest night of her life.

She was determined to find out who was behind it. She'd never been the kind of woman who sat back and let other people dictate to her, and she wasn't about to do so now.

And she would start by forcing Mr. Smarty-Pants Englishman to talk.

The only question was how.

\* \* \* \* \*

She didn't trust him.

That was fine. Julian wasn't sure he trusted her, either. She was playing it all a little too clever.

Did she know he'd been watching her?

Was she in league with Valentin? Maybe she had set him up.

He'd thought he was doing the right thing in bringing her here. Now he wasn't so sure.

Only one way to find out. Not that he minded. Seducing the beautiful woman wasn't exactly a chore. In fact, given that she was more Julian's type than he cared to admit, it was probably going to be one of the best chores ever. He made his way down the stairs into the kitchen, where Edward sat at the table, flipping through a magazine under the subdued glow of the recessed lights.

"I gather she's awake," Edward said as Julian entered.

"Yes. Awake and bitchy as hell."

Edward grinned. "Not falling for the famous Mansfield charm, eh?"

"She's not giving me a chance to use it. I don't think Cary Grant could charm her."

"I'm sure you'll get there," said Edward. "If anyone can stop her, it's you, right?"

Julian glanced at his friend as he filled a bowl with the stew that simmered on the stove. "Let's hope so."

She was going to hate him when she found out why she was really here.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Have you finished snooping, or should I come back in a few minutes?"

Cecelia almost jumped out of her skin at the sound of his voice. She *had* been snooping, loath as she was to admit it, but had found disappointingly little to tell her more about the man who lived in this room.

"I was *not* snooping," she said, with as much dignity as she could muster. "I was looking for something to read."

"You might have more luck at the bookcase, then, instead of the desk," he said cheerfully. "Just a suggestion."

She gritted her teeth, both in irritation and in a vain attempt to keep herself from blushing. "You keep your books on shelves? What a novel idea."

"I'm an innovator." He was standing expectantly at the bookcase, so she walked over and began looking.

"You have a lot of poetry. Old volumes too."

"They're first editions. Most of them, anyway. The Keats is autographed, would you like to see it?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. He removed a slim volume from the shelf above

her head, stepping so close to her that she could feel the heat of his body and smell the warm, slightly vanilla fragrance of his cologne. Or maybe that was just his skin. Whatever it was, it was delicious, and she fought to keep from stepping closer and putting her face to the smooth, pale skin of his throat.

He did not step away as he handed her the book. His eyes were brown, deep and rich, with gold flecks in them, and the amusement that had made them dance earlier was gone when they met hers.

She couldn't stand the intensity burning in the depths of those eyes, so she turned away quickly and opened the book.

"To Julian?"

"It's a family name," he said.

"Someone in your family knew Keats?"

"We've always been social."

"Could have fooled me."

He smiled. "Because my manners are so atrocious?"

"Exactly." She smiled back.

He indicated one of the leather chairs by the French doors. "I do know how to serve a proper dinner, though."

She sat while he lifted a small side table and set it in front of her, then placed the tray on it next to a white linen napkin. He smiled and raised an eyebrow as he set up another table for himself and unfurled his own napkin onto his lap.

The stew in her white china bowl looked and smelled fabulous, rich with beef and red wine, but Cecelia wasn't about to dig in. Who knew what was in it? She'd seen enough movies to know that the heroine—in which category she firmly placed herself—never just blindly accepted food or drink given her. Especially by someone whose category—hero or villain—she didn't know.

She watched Julian from under lowered eyelids, waiting for him to begin eating. He didn't. He was watching her right back, smiling slightly.

"Is this where I take a bite myself, so you know I haven't poisoned the food?"

"Would you?"

"They're in separate bowls," he pointed out. "I could easily have drugged yours and not mine."

"Then switch—"

"Stop being ridiculous. I'm not going to sit here and play out scenes from *The Princess Bride* with you. Eat it or don't. I don't much care."

She looked doubtfully at the bowl.

"Just ask yourself," he said. "If I planned to kill you, would you have woken up at all after you passed out? Fun as our little conversation has been, I assure you I have other things to do than trade barbs with women who make it a habit to wander around

alone at night."

"I wasn't wandering. I was coming out of the lab. Where I work. I'm a scientist. You make me sound like a hooker."

"And you make me sound like a clumsy serial killer. Poisoning your food, indeed."

"Look, just what the hell is going on here?"

"We're discussing which of us thinks the worse of the other. Not a pastime I usually —"

"Oh, shut up!" she said, louder than she'd intended. "What do you know about all of this vampire stuff, anyway? You can pretend you don't, but you do. How are you involved in all of this? And why are you being so fucking mean to me? I was attacked, and you don't even care."

"Should I?"

"Go to hell." She stood up. "I'm leaving."

"Oh, and you're welcome," he replied.

"What?"

"I said you're welcome. For saving you. You couldn't be bothered to thank me before."

She stopped hunting for her shoes and stared at him. "Is that why you're being so nasty?"

"One of the reasons, yes."

"And what, pray tell, are the others?"

He sighed. "It irritates me when people waste energy."

She kept staring.

"You're spending all of your time worrying about me. Am I a serial killer, am I going to poison you, what do I know about vampires. What do *you* know about vampires, Cecelia?"

"They have fangs and drink blood and catch fire in the sun. Crosses scare them. Holy water burns them. A group of them attacked me earlier. And...I know you saved me. Thank you," she added, hoping she didn't sound as begrudging as she felt.

He nodded an acknowledgement, managing to look in the process like a king bestowing favors. She hated him. And still, damn it, found him incredibly sexy. "A group of vampires," he repeated. "Doesn't that strike you as a bit odd?"

"Uh, the whole *concept* of vampires strikes me as a bit odd. What exactly is supposed to be standing out in the sea of weirdness here?"

"Don't you usually think of vampires hunting alone? Stalking their prey on a lonely street or some fake smoke-filled nightclub?"

She sat back down. "I guess I do."

"So, then, isn't it odd that a whole group of them showed up—barely past sundown—and attacked you? Outside of a blood research facility?"

She was beginning to see his point, and fear flowed through her veins like a frozen cocktail. "But," she said, a little desperately, "couldn't they have just wanted to get in? We keep blood there..."

"Cold blood. Blood that's being tampered with. You're not a blood bank, you're a research lab. I don't think they wanted entrance to the building, Cecelia."

"How do you know my name, anyway?"

He raised one eyebrow at her again. Bastard. "Do you think I would have brought you into my home without knowing something about you?"

"You searched my purse."

He shrugged. "Of course."

She wanted to be angry, but found she really couldn't. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't that big of a deal. After all, he had saved her.

Although why, she had no idea. The image he seemed to be painting of himself as wandering Samaritan faded quickly when examined through the lens of his snide personality.

"And did you find out anything interesting?"

"I know you like MAC lipstick."

"Ah. The secrets of my soul lie bare before you."

"Sarcasm is so charming in a lady."

"Just as charming as in a gentleman," she retorted. "So what you're saying is, I was attacked because of me. Not by chance, or at random. There's something about me that made a big gang of vampires want to kill me. Which means..." Her voice faltered. "Which means they'll probably try again. And keep trying. Until they get me."

## **Chapter Two**

She almost expected him to do something really loathsome, like shout “Bingo!” at her, but thankfully he did not. Instead he sat still and watched her, one leg crossed casually over the other. “Want a drink?”

“N— Yes, actually. I think I could use one.”

He stood up and crossed the room to a small wet bar in one of the shelves. She hadn’t really noticed before how graceful he was, how powerful his movements were.

Little wonder she noticed now. Her senses were heightened by the pounding fear in her veins, and when Julian returned and handed her a glass she gulped from it, drinking the entire thing.

“My God, what is that? It must be a hundred and eighty proof,” she gasped, when she had finished.

“One fifty. It’s meant to be sipped, actually,” he said, sitting down opposite her. “Had I known you were going to chug it down like a frat boy with a keg I would have given you something weaker.”

“I wanted something strong,” she said, then felt her face grow even warmer than the whiskey made it as Julian’s eyebrow raised. “To drink, I mean. Thank you.”

“Feel better?”

Actually, she did, despite hearing her mother’s oft-repeated admonition that “alcohol didn’t solve anything” in her head. She didn’t feel so cold, or so scared.

In fact, she was quite warm, and watching Julian get up smoothly from his chair and reach for her glass made her even warmer. How did he manage to move like that, to give off such a sense of controlled force? It made her feel as if he could lift her up one-handed without breaking a sweat. And he wasn’t even that big. It wasn’t strength so much as...power that she felt from him. It was a little intimidating, and a lot attractive.

“Another?” He was already walking back toward the bar.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“Do I need to?”

“That depends on what you have in mind,” she said brazenly, not quite believing the words came out of her mouth. It was him. Something about him made her want to...well, to win. It seemed foolish, but she wanted to beat him at something, at anything. He was like the world’s biggest dare.

If she thought it would take that slightly superior look off his face, she’d get up and do a striptease right there.

Of course, while that would take the superior look off his face, it might replace it with laughter. And that she couldn't take.

"Here." He handed her back her glass, refilled, and set the bottle down on the floor next to his chair as he sat down. "I thought we might need it."

"You thought right."

There was silence for a moment while she sipped and he watched.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"How should I look at you?"

"Not like that," she said, annoyed. "You look like I'm some sort of experiment."

"I'm trying to figure you out," he said. "You don't act like any scientist I've ever known."

"How many scientists have you known?"

"A few," he said, waving his hand again. Cecelia understood the gesture to mean that he wouldn't discuss it further. "They were all boring."

"I'm not boring?" She was secretly pleased, despite her cool, slightly sarcastic tone.

"I don't think so. But then, I don't know you very well, do I? This could be the one night of the year that you're interesting, if a bit scattered."

"Scattered? I'm not scattered. I think, all things considered, I'm being pretty rational and levelheaded. I don't think many women—many *people*—would be handling a vampire attack this well."

"You are handling it well," he mused.

"I've thought about it," she said, feeling rather smug. The alcohol seemed to be going to her head a little bit. "All I have to do is make sure that I'm not out after dark anymore. They can't come after me during the day, and they can't come into my house unless I invite them. So I'm perfectly safe."

Julian opened his mouth as if to speak, then shut it again. His gaze was making her nervous.

Or was that nerves? It was more like...restless. Something in his eyes had changed as he looked at her, and without knowing why, her body suddenly ached for movement, her stomach filled with butterflies.

Not to mention the distinct damp sensation in her pants as her pussy came to life under his dark scrutiny. She squirmed slightly, uncomfortably certain that he knew he was turning her on. Certain too that infuriating as he was, she wanted him.

She never could resist a dare.

Crossing her arms over her now-erect nipples, she leaned back slightly in her chair. "You were going to say something?"

"No, I wasn't," he said, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Were you?"

"I wasn't." Damn him! He was going to make her talk. She had read about this. Never talk first, the books said. It gives the other person the advantage.

They sat there for several minutes. Cecelia was growing more uncomfortable with the silence, and more aroused, by the moment. There was something about him, while at rest, that made him seem to radiate even more of that fundamental power she'd noticed earlier. When he wasn't being rude, he was just being silent, and his silence was deafeningly sexy.

The silence didn't seem to bother Julian at all, to Cecelia's immense frustration. He sipped his drink calmly, his eyes on her face as she fiddled with her glass and drank rather more quickly than she should have.

She as determined not to speak first. *Don't talk, don't talk, don't talk...*

She was squirming slightly in her chair, both from nerves and from the heat that was building in her pelvis, when Julian stood up.

"Where are you going?" she demanded before she thought, and when his face broke into a smile she cursed herself inwardly. The bastard had beaten her.

"Nowhere," he said innocently. "I just fancied a stretch."

"That's cheating."

The puzzled expression on his face was so exaggerated that she almost laughed. "Cheating? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You understand perfectly well," she replied coolly. "But never mind. I hope you enjoy your hollow victory."

"I enjoy any kind of victory." His voice was lower, sexier, as he moved toward her.

She swallowed. "Even ones you didn't earn?"

"Especially ones I didn't earn. Work is overrated, my dear."

A shiver ran up her spine at the careless endearment. What was he doing to her? She'd never been this type of person before, the type to just fall into lust with any man who came along.

Well, unless you counted spring break at college...or Jose from the bar...or Greg, who'd been in that band. But three – okay, four or five – didn't count.

He was kneeling before her now, his eyes level with hers. The starched front of his shirt brushed against her bare legs, sending an involuntary tremor through her body. She prayed he hadn't noticed it, but knew that he had.

"Wait a minute," she said, as his face drew closer. "I don't even think I like you."

"You don't have to," he said, and his lips met hers.

Her first instinct was to push him away. In fact, she thought at first she was, but then she realized instead of pushing, her hands were in fact grabbing at his shirt, yanking him closer to her, stealing up around his neck to let her fingers play in his soft, dark hair.

His hands slid from her face to her arms, gripping them more tightly as his tongue entwined with hers, a slow dance of heat that made her dizzy. Up close, the warm



fragrance of his skin was enough to make her feel as if she was drowning in it, drowning in him and the sensation of his hands and lips caressing her.

He pulled her from her chair. They knelt on the floor, her arms sliding around his neck as he explored her mouth with his. She had never been so thoroughly kissed in all of her life. It was as if he was kissing her soul instead of her mouth.

His hands slid lower, down to the delicate curve of her ass, stroking and petting her. His light touch set her nerves on fire, and she squirmed her lower body toward him, letting his erection press against her belly.

He groaned.

She didn't know what had come over her and she didn't care. Her attack, vampires hanging out in parking lots, men who knew more than they let on, none of it mattered now. Her body was suddenly, violently afire, and all she could do was dance in the flames and cling to the hard, hot body in her arms.

His hand slid lower, down to the hem of her skirt, slowly lifting it, caressing her thigh. Her head fell back, and she heard him make a low sound of satisfaction in his throat as he bent to her exposed neck, teasing it with his teeth and lips.

His hand moved farther up her thigh, stopping just short of the panties she knew were soaked with her own juices. Gently, he pressed against her inner thigh, separating her legs, giving him better access to her dripping cunt. She prayed he would touch her then, but he didn't.

Instead, his other hand tangled in her hair and tugged, pulling her head back even farther. She would have lost her balance if his arm wasn't pressed like steel across her back, cradling her upper body. She was completely in his power, her back arched more than she'd thought possible, her legs spread apart, thigh muscles tense and aching, her arms around his neck.

"Let go," he whispered. "I won't let you fall. Let your arms drop."

"I can't," she said, her voice barely audible even to her.

His hand left her thigh and came back to smack her lightly on the ass, making her cry out in surprise and pleasure.

"You can," he said. "No power games now. Let go."

Instantly, she obeyed. For a second she swayed, afraid of falling, before she relaxed and decided to trust his arm holding her up.

"That's better," he murmured into her neck. His free hand left her thigh and moved to the buttons of her silk blouse.

Her head was so far back that she couldn't see him. She could only feel the cool air of the room against her skin as Julian slowly unfastened the few buttons still holding her shirt together and pulled the shirt open, exposing her lacy bra, his hands just brushing against the heated, incredibly sensitive peaks of her nipples.

Her pulse was pounding in her ears. She could practically feel the blood racing through her body, hot and thick, as he unfastened the front hook and freed her swollen

breasts.

There was a pause. She heard him whisper “Beautiful”, before his hungry mouth fastened onto her left nipple, the intensity of the sensation making her body jerk in response as she cried out.

Instantly his hand was back between her legs. There was no hesitation or teasing this time as his finger went straight for her aching clit, tapping it lightly.

She hadn’t thought it was possible for her back to arch further. She was wrong. Every muscle in her body seemed to clench, the tension making her vibrate. “Julian!”

He didn’t answer. His mouth left her nipple and moved to her other breast, nibbling underneath it, then moving up so his tongue could caress her nipple. His tapping finger sped up, each touch sending shock waves of heat and pleasure so intense it was almost a tangible thing.

Her thighs were shaking. Sweat broke out all over her body as Julian drove her higher and higher into a realm of pleasure so intense that she thought she might die from it.

She came, her fingernails scratching at nothing, the hot juices from her cunt drenching Julian’s hand as she cried out. She was so dizzy she barely noticed his hand slipping back around to cup her ass as he pulled her closer to him and lifted her from the floor, her legs automatically wrapping themselves around his waist. She could feel his cock like a brand through his trousers pressing against her as he carried her to the bed and laid her down.

She watched as he removed his white linen shirt, exposing a body so breathtakingly gorgeous that she actually gasped at the sight. His skin was smooth over muscles so well defined she could count them.

The weakness from her orgasm was passing, and she wanted—no, she *needed*—more. She needed to feel this man inside her. Her pussy was still open and dripping, desperate to be filled. She reached for him, sighing as her hands stroked the planes of his chest and stomach.

“Do you want me to take everything off, Cecelia?” His voice was still low, teasing her, enticing her with the promise of what he would do to her when he removed his pants.

She nodded, unable to look him in the eye. She knew that if he looked in her eyes he would see how desperately she wanted him, and how vulnerable that would make her.

“I didn’t hear you, Cecelia,” he said. “I asked if you want me to take off all of my clothing. Do you want me to do that?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to speak a little louder,” he said. His hands moved to his belt and removed it, then undid the top button of his pants.

“Yes,” she said, a little louder. God, he was making her beg...and she loved it. It was turning her on in a way she’d never expected, never experienced before in her life.

He didn't reply, but tugged down his zipper and slipped out of his pants. He wore nothing underneath, and his cock sprang free, huge and hard and gorgeous. She let out a low moan involuntarily, and looked up in time to see him grinning wickedly at her.

He reached for her again, his fingers tangling in her hair, and lifted her head up to plunder her mouth with his. She pulled her hands free from her shirt and bra and caressed his broad shoulders, sliding her hand down his back to the taut, hard muscles of his ass, smooth and perfect under her hot palms.

Julian broke the kiss and leaned back, unfastening her skirt and removing it with her panties, leaving her exposed to his black gaze.

She had never thought before that such a thing could turn her on, but it did. The frank desire and appreciation in his eyes made her feel beautiful, special...and incredibly sexy. She wasn't herself any more, wasn't boring old Cecelia Barnes, PhD. She was just Cecelia, a woman, a sexy woman who knew she was about to be fucked like she'd never been fucked before by an incredibly sexy man. And she couldn't wait.

He reached out and gently pushed her back so that she was lying on the bed, her legs over the side, and ran his hands down her body to lift her knees so that her heels dug into the very edge of the bed. Her face went almost as pink as the dusky rose of her pussy.

"No embarrassment," he said, looking her in the eyes. "We have no need for that between us, do we?"

After a second's hesitation, she shook her head.

"Good. Because you are beautiful, Cecelia, and you have a beautiful body. Does it taste as good as it looks?"

He didn't wait for an answer, kneeling before her in one fluid movement. His mouth found her clit and began teasing it with his tongue.

She gasped as he inserted a finger into the wet opening of her cunt and began to move it slowly in and out. Another finger, then another entered her, stretching the walls of her pussy, filling it.

She could hardly breathe. One hand was buried in her pussy, while the other rolled and tugged at her left nipple. His tongue kept its steady rhythm on her clit, making her ache, making her body twist and arch on the bed.

"Julian," she gasped. "Julian, I can't wait..." But just then she came again, harder than before, her legs spread wider than she'd thought possible, her heels digging into the bed, her hands clenched in his hair as he sucked her dry.

He stood up then and pressed the heavy, glistening tip of his cock against her pulsating cunt. "I didn't get to see that," he said. "I think you're going to have to do it again."

"I don't think I can take any more," she whispered.

"Let's find out." He drove his cock all the way into her waiting pussy, so hard and fast that she thought she would die from the pleasure of it, triggering another orgasm.

Julian heard her cries dimly over the beating of his heart and the sound of his own breath rasping in his throat. She felt so good, better than he'd imagined, better than he ever remembered a woman feeling in his entire life.

He gripped her hips more tightly, holding her steady for him, giving in to his body's mindless need. All thought, all reason, left him, save the image of her beautiful face transformed by passion into something other than human, something more primordial. She was a goddess and he worshipped her, pounding into her, her pussy caressing him and surrounding him with unbearably delicious heat.

He felt his own peak building as she throbbed around him again, and he grabbed for her, pulling her upright, one hand in her hair and the other clasped around her waist, bringing her more closely to him. Her arms wrapped around him, pressing him to her, letting him feel the soft, hot crush of her breasts against the muscles of his chest.

It was time. He tugged back on her hair, exposing her slender neck, and as his orgasm ripped through him he let his fangs come out and pierce the pale, delicate skin of her throat.

## Chapter Three

Her blood flowed over his tongue, hot and rich, tasting of copper and honey and spice, pulsing into his mouth and bringing with it a rush of pleasure so intense that for a moment he actually thought he might die from it. Instantly, his mind was filled with her thoughts, her memories, her feelings. The physical sensations she was experiencing became his, making his body spasm in ecstasy. Desperately, he tried to control it, to control himself, to push back into her mind to erase the knowledge of what he was doing to her right now. She was coming, her body taut and sweating against his, but in a moment she would come back to earth and know what he was.

And hate him for it. Even more than she would when she knew what he wanted from her, and why she was here. She would feel used, and she would be right. And for the first time in a long time, he cared.

He already felt guilty, even as he found the place in her mind that knew what was happening to her and gently soothed the thought away, forcing himself to lick the wound on her neck closed. The taste of her blood remained in his mouth, like an elixir of her soul, telling him everything he needed to know about Cecelia Barnes...and then some.

\* \* \* \* \*

He'd been watching her for a couple of months now, ever since *The Journal of Hematology* had profiled her. It had been a small article, barely half a page, but he'd noticed it—and her—immediately. She'd seemed to jump off the page at him. Her chestnut hair was pulled into a low ponytail as she smiled serenely at the camera, but he'd read the tiny interview and seen the fiery, smart woman who hid inside the lab coat. He wanted to meet her.

And then he realized that he was not the only one of his kind who read *The Journal of Hematology*, and knew that someone had better keep an eye on Dr. Cecelia Barnes.

Carefully, so as not to wake her, he slipped out from between the covers and got dressed, then made his way back down to the kitchen.

They were waiting for him. He knew they would be.

"Well?" Tristan's blue eyes widened slightly as he leaned forward, his elbows resting on the tile top of the kitchen table.

Julian sighed and shook his head as he sat down. "She's not with them."

"Is she going to give up her research?"

"I didn't get there yet."

"Julian." It was Edward speaking this time, and Julian turned to him, irritated by his friend's tone.

"What was I supposed to do, Edward? 'Hi, you don't know me, but you have to give up your life's work or die. Oh, and can I just drink your blood to see if you're trustworthy or not?' It's going to take some time, Ed. I can't just spring this all on her at once. She's been through enough this evening."

Elizabeth snorted, and Julian looked across the table at her. Damn. He'd known this was coming. "Is there a problem, Elizabeth?" He tried to keep his voice neutral.

"Hell, yes, there's a fucking problem," she snapped. "Get her out of our house. She's putting us all in danger."

"Liz—" Edward started, but she cut him off.

"Oh, poor lady, she's been through so much," she said, rolling her eyes. "Too bad. If she's dead she can't continue her stupid research either, and I don't understand why we can't just tell her that and be done with it. Unless Julian has some *other* reason for all of this."

"I explained my reasons."

Elizabeth stood up. "Whatever. Have fun *playing doctor*."

They watched her storm out of the room, her heels clicking on the ivory tile floor. Edward looked nervous, Tristan sad, Julian impassive. Edward turned to him.

"I'm sorry, man," he said.

Julian shook his head. "My fault. I should have known she would be upset."

He saw the look the two other men exchanged. "What?"

Tristan sighed. "The thing is, Julian...we think maybe it's time that Elizabeth left us."

"Because of this?"

"Well, yes. And no. Because of what happened with you two. I know it was a long time ago."

"For you," Edward interrupted.

"Yeah, for you," Tristan said. "But Lizzie, she's not getting over it very well."

"Or at all, really," Edward said.

Julian was used to the way his friends interrupted each other and completed each other's sentences, but there were times it annoyed him. Like now.

"So you think Elizabeth poses a threat to us?"

Edward and Tristan exchanged looks again. Neither of them seemed to want to agree, but Julian could see the truth written on their faces.

He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. "So where do you propose she go?"

"We don't know," Edward said. "We thought you might know of a place."

Sometimes being in charge was a real pain. This was one of those times.

"She stays," he said. Tristan and Edward both started to speak at once, but Julian stood up, silencing them. "I understand your concerns, all right? I even share them. But I can't kick her out of our home just because things didn't work out between us. It's too dangerous out there right now. She would be too vulnerable."

"She makes us vulnerable," Tristan muttered.

"Maybe she does," Julian said softly. He crossed the room and poured himself a drink before returning to the table. "But I'd rather take that chance than know I was responsible for her death. It is her death we're talking about here. Valentin wouldn't let her live if he caught her."

"And what about the good doctor?" Tristan's eyes were downcast, hidden from Julian's view.

"What about her?"

"Well." Tristan looked at Edward before finishing. At Edward's nod, he continued. "Well, it's not like Elizabeth didn't have a point. She does put us at risk. And there's really no reason why..." He trailed off as Julian's expression hardened.

"It's not safe for her out there either," Julian said. "She doesn't realize what danger she's in, she doesn't understand that all of those hoary old vampire clichés aren't true. They'd have her in a minute if we let her leave."

"But we have to let her leave," Edward said. "I mean, Julian, she can't just keep staying here."

"That's exactly what I plan to have her do," Julian replied.

"In our house? With us?" Tristan's voice almost squeaked on the last word.

"No, I thought we'd dig a cave in the garden and she can hole up out there," Julian said. "Of course in our house. It's the only place we know is safe."

"Far away is pretty safe," said Tristan. "I think far away sounds like a good place for her."

"What the fuck is your problem?" Julian could feel the blood beginning to pump through his body more quickly, bringing a dull flush of color to his cheeks.

But who was he angry at? Tristan and Edward...or himself?

What they said made sense. It was the original plan, after all, and he had come up with it. Of course it made sense. The problem was that he was suddenly reluctant to let Cecelia Barnes go. He could still smell her, could still taste her and feel her skin against his.

He hadn't expected this. He hadn't expected to like her so much. He hadn't expected his routine seduction of her to become something more.

But it had, and he wasn't sure what to do or think about it. He only knew that he wanted to spend more time with her, and right now he didn't give a damn if his friends approved or not.

"Our problem," said Tristan, in his best "calm everyone down" tone, "is that we're facing a real war with Valentin and his men over a woman that we don't even know. A woman whose research has the unhappy side effect of being a possible death sentence for us all. A woman who would probably stake each and every one of us in our sleep if she knew what we are. And Julian, I'm sorry, but we're angry because you seem to be thinking with your dick instead of your head."

"You want me to throw her out so she can be killed?" His voice was ice-cold.

"No, man." Tristan was still being soothing, seeking to placate his friend. "We just want to know you have a plan, that's all. We just want to know that you know what you're doing."

"I do," Julian said. He turned and left the room, wishing that wasn't a lie.

\* \* \* \* \*

She'd never been here before. Christian Max's was way too expensive a restaurant for a research scientist to afford.

Apparently nothing was too expensive for Julian. He was perfectly self-assured as he steered her through the crowd of candlelit tables, past women dripping in diamonds and men in conservative, sharply cut suits that probably cost as much as her car. Suits like Julian's.

The feel of his cool skin on her bare back, exposed by the silk dress she wore, made her shiver.

He'd insisted on accompanying her back to her apartment, because for some reason they slept so late that it was almost sunset when they finally got out of bed. From there, he'd also insisted on taking her out to dinner, and she'd agreed because she never turned down a free meal.

She might have flattered herself that he was trying to seduce her again, but his lack of attention to the obvious sexiness of her gown made her think twice. What was wrong with him? First he was all over her—the memory of the previous night still made her heart pound—then he barely raised an eyebrow at the dress her research assistant had dubbed "tits on parade".

Fine. She didn't want him anyway, she decided, ignoring the loud protestations of her pussy. She would get the information she needed and leave, and Julian could just whistle in the dark.

Of course, the idea of his lips pursed to whistle made her think of his kisses, which led her right back where she didn't want to be. She imagined slapping him. That was better.

"That's a funny little smirk," the man in question said. His dark eyes reflected the candles on the table, making their expression inscrutable, but he was smiling.

She realized with embarrassment that she was indeed smiling oddly. "I wasn't smirking."



"You were. Share the joke."

"Ladies," she informed him, "do not smirk."

"Oh? What do they do, then?"

"They smile enigmatically. It drives the gentlemen crazy."

"Well," he said, dropping his voice to a confidential tone. "You look like the cat that swallowed the canary. Contemplating my early and violent death, I assume?"

She was so startled that she almost dropped her just-filled wineglass. "What if I was?" she said, trying to regain some semblance of dignity.

"I'd be interested in seeing you try. I could use a few laughs."

"Oh, I'm sure you could," she said. "It must be boring being superior."

He smiled. "It's a burden I've learned to live with."

"Poor little Julian, all alone in his perfection. I'm so thrilled you deigned to spend the evening with me."

"I try to spread the love whenever I can." He sipped his wine, his eyes fixed on hers over the crystal rim, and her stomach did a slow flip.

It was as if her blood couldn't decide whether it wanted to rush to her face or her pussy first. A shiver of pure desire ran through her body, and she was glad to see the waiter. She didn't think she was capable of composing a reply just then.

Julian ordered them both steaks, and turned back to her. "So, tell me why you were smiling, then."

"Why don't you tell me something?" She said. "I don't know anything about you at all, really. What do you do for a living? How did you happen to be walking by last night? There's nothing around the lab that would attract a group of men. Who are you, Julian? Do you just wander around at night looking for vampires?"

"We all have our hobbies."

"Sure. I know lots of guys who like to pretend they're Batman as a hobby. They're called geeks."

"And these are the sort of men you usually date?"

"I didn't say I date them," she said, blushing. "Just that I know them."

"Although finding out how you know these Batmen is likely to be a fascinating tale," he said, "we do have other things to discuss."

"Science geeks," she said. "Those guys are obsessed with Batman. Mr. Spock is a big idol too."

He squeezed her hand. "Don't avoid the topic."

"I'm not avoiding anything."

"You couldn't be avoiding it more if you held up a neon sign that read 'Don't talk about vampires'. Instead you're talking about Mr. Spock."

"I wasn't talking about him, I was just saying that a lot of the guys I know talk —"

Her sentence was cut off by the firm pressure of Julian's lips on hers as he leaned over the table to kiss her. His right hand stayed where it was, holding hers, while his left hand moved up to cradle her cheek.

His tongue, cool at first and tasting of wine, caressed hers. She could not help responding, despite her halfhearted avowals to herself that she would get to the bottom of this. There was no truth to seek at this moment but Julian's lips, Julian's tongue, Julian's thumb tracing slow circles on her cheek as he kissed her breathless. Her nipples hardened against the thin silk fabric of the black dress she wore. Under the table, her legs parted slightly, an involuntary motion, as heat pooled between them. Her panties were damp with excitement. She wanted to leave. She wanted him to take her home and take her to bed.

"You are charming when you're being a nerd," he murmured, "and later you can regale me with tales of the physics club or whatever you were involved in, but we must put our minds to other things at the moment."

The combination of the word "later" and the physical sensation of his kiss made her stomach leap in her belly and land somewhere between her legs. She could hardly breathe, frozen in her chair by pure lust. She had never felt this way in her life.

He hardly seemed affected at all, but she thought his breathing was a little faster.

"Everyone is looking at us," she mumbled.

"They were looking anyway. They're all jealous of me for having such a beautiful date." He nodded and smiled as the waiter brought their food.

"Are you like this all the time?"

"Like what?" He stopped cutting his steak and looked up at her.

"Like...so complimentary, combined with snotty. Is that an English thing, or is that just you?"

"It's an English thing. We're all that way."

"Good to know."

He sighed. "Are we done analyzing my personality, or would you like to know more? I can tell you a long story about how I lost my puppy at a tender age and how I never, ever got over it."

She thought for a moment. "Actually, I wouldn't believe it anyway."

"Good. Because it isn't true. Now let's talk about some other things that aren't true, shall we?"

"Like what? That the Earth is flat? That when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true?" Her voice rose slightly. "That vampires exist?"

"I was wondering when we were going to get to this," he said. "You seemed to take it awfully well last night."

That wasn't all she had taken awfully well, she thought, and knew he was thinking the same thing when his mouth twitched. Her face grew warm. "I've spent my entire adult life believing in proof and facts. I can't very well deny the truth of what I saw. I'm

just having a hard time really believing it, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to make a leap of faith here,” he said, refilling her glass. “Because vampires are real, and there are some things you ought to know about them.”

“And how do you know about them?”

“I’ve had dealings with them before,” he said smoothly. A little too smoothly, she thought, her suspicions rising.

“When?”

“So I know that most of what you think is true about them, isn’t,” he went on, as if he hadn’t heard her. Maybe he hadn’t. Somehow, it didn’t seem to matter quite so much. The sound of his voice was more soothing than it had been a moment ago, and she leaned in to listen more attentively.

“For example, vampires can go out in the daytime—at least, the older and more powerful ones can. They can walk in a shady place or ride in a car with tinted windows easily, and the younger ones can still go out for a little while after sunrise and before sunset. They aren’t necessarily afraid of crosses and garlic does nothing to them but make them crave spaghetti. Holy water doesn’t really have an effect either.”

“I don’t understand. I mean, vampires are some kind of abomination or something, aren’t they?”

She didn’t notice him wince, because he didn’t let her. He was using the mind connection to keep her focused where he needed her to be. “According to some Christian lore, yes. But ask yourself—what are the chances that all vampires are Christians? The cross is a symbol of Jesus. Why would a cross upset an atheistic or a Jewish vampire, for example? Or a Hindu?”

“They have Hindu vampires?” She was fascinated.

“There are all kinds,” he said. “Anyway —”

“Do you think that maybe, for a Hindu vampire, a statue of Vishnu or something would hurt them?”

“I’m sure it would, if you hit them with it hard enough,” he said. “But my point is, you can’t count on some religious object or the sun or anything like that to protect you.”

“What about mirrors?”

He looked amused. “You can’t see vampires in a mirror, right? Because they don’t have souls.”

She nodded. “Right.”

“Mmm-hmm. Well, next time you look in a mirror, you be sure to check if your soul needs a fresh coat of lipstick.” He took a bite of his steak and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Cecelia, but none of those tricks will work. Vampires are generally pretty self-preserving, anyway, so even if they would it would be unlikely you’d have a chance to use them. You really can’t hide from vampires, and you really can’t get away.”

A slight shiver ran through her, and it seemed that the lights in the restaurant dimmed. "So what do I do? How do I stay safe?"

"You'll have to stay with me."

"What, in your house?"

He rolled his eyes. "Would you prefer a cave in the garden?"

"What?"

"Never mind. What part of 'stay with me' are people not getting today? Yes, in the house. In my house. Where I can keep an eye on you."

"Why can't you keep an eye on me at my apartment?"

"Because I don't live there. I live at *my* house—this is pretty elementary, really—and I know my house is safe. I don't know that your apartment is safe and I don't really want to take a chance. Plus," he leaned forward and stared right into her eyes, making her nerves start to tingle again, "the way I see it, you don't have much choice. If you want my protection, you do things the way I say. Right?"

## Chapter Four

"What's in it for you?" she asked suspiciously.

He grinned. "I thought you'd ask me that."

"So answer. Why do you want to protect me?"

He leaned back and took another sip of wine. "Maybe I like you." The desire in his eyes was naked, intense.

She stood up and set her napkin on the table, hard. "If this is some game to keep me in your bed, I'm not playing. I can call a cab."

His hand was on her wrist before she could turn away. She gasped. The gentle heat she'd felt tingling between them all night coursed through her body, hardening her nipples into painfully tight peaks. Every nerve ending in her body was on fire, her pussy weeping openly for him to fill it.

"Sit down," he said. Then, taking her silence as refusal. "Please."

*I don't think I can move unless you let go of me*, she thought, and was surprised when he released her, as if she'd spoken aloud. She sank into her chair.

He was silent for a long moment, long enough for the tingling in her body to subside. His face was a little flushed, and she wondered again just what the hell was going on.

"I didn't mean to be rude," he said finally.

"You were."

He closed his eyes. "I know."

They sat there for another minute, while an officious waiter cleared their table.

She folded her arms. "I'm waiting."

"For what?"

"An apology. And an answer."

"Answer?"

She tilted her head to one side and stared at him, letting him see her impatience.

He cleared his throat. "Okay. I'm sorry."

She kept looking at him.

"I'm sorry, Cecelia. I was rude. You deserve some answers. I'm just...I'm not a man used to giving them."

"But you will now."

He sighed. "Yes. I don't suppose you'd believe that what's in it for me is the pleasure of your company?"

He looked so hopeful she almost laughed, but stopped herself. "No."

"That is part of it, though."

She nodded. "That I'll believe."

"Good. As for the rest of my reasons, I told you I've had dealings with vampires before. The group that attacked you...let's just say that if I can keep them from getting what they want—"

"Me."

"Yes, you. If I can keep them from getting you, I'm not only saving you, I'm harming them. Make sense?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," she said.

"Right. So you can help me beat them and save yourself, or..."

She swallowed. "I can die."

He was watching her, his eyes unreadable. "What's it going to be?"

"I guess I don't have much choice, do I?"

"We all have choices. You just only have one right choice."

"I still don't really trust you. I don't think you're a very nice man."

"Do I have to be?"

She considered it. "I guess not, although I'd probably enjoy staying with you more if you were."

"My dear," he said, leaning in closer. "I seriously doubt that."

This time she couldn't hide her response. Heat flowed through her, blood rushing to her face.

He continued speaking in the same soft tone. "I somehow don't think that a nicer man would be man enough for you."

Her mouth was too dry to speak. She looked down, aware that by not answering she had answered him in the most eloquent way possible.

She could feel his gaze on her, almost as if his hands were caressing her. Soft and cool, running across her taut, sensitive nipples, making her gasp as her eyes closed involuntarily.

"You look stunning when you do that," he said quietly. His voice caressed her too, sliding down her bare arms. "Beautiful enough to make an army of men fall to their knees."

The compliment made her even warmer, but she opened her eyes. "You?"

He smiled a wistful smile that made him look younger. "I'm only one man. It's nearly enough to kill me."

He wasn't joking. The knowledge made Cecelia a little weak herself.

"If you won't let me die," she said, surprised at how breathy her voice was, "I won't let you die, either."

"As tempting as dying from the beauty of you is," he said, "it's a deal."

She nodded. "Can I call my lab assistant and let him know where I am?"

He was thoughtful, switching quickly back from "Julian the Romantic" to "Julian the Businesslike". "No, but you can tell him you're staying with a friend. Make something up so he won't expect you at work. But don't give away your location."

"I don't think all this is entirely necessary." She was trying to trust Julian, but he wasn't making it easy.

"Then you are far less intelligent than I have given you credit for."

She sighed. Just when she was starting to feel all warm and squishy toward him, he turned that acid tongue on her again and reminded her that underneath the sex appeal was a viper. An intriguing viper, but one who could still hurt her. "You really are an asshole, aren't you?"

"I prefer to think of myself as a realist. And realistically, your naiveté will get you killed before you even have a chance to see it coming." She opened her mouth to speak but he held up his hand, stopping her. "No, Cecelia. You know a lot about what you do. This is what I do. Please give me credit for knowing how to do it."

"You're asking a lot from me."

"Yes, I am. But I'm offering you your life in return. Either your life is important to you or not. Either you want to live or not. Honestly, I don't imagine you want to die, even though your life is terribly dull."

"It isn't."

"It is. But that's not the point."

"We're getting awfully close to that cab, Julian."

He rubbed his eyes with his thumbs, his face hidden. The gesture was at once vulnerable and masculine, and for some reason Cecelia felt a rush of triumph. He really didn't want her to leave. She could feel how much he wanted her to stay, sense it like a living thing.

He didn't want to give in to her, though. He wanted to say whatever the hell he wanted—he was obviously *used* to saying whatever the hell he wanted—without repercussions.

Arguing with him may have felt like some kind of bizarre foreplay that both pissed her off and turned her on, but Cecelia had a line. He wasn't going to cross it, no matter how beautifully he complemented her or how attracted to him she was. The sooner he learned that, the better.

"Please don't go," he bit out, his face still hidden by hands that now massaged his forehead as if he had a headache. "I will try not to insult you by implying that your life is boring."

"That's a little better," she said, enjoying herself now.

Until he looked up and caught her smiling. He narrowed his eyes. The deep color of them seemed to intensify, darker and darker, leaving her breathless. "Now you are

smirking," he said.

She stood her ground. "Yes."

He surprised her by shrugging and pouring some more wine into his glass. "As long as you admit it. Enjoy your little victory, my dear. It may be your last."

"I bet it won't."

He smiled. "I'll take that bet."

"What does the winner get?"

His smile grew wider. "Whatever they want, shall we say?"

She knew she shouldn't agree to it, but honestly, she didn't care. All night her heart had been beating below her waist and she was tired of trying to pretend that she didn't want him as badly as he seemed to want her. "Fine."

"Excellent." He looked far too pleased with himself to make her comfortable.

Cecelia blushed and looked away, catching the eye of their waiter. He was leaning against the wall, glaring at them. "I think we should go," she said. "Our waiter looks ready to kill us."

"It is a bit late, isn't it?" Julian took her hand. "Shall we go back to my place?"

The innuendo was so heavy that she laughed. "My mother warned me about men like you," she said.

He raised one eyebrow. "Come with me," he said, kissing her hand. "I'll show you why she was right."

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth watched as Julian walked the doctor bitch to his car and helped her in.

*Oh, sure, he's so thoughtful. So gentlemanly.*

*Until he dumps you on your ass, anyway.*

*Oh, Lizzie, I think we would be better as friends. No, it's not you. I just don't want to get married, it's such a commitment for us, you know that. Lizzie, please, can't we be adults about this? It didn't work out. I still care about you and like you. I want you to be my friend.*

"Fuck friendship," she sneered, as the car drove off. Back home, she guessed, where Julian would probably screw that stupid woman senseless before drinking from her. Again.

Elizabeth got into her own car and headed for the strip of nightclubs not far down the road. She could have fun on her own. She could meet someone and take him home. See how Julian liked hearing her screaming in ecstasy when he was trying to sleep.

The club she picked was one she'd been to before. Dark, crowded, full of sweaty bodies.

She quickly lost herself in the rhythm of the music. The rhythm of the many heartbeats that pounded in her ears. The scent of blood and excitement made her high.



She saw a man at the bar across the room. He wiped his brow, said something to his buddy next to him. She watched as his eyes scanned the crowd, looking for a woman, any woman, to be tonight's entertainment.

She smiled as his eyes met hers. Why not?

She could certainly show him a time he'd never forget.

She started walking toward him, slowly, sensuously, letting her body keep the beat of the music as she slithered across the club. His eyes followed her every move, every step. Her fangs were already starting to slide out, ready to pierce the soft skin of his neck, right over the pulse she could see beating there.

A hand grabbed her arm. She tried to shake it off and felt the first frisson of fear go through her when she realized this was an awfully strong hand.

Preternaturally strong, in fact.

"Elizabeth." Valentin's next-in-command, Daemon, held her arm in a grip that would have broken the bones of a mortal.

He smiled, letting her see the fangs he hadn't bothered to retract. "We need to talk."

\* \* \* \* \*

He carried Cecelia into the bedroom and kicked the door shut behind them, her soft sighs filling his ears like music as he set her down on the bed. He couldn't bear to break the kiss as he flung off his jacket and practically tore open his shirt.

She smelled fantastic. Her perfume, the scent of her hair and skin, the heady musk of her arousal. Beneath it all was the faint fragrance of her blood rushing through her veins, so delicious it was almost impossible for him to keep his fangs retracted.

He had no idea why, but something about her made him drunk. The way she stood up for herself, the way she was so self-effacing at the same time she demanded respect...she challenged him. No woman had done that for him in years, if ever. It was desperately sexy.

Her skin was like silk and radiated heat as he snaked down the zipper on her dress, letting his hand slide under the fabric to caress her hip. He felt the shiver that went through her body at his touch, sharing it, and the evidence of her delight shook him harder.

"Cecelia," he murmured, his own voice sounding hoarse and strange to him. She sighed in response and pulled him closer, pressing the hard ridge of his rampant cock into her belly. He groaned.

He couldn't wait. His fingers found the clasp that held the halter top of her dress up and deftly unhooked it, letting it fall free, exposing her smooth ripe breasts to his heated gaze.

He dipped his head to one puckered pink nipple and began to suck, letting one hand stray down over her ass, pulling her closer still. Her nipple was like a jewel in his mouth, and when he carefully probed into her mind he felt nothing but the sheer rush

of pleasure he was giving her, sharing with her.

"Julian!" Her voice was ragged with desire. Mercilessly, he pushed oblivion into her mind as he drove his fangs into the tender skin of her areola.

She gasped, her back arching. Julian held her tighter, closer, as he greedily sucked her breast, sucked her blood. The sweetness of it filled his mouth, finer than anything he had ever tasted. Again there was the heady sensation of tasting her soul, letting the essence of Cecelia pour over his tongue and into his body. The connection was overwhelming, making him dizzy and excited. He was lost and she found him, or maybe it was the other way around. All he knew was that he didn't feel alone anymore when he had Cecelia in his arms, in his bed, her life force joining with his.

Her fingers twisted in his hair, pressing his mouth harder to her breast. Her hips bucked as she came on a scream, her body shaking, her head flung back.

He licked the wound on her breast closed and slid off the bed. Cecelia watched him through eyes glazed with desire as he removed the rest of his clothing, freeing his burning erection, before returning to her and pushing her back onto the bed.

She grabbed for him, urging him on top of her. "Julian," she moaned. "Fuck me."

There was no time to think. He rammed into her, hard, his cock slipping into the weeping folds of her cunt with an ease that threatened to drive him out of his mind. Her wetness gripped him, caressed him, as he pounded into her, his cries of pleasure mingling with hers.

He fastened his mouth to her other nipple, teasing it with his teeth, letting them scrape the pebbled skin. His mind again tested hers, feeling the lust coursing through her body.

He moved his hand down her stomach, through the neatly trimmed hair that covered her mound. Her clit was plump and exposed, and he started making slow circles on it with his thumb, pressing harder than he sensed she wanted. She tried to wiggle away, but he held her fast.

He started moving his thumb in time with his thrusts, feeling her walls stretch to accommodate him. With every thrust she cried out. With every thrust he felt her growing hotter, wetter. Her juices flowed from her passage to drench his cock. His thumb still pressed against her, and now he felt the sensation changing for her, felt as it stopped being an irritation and started being gratification. Her hips began to rock toward him, begging wordlessly for more.

He kissed her, hard, then gathered her hair in his fist and yanked her head back, exposing her pale throat to him. Her excited cries echoed in his ears as he sank his fangs into her neck and let the hot, rich fluid that filled her veins flood into his mouth and down his throat, propelled by the frenzied beating of her heart as the pain and pleasure mingled and brought her, screaming, into another orgasm. He started shaking, sharing her pleasure, thrilled by the flavor of her, and he clutched her tightly to him and drank his fill as his own body exploded.

They slept then, curled up together under the soft linen sheets, only waking to make love again before drifting back off. Cecelia had never tasted passion like this before in her life. She craved his very touch, the sound of his breathing, the deep, melodious hum of his voice as he urged her to greater and greater heights of ecstasy. She couldn't stop herself.

And she didn't think she wanted to.

It couldn't be possible to fall in love so quickly. Every sensible bone in her body told her that this wasn't real, that it was merely some psychological reaction to the trauma of her attack and the fact that right now her life depended on Julian.

But she couldn't deny how he made her feel, or how much she enjoyed his company. With him at her side nothing seemed so terrible or scary.

And somehow that was the scariest thing of all.

"It's Sunday," she said quietly, when she saw that he was awake.

"Yes," he agreed. "I usually just say 'Good morning' on arising, but if you prefer to identify the days of the week, I think I can get used to that."

"I mean, it's Sunday. Tomorrow is Monday."

"And after that is Tuesday. And then comes Wednesday. Don't they teach you anything in American schools?"

She swatted at him playfully. "They teach us who ended World War Two...and One, for that matter."

"Ooh, low blow, my dear. Is this the part where I cringe in meek acceptance, or where I criticize you Yanks for your procrastination?"

"Why do we always have such ridiculous conversations?"

He looked offended. "You started it."

"I don't think so."

"Are you always like this in the morning?"

"Yes," she shot back, smiling.

"How lovely."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he grinned. "You better not bring that thing out unless you intend to use it."

His words sent a thrill of excitement through her. How was this possible? They'd spent the whole night making love, and she was still ready to go again.

But it was different, somehow, this morning. She felt connected to him.

She felt like she belonged to him. It felt great.

*Get a hold of yourself, Dr. Barnes. Two nights of fun conversation and fabulous sex do not equal love. This stuff is probably par for the course for Julian. You still don't know much about him except that he has a great body and a huge cock and he really knows how to use it.*

*And he makes you laugh.*

He put his arm back around her and pulled her close, so her head rested on his chest. Under the covers, his legs snaked around hers. The hair on his thighs rubbed against her own smooth legs, sending shivers of delight through her entire body.

"Julian?"

"Yes?"

She flipped over so that she straddled him, her hands braced on the smooth muscles of his bare chest. His cock stirred beneath her and she gave a little wiggle, making him gasp.

Cecelia smiled, suddenly determined to show Mr. Mansfield what kind of woman he was dealing with. "I think it's my turn to be on top."

She centered herself over the hard shaft of Julian's now-erect cock and moved forward slightly. He sighed softly as her wet lips stroked over the head and back down again, and she sighed as well when her clit came in contact with the silken skin covering the head of his dick.

His hands slid between her legs to toy with her clit, then rose up to play with her nipples, tugging them gently with fingers covered in her own juices.

She dropped her head back and let her hands fall, lightly running over the head of his cock before they reached the trimmed hair of her mound. She separated her lips and began gently pulling at them, glancing down to see Julian watching her hands, his face transformed by lust.

"You are amazing," he whispered, as she slid her index finger down over her clit and began rubbing it lightly. The sensation of being watched combined with what she was doing made her incredibly hot, and she let her eyes fall closed as she continued teasing herself with her fingers. Her hips started moving, her wet pussy sliding deliciously along the length of his cock, fiery and rigid against her own soft flesh.

"Cecelia." He grabbed her hips, pulling her upward so that he could fit himself inside her. She pulled away.

"Not yet," she whispered, enjoying the frustration on his face. "I'm in charge here."

"Oh, Jesus," he groaned, throwing his head back on the pillow and closing his eyes.

She grinned. "Patience is a virtue."

"It's not one I want to learn." He gasped as she ground herself harder on his rampant cock, teasing him by letting the tip slide just into her entrance then pulling away again. His fingers dug more deeply into her hips, but he did not try to move her again. He was letting her control things, at least for the moment, and Cecelia enjoyed the power in a way she never had before. Watching Julian's reaction to her was incredibly sexy.

She rubbed against him faster, his gasps filling her ears, her blood racing as her clit became more and more sensitive and engorged against his cock. She leaned back, her full breasts moving gently, her erect nipples dark red against her pale skin.

She reached down behind her and let her fingernails scratch gently up his inner

thighs. His hips jerked up beneath her, and when she ran her nails across his balls he groaned.

"Enough," he growled, and before she knew what was happening he lifted her up again and impaled her in one smooth, quick thrust.

She gasped in sheer hedonistic delight as his cock drove into her, thick and smooth, filling her with his heat.

"Ride me," he commanded. His voice sent more shivers through her already feverish body. His fingers were digging into her hips so hard she knew she'd probably be bruised there, but she didn't care. His hands made her feel grounded, like she was part of the universe itself, and the sensation of it all was too much for her to handle. She came silently, her body shaking, her pleasure too intense even for words or sounds. Her body was arched like a bowstring as she came and came again, as Julian pumped her hips forward and back over his voracious cock, pounding her mercilessly, his hips and lower belly slick with her juices.

She was ready to die from pure bliss when he finally came with her, his groans like triumph in her ears, his dick swelling and throbbing deep inside her.

She collapsed on top of him and they lay there, panting, the sweat of passion cooling on their bodies, until Julian finally spoke.

"Perhaps patience has its virtues, after all."

## **Chapter Five**

"We want the woman."

Daemon poured whiskey into a crystal glass and offered it to Elizabeth, who took it.

"I know what you want," she said. "Why don't you tell me what you'll give me?"

He gestured around the room, at the silk wallpaper and leather furniture. "We can afford to give you whatever you want," he said. "Name your price. Just tell us how to get into the house."

"I can't let you into the house," she said. "You know that."

He sat down next to her and reached for her free hand. A shock, surprising but pleasurable, ran up her arm and through her body at his touch. Daemon fought for the wrong side, she reminded herself.

But he was awfully handsome, with that olive skin and those big, expressive brown eyes. Julian had told her once that Daemon was part gypsy. He'd also told her Daemon had been orphaned as a young teenager, and that Julian had found him when his guardian tried to sell him as a sex slave. The figure Julian had paid to keep him safe was astronomical. She could see why.

She sipped her drink and watched him out the corner of her eye as he watched her right back. She'd never seen him up close like this before.

"You're a beautiful woman, Elizabeth," he said softly.

She frowned. "You're not going to seduce me into giving up my family. You can have the doctor bitch, and I don't much care what you do with her. But my family stays safe."

"That can be arranged," Daemon said smoothly. "We've always thought it would be better if our two families were more...shall we say, cooperative." His slight accent was attractive, giving his already smoky voice an even more exotic quality. He leaned closer, and she could smell the residue of the nightclub on his clothes, the cologne that still hovered on his skin. "Wouldn't you like us to be closer, Elizabeth?"

She leaned back, refusing to let him see how he flustered her. "I don't care if we're close or not. I just want what's mine."

"Julian."

"Yes," she said defiantly. "Julian."

He shook his head. "I can't give him to you."

"You can remove the distraction."

"That's not the same thing."

"Close enough."

He stood up to pour himself another drink. "Are you really so convinced you can manipulate everyone into feeling what you want them to feel? Into doing what you want them to do? I thought you were smarter than that, Elizabeth."

"Don't give me that shit about people's feelings and how everyone is so, so special in their own way. I know better. Almost anyone can be made to do almost anything, if you're clever enough."

"So how do I get you to do this, Elizabeth? What do you want, what can I do that's clever enough to fulfill my master's wishes?"

"You can cut the Mr. Smooth act, for one thing. I'm not one of your usual dumb conquests."

He smiled. "What kind of conquest are you, then?"

She blushed. Damn it. She was always letting her mouth run before she thought. She'd have to be more careful. "I'm not one at all. I'm not interested in you."

"You seem to have paid a lot of attention for a woman who's not interested."

"It's hard to miss the guy who's always with the loudest and most irritating woman in the room," she said. "If their IQs ever topped their waist measurements I'd be shocked."

"How cynical you are. Has it occurred to you that I'm just looking for that special woman?"

"You should try looking at one who still has all her original parts," Elizabeth replied. "Just a suggestion."

He laughed. "Can I inspect yours?"

"Certainly not," she snapped, but she turned away so he couldn't see how hot her face was getting. Not that it would help. She knew he was aware of every beat of her pulse, every rise and fall of her chest.

Just as she was aware of his.

He crossed the room and knelt in front of her. "Come now. You want Dr. Barnes out of the way as much as we do. It's what's best for you, and for us. For all of us. For all vampires." He smiled at her and took her hand. "Haven't you any community spirit at all?"

"Not really, no."

He laughed. "That's what I like about you. You don't hold back."

"You don't even know me."

"I think I know you better than you think." His eyes regarded her solemnly. "You'll stop at nothing to get what you want, won't you? Just like me. We both of us do what we have to do."

This assessment of her ethics was a little close to home for Elizabeth, and she leaned back, away from him. He didn't let her hand go. "You still haven't told me what you'll give me if I give up the doctor."

"More than distracting Julian enough for you to make your play to get him back?"

She nodded. His hand on hers was so warm. She craved that warmth.

"I don't think I have to give you anything. You want her gone. We can make that happen. You can just give us a time and place and wash your pretty hands of the whole thing." He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, sending another thrill through her body.

She tried to pull her hand away but he held it fast, letting his fangs appear and scraping them against the sensitive skin.

Her whole body felt warm, and she fought to pull her hand away. This was different, different from the rush of a casual pickup. Something in Daemon's eyes made her feel like he understood her, understood what she was feeling.

And that could not be. Elizabeth did not like to feel close to people.

Besides, he was a freaking villain. He'd kidnapped her from a nightclub and tried to kill her lover. Her ex-lover, anyway, but the man she still loved and thought of as hers.

He would kill Julian if he had a chance. Either he would, or that wretched Valentin would. And Elizabeth could not, would not, have that on her conscience.

So she ignored the heat that rushed through her veins and made her tingle and yanked her hand away.

"I'll think about it," she said.

"Don't wait too long to make a decision," he replied, and she could see in his dark eyes that he was not only talking about Cecelia Barnes. "The opportunity may not always be there."

"I guess I'll just have to take that chance," she said, standing up. "And cry into my little pillow if I do miss out. You're not half as charming and provocative as you think you are, you know."

"And you're not half as cold and calculating as you think you are, my sweet. Shall we agree to keep up our little pretenses, though, for the fun of it?"

"Can I leave now?"

"Of course." He stood up as well. She hadn't realized he would be standing so close to her, but he was. Their faces were only inches apart.

"You're always free to leave, Elizabeth," he said. His eyes were so close to hers that they looked enormous. She felt ready to drown in them. "And you're always free to come back."

She ignored this and walked away on legs that were not as steady as she would have liked. She stopped at the door and turned back.

"I know that," she said. "But until you can offer me something better than cheap seductive tricks, I won't be back."

"My seductive tricks aren't cheap," he called out indignantly, as she closed the door and left.



\* \* \* \* \*

"Elizabeth didn't come home until dawn," Edward informed Julian.

Julian shrugged. "She's a big girl. It isn't the first time." He was annoyed, but not for the reasons he knew Elizabeth was hoping.

"It's not just that."

Julian sat down in one of the big cushy armchairs that flanked the fireplace. The living room was his favorite. The soft greens and grays of the furniture and walls always soothed him. Today, though, the restful surroundings didn't help. "What is it, then? I'm not pleased. I've asked you all not to stay out longer than you need to. But I'm not much in the mood to start yelling at Elizabeth like an overprotective daddy when she gets out of bed."

"Someone saw her going into Castle. And Valentin's men were all over the place."

Now this was a problem. Julian sat up straighter in his chair and lit one of his rare cigarettes. "Where?"

"Off Las Olas."

"What the fuck was she doing there? She should have been able to sense Valentin and any of his family. Was she not paying attention?"

"Maybe she was trying to get herself killed."

"She's not the only one they would kill," Julian replied.

They were silent for a minute as his words hung in the air, letting the possible implications of Elizabeth's actions sink in.

"I need to talk to her as soon as she gets up," Julian said, "and I want —"

"Are you sure about that?"

Both men looked up to see Elizabeth standing in the doorway, her blonde hair twisted in a shining rope over one black silk-clad shoulder. She leaned against the doorframe, casually, but the tension that ran through her small, thin frame was apparent.

"I don't think you want to talk to me," she said, "because if we talk, we'll probably fight. And your precious little doctor lady might overhear. And I don't think we want her disturbed, do we?"

"Damn it, Elizabeth, sit down." Julian was in no mood to be toyed with.

She shrugged and moved gracefully to the matching chair next to his, sitting down and taking his cigarette from his hands in one smooth movement. She took a drag and handed it back.

"Back on the sticks again?" she said sweetly. "I guess your doctor friend is stressing you out already."

He sighed. "The only thing stressful to me right now is the idea that you were being careless last night. That you were spotted at a club where Valentin's family was. Why would you go there?"

She was too good to show her surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Jesus, Elizabeth, what the fuck?" That was Edward, the disbelief and anger etched plainly on his face.

"I don't answer to you, Edward," she snapped.

"But you do answer to me," Julian said. He hated, hated having to pull rank on Elizabeth, especially when he knew he was the reason she was doing these things. But he didn't have much choice. "And right now you will answer. Why did you disobey my direct orders and stay out all damn night? What were you doing?"

"What do you think?" she purred, leaning toward him.

He just stared at her, lifting the cigarette to his lips to inhale and letting the smoke drift lazily back out. He raised his eyebrows and waited.

"I was bored," she said finally. "I wanted to have some fun."

Julian fought to keep himself from yelling at her. It wouldn't do any good, would probably even make things worse. "And did you?"

She shrugged. "I guess so."

"I could find out if you're lying." He didn't mean if she was lying about having fun, and she knew it.

She smiled nastily. "But you won't, will you? Because you'd have to feed from me to find out. I've blocked you, and you can't read me unless you feed." She knelt on the tile floor in front of him and exposed her throat, pulling off her blouse. Her blue eyes caught his, held them. "I'll tell you what you want to know, Julian. Go ahead. Feed from me."

"Edward, get out." Julian's voice was hard, bitter. He didn't look up, but could hear Edward closing the door behind himself.

"You never did like an audience, did you, my love?" she asked, her red lips blossoming into a tiny smile.

Deliberately, he took another drag from his cigarette before stubbing it out. "Maybe you don't care if Edward sees you debase yourself, Elizabeth, but I do."

The smile twisted into a grimace. "You bastard. You don't give a shit about me."

"I do."

"You don't!" she yelled as she stood up. "If you did you wouldn't hurt me like this! You wouldn't have left me! You'd make love to me again, like you used to." Her arms reached for him, hands clutching the front of his shirt, forcing him to get up or let her tear the fabric. "Please," she said, her face only an inch from his. "At least kiss me, Julian. Tell me you still love me."

"I can't," he said, but she didn't seem to hear him. She closed the distance between their mouths and took his, hungrily, angrily, trying to hurt him. Trying to make him want her again.

For an instant he felt himself respond, and felt the triumph that flooded through her

body.

Then it was gone. He pushed her away, his hands bruising her arms. Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth where her fangs had sunk into him.

She slapped him, hard. "I can taste her in your mouth, you son of a bitch."

"Julian?"

Cecelia was standing in the other doorway. The one he hadn't closed.

Fuck.

It was obvious what she thought. Elizabeth, topless, kissing him, slapping him.

"Cecelia..."

She spun around and ran from the doorway.

Elizabeth turned to him, her eyes blazing with triumph. "Have fun explaining that," she said. "Have fun trying to convince her you don't love me."

"I will," he replied, already walking out the door. There he stopped and turned back to her. "You know, Elizabeth...if you weren't such an unbearable bitch..."

She smiled expectantly.

He looked her right in the eyes, wondering for a moment how this happened, how his charming, funny Elizabeth had become such an out-of-control shrew. His expression was so impersonal he might have been talking to a tree.

"Then you'd just be pitiful," he finished. "Don't make me regret keeping you under my protection. How long do you think you'd last, if I withdrew it?"

He closed the door on her stunned expression.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cecelia was waiting for the knock, but she still jumped when it came.

She tied the belt of her robe more tightly around her waist and walked across her living room to open her front door.

After seeing Julian with that blonde woman, she'd run. All the way home. Or if you wanted to get technical, she'd run all the way to the cab that drove her home.

Even as she did it, she'd known it was stupid, but by the time she'd pushed past whoever that friend of Julian's was who tried to stop her, and run down the street, she was too embarrassed to turn around and go back. So here she was, and here he was.

He was standing very still in the middle of her doorway. "Cecelia," he said. "Can I come in?"

She nodded and stepped back. The faint scent of his cologne caressed her as he walked past, and the now-familiar tightening of her stomach accompanied it. He just smelled...right, somehow.

She closed the door behind him and indicated the couch. He shook his head. "We don't have time," he said. "It's getting close to dark, and we have to get you back to my

place before the sun sets. They're probably already out, waiting for us."

"I'd rather have some answers first," she said. "Who was that woman?"

"Can't we do this back at my house?"

She crossed her arms over her chest. "We can," she said. "But I'd rather do it here."

"There isn't time."

She raised her eyebrows. "Then you better talk fast."

He glared at her. She glared right back. "I'm not leaving until I know who she is, Julian. I don't like being lied to."

"Lied to? What the hell are you talking about? I haven't lied to you about Elizabeth."

"Oh? So you lied to me about something else?"

He rubbed his forehead in that way he had, like he could rub whatever he was thinking right out of his skull. "No," he said distinctly. "I have not lied to you."

"But you would say that, wouldn't you? I mean, you're not likely to tell me you've been lying to me all along, are you?"

"Damn it," he said. "You really are the most infuriating woman, you know that? I'm telling you, we don't have time for this."

"You could have come here sooner." Cecelia wasn't really sure why she was picking a fight with him. Deep down, she was fairly certain the blonde woman—Elizabeth, apparently—wasn't Julian's girlfriend and had probably set up that little scene in the living room. If she'd really been Julian's girlfriend, Julian wouldn't have been sleeping alone.

Elizabeth was exceedingly beautiful. But even if Cecelia had those kinds of looks and the confidence that went with them, she doubted she would have let a man like Julian have too long a leash.

So no, Elizabeth was probably an ex. A woman who looked like her wouldn't be used to rejection and would probably handle it badly.

Cecelia knew all this. It didn't help her understand why she was so angry at Julian, why she was trying to provoke him.

But she was. Maybe she just wanted a glimpse behind that suave face he presented her with all the time. Maybe she wanted to see what his feelings were, if she meant more to him than some damsel in distress.

"I could have come here sooner?" He was losing his temper, she saw with satisfaction. "How about you could have stayed put? How about you not running off home without giving me a chance to explain?"

He was pacing up and down the floor of her living room. She could feel his anger like a dense fog around him, brushing against her skin. "You come back home, despite our agreement, and then it's my fault that if we don't get out of here right now we're going to be in big trouble? What the hell is the matter with you women today?"

That was it. Something small and dark in Cecelia was pleased he'd given her reason to be really angry. "Don't you dare lump me in with that crazy woman in your house earlier!"

"When you stop acting crazy, I'll stop 'lumping you in' with crazy people," he snapped. "All you had to do was wait. I would have explained everything to you. But no, you had to run out of my house and back here without saying anything. Do you know —"

"What was I supposed to say? It's none of my business what shirtless women you make out with," she said. "I just figured you wanted your house to yourself."

He stopped pacing. "Oh, that's what you figured," he said. His eyes blazed at her, the dark fire of his anger barely contained in their depths. "After all of the discussions we've had about this, where I stressed to you time and again how bloody fucking important it is that you stay with me, you decided that you know better and I wanted you to leave."

"Don't talk to me like I'm stupid."

"Then stop acting stupid. Do you think this is a fucking game, Cecelia?"

"I don't know what it is, but I don't like it. And I don't think I like you right now, and I want you to leave."

"I'll leave when you come with me."

"I'm not going with you. I've had it. You keep secrets from me, you treat me like a little girl who needs your protection instead of helping me protect myself. I'm not a little girl, and I'm not a sex toy, and I'm a woman, with feelings, and —"

He cut her off, his hand in the air. "Hush."

She'd been babbling, but now her indignation rose again. "Don't tell me to hush. This is my house, I'll —"

Without another word, he strode over to her and kissed her.

His hands on either side of her face held her still, lifted her to her tiptoes as his lips met hers. Thoroughly, almost angrily, he kissed her, taking her mouth like he was punishing her, and she returned both the anger and the heat, turning the kiss into a battle of wills that faded as the passion between them sparked into life.

He broke away before Cecelia was ready, leaving her dazed. His shirt front brushed against her robe, sliding the rough terrycloth fabric against her hardened nipples. A gasp escaped her lips and she reached for him again, wanting to kiss him, not wanting to waste this passion on more arguing. She wanted him, now, here, on the floor of her apartment. Wanted him to take her and dominate her, to prove to her that she was the one he wanted, not that slick blonde with the tiny waist and expensive bra.

Instead, he brushed his lips against her ear, sending a long shiver through her entire body so intense she didn't hear what he said.

"What?"

"Shh," he whispered. His breath was hot on her skin, making her squirm. "They're

outside."

Her half-closed eyes flew open and she jerked away. "Wh—what?"

He pulled her closer again. Her fear was sharp and bitter in the back of her throat. "They know we're in here," he said. "They can hear us."

Her eyes widened as he gripped her arms tighter. "How do we get out of here?"

She looked at the front door, and he shook his head. "They're waiting for us there. I can't fight them all. We need another way to get out."

"Why can't we just stay in here?" she whispered back. "They can't get in, right? Or is that one not true, either?"

"No, that one actually is true, but does your landlord live in the building?"

She nodded. He shook his head again.

"All they need is his permission, then, and I can assure you that will be easy for them to get."

Cecelia licked her lips. Her mind was racing. "The windows?"

"Is there a fire escape in the back?"

"No."

"Shit."

She would have smiled if she'd been able to move her face. "Exactly."

He took her hand and led her back into her bedroom. There were two windows here, one that faced the side of the building and one in the back. Julian nodded toward the latter.

"It's not good," he said, "but I guess it's our best option." He pulled her close again, his lips against her ear, his arms warm around her. She savored the momentary feeling of safety, knowing that in a minute she was going to have to climb out her window into what could be the waiting arms of a group of angry vampires.

"When we open the window, they'll hear it," he said, breaking the illusion of comfort. "So we'll need to move fast. Are you ready?"

No. But she nodded, and he smiled. "Good girl. Let's go."

He had just unlocked the catch on the window when they both heard the sound of a key scraping in the lock.

"Fuck, that's it," he said. He wasn't whispering now; there was no need. He threw the window open and picked Cecelia up, forcing her out into the night air.

She bit her lip to keep from yelping in fear as she got one long, dizzying glance of the drop below the window to the alley. Her arms flailed in the air. She was going to fall.

Then Julian's grip changed, and she found her upper body pressed against the wall. "Grab on!" Julian yelled. "They've opened the door."

Her hands scrambled for purchase on the lip of the roof. Julian was holding her legs now, lifting her up, and even as she found the edge with her fingers she wondered at

his strength.

He pushed upward. Her knees scraped the stucco as her robe flew open, but she barely felt it. The combination of his pushing and her pulling was enough to get her up over the edge, and she collapsed in a heap on the hot concrete of the roof.

She'd barely time to scramble back to her feet when Julian was beside her, grabbing her hand and pulling her along the roof toward the far end. She could hear the shouts coming from her open window and knew it would be only a matter of time before the vampires were on the roof with them.

And there would be nowhere to go.

"Julian," she gasped as they ran. "Where do we go?"

He stopped at the edge. Their hands were still clasped, giving her some sense of warmth and comfort. "I guess we go down, darling."

The noise drew both of their attention as the first vampire arrived on the roof. Cecelia didn't get a good look, but it seemed to her as if he flew onto it.

He was joined by three more. She recognized two of them as the ones who'd assaulted her outside her lab. Was that only two nights ago? It felt like weeks.

They moved toward her, smiling, menace inherent in every angle of their bodies.

"We just want the woman, Julian," one of them said. "Our master just wants to talk to her."

"Tell your master to burn in hell," Julian replied. He moved forward, subtly trying to push Cecelia behind him, but Cecelia wasn't having any of that. She stepped to the side. "If we're going down fighting," she said, "I'm not going to stand by and watch you go down first."

Julian shot her a quick smile before speaking to the vampire again. "If your master is so interested in a talk, tell him he can contact me. I'm happy to relay any messages."

The vampires were closer now. Once again Cecelia could see their teeth, long and pale, glistening with saliva.

"Just hand her over, Julian. We don't want to fight with you."

"Bloody well right you don't."

Cecelia had never seen a real fight before. This was odd. She'd always imagined lots of yelling and scrambling around. Instead, everyone was just watching each other warily.

Clearly, the vampires weren't lying. They really didn't want to fight Julian. She was impressed.

One of the vampires stepped forward, and the strange quiet was broken. Julian shoved Cecelia back, hard, causing her to stumble against the low wall of the roof. She heard yells and the sickening sound of skin hitting skin, and when she looked up, Julian was fighting.

All of the power and grace he possessed was in evidence. It was like watching a

dance, a deadly choreography of fists and elbows.

One vampire was already down. She watched as Julian's fist connected with another's mouth, snapping the head back. Julian's elbow smashed into the face of the vampire trying to come around behind him.

Cecelia looked around. There should be a flowerpot. There was always a vase or a flowerpot or something in the movies, something for the heroine to grab to help out the hero. But she saw nothing.

One of the vampires tried to make a wide arc around Julian, his eyes on Cecelia as she stood. Julian caught him around the neck and shoved, knocking him flat on his back on the concrete.

She was scared. Julian was doing well, amazingly well in fact, but there were four of them and one of him.

One of the vampires screamed, a terrifying shriek of pain and anger, as blood flew from his throat. She didn't see how it happened, or how it could have—Julian didn't have a weapon. But there was blood, and as she watched, horrified, she heard another scream and saw that he was not the only vampire bleeding.

She could barely see Julian now. The vampires surrounded him, piling onto him, frenzied with an anger she could feel in the air. She screamed at the sheer pressure of it as it flowed around her.

One of the vampires flew backward against the wall. She caught a glimpse of Julian's face and was horrified to see that he too was covered in blood.

She backed away, aware that soon enough one of them would break free from the fight while Julian was busy with the others, and her gaze fell on a piece of metal on the roof. It looked like a pipe, or part of an antenna, but she didn't bother trying to figure out which or what it had come from. She picked it up, swinging it like a bat, and headed into the fray, sparing only a momentary wish that she was wearing something besides her bathrobe. Shoes would have been nice too.

She swung her arms back and brought the pipe forward as hard as she could onto the head of the nearest vampire. It connected with a satisfyingly loud clank. Her bones vibrated with the impact. The vampire fell. She caught a glimpse of Julian and opened her mouth to scream, but another vampire came at her before she could make a sound.

This time she wasn't able to bring the pipe back around. She shifted it in her grip, hoping to use it to ward off the vampire, steadying it between her chest and the side of her arm.

The vampire lunged. She saw him in slow motion, coming toward her, arms reaching for her, trying to grab her. Saw the look of triumph on his face, felt his hands touch her hair like a vile-smelling breeze.

She tilted her head sideways, trying to elude him. Her movement brought the pole up. There was a jolt through her entire body, and the vampire's expression changed from triumph to terror as he impaled himself on the pole.



She fell backward, her hands instinctively gripping the pole, as if it could stop her fall. The vampire fell with her, landing on top of her. His breath was hot and heavy with a coppery scent she recognized as blood.

He was screaming. Blood poured from the wound, drenching her, falling on her. She screamed too, her throat going sore as she watched the vampire struggle to free himself.

There were more shouts in the background. She didn't recognize the voices, could barely hear anything over her own cries and the squealing of the vampire.

She flung herself to the side, wrenching her shoulders and pushing with her legs, forcing the vampire off her body. Her knuckles scraped the concrete as she pulled her hands off the pole, trying to get away, get away from the screaming thing that she had wounded.

Mindless of the pain, she scrambled backward against the low wall, backed into a corner. Her robe fell open, exposing her blood-spattered skin, but she didn't care. Her eyes were wide with horror and focused on the gruesome sight of the vampire trying to remove the pole.

Strong hands grasped her shoulders, a man she didn't know. His anxious expression and pleas to calm down told her he was one of the good guys, but the knowledge didn't seem able to connect. She screamed again and fought, trying with nails and teeth to free herself, to get up and run away, but there was nowhere to run. She tumbled over the wall, falling, her heart pounding, before being pulled back onto the roof.

There was more yelling. She struggled, fighting against the arms that held her, hearing men shouting and the ever-more feeble cries of the wounded vampire.

Then the strong, comforting presence of Julian washed over her like a warm breeze, and he was there in front of her. He was covered in blood and dirt, his white shirt filthy with it, but to Cecelia he looked better than anyone she'd ever seen. She fell into his arms, heedless of the mess, wanting only to press herself against his solid warmth.

"Shhh," he whispered into her hair. "It's over. It's over now."

She buried her face in his chest, holding his shirt in her fists. She was shaking now, shaking with the residual effects of adrenaline and violence. Shaking with the knowledge of what she had done to another living creature.

His arms were tight around her, his cheek resting against the top of her head as he crooned to her wordlessly, sounds of comfort that finally started to penetrate the confused fog of her brain. She pulled away slightly to look at him, and he smiled.

"If I'd known you were capable of this kind of violence," he said, "I would have been a lot more careful about letting you get mad at me."

## **Chapter Six**

The hot water stung. Cecelia hadn't realized she was so scraped up, but as she slid into the tub in Julian's cool gray bathroom, her entire body felt like one open, complaining wound. She hissed in pain.

Her head still swam with images from earlier. The attack, Julian covered in blood, the look on the vampire's face as she impaled him. She closed her eyes, trying to shut it out, but that only made the vision more clear.

She sobbed, one loud gulping cry, as she started to shake. The control she'd had since they left the roof evaporated, leaving her a trembling mass, cowering against the side of the enormous bathtub.

She didn't know how long she huddled there before she was disturbed by motion in the water.

Julian was in the tub with her, his dark eyes full of concern as he moved toward her.

She tried to pull back. She didn't want to be touched, didn't want to be comforted, but he wouldn't let her move away from him, even though the tub was big enough.

"Stop struggling," he murmured. "Come here."

She couldn't look at him. "I don't want to."

"Why not?"

She didn't think she would be able to say it, so she just shook her head.

"Cecelia. Why not?"

"I'm awful!" She was crying again. "You saw what I did. I stabbed a man with a pipe. I killed him. With pain. He screamed and cried and his blood flowed all over me, and I did that, and..." She took a deep breath, then blurted it out. "And I don't even care."

"Oh, Jesus." He pulled her into his lap. She huddled there, whimpering, feeling childish and silly, but also safe and better than she had. His chest was warm and hard against her cheek, his arms strong and sure.

He stroked her back. "Cecelia, I hate to tell you this, but you didn't kill anybody."

"What?" She pulled back so fast she almost slammed his chin with her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"Darling, he was a vampire. You didn't kill him. He's probably healed and back home by now."

"So I didn't even hurt him?"

He chuckled. "Oh, no. You hurt him badly. But you didn't kill him. We didn't talk

about that, did we? The stake through the heart? That one's true. So unless that was wood, he'll live. Although," he kissed her on the head, "it was a good try."

She thought about it for a minute. "I guess I'm glad. But it doesn't change the fact that I thought he was dead at my hand and I wasn't bothered by it."

He laughed again. "'Dead at my hand'? You sound like Lady Macbeth." When she didn't laugh, he pulled her back to him, cuddling her into his body. "He would have killed you if he'd had a chance, Cecelia. He wouldn't have felt guilty about it, either, or given you more than a passing thought as he was doing it. So you shouldn't feel bad about not feeling bad. It was you or him."

"Have you ever killed anyone?"

She'd meant it as a joke, but the sudden tension in his silence made her move away from him entirely to look him in the eyes. "When?"

He looked uncomfortable for the first time since she'd known him. "I don't really want to talk about it," he said.

"That's not fair. I talked about mine."

"You didn't really kill anyone."

"I thought I had. Same difference."

He sighed. "I was a soldier."

"Gulf War?"

Julian cringed inwardly. *No...Napoleonic, First and Second Afghan, Crimean...World War One.* He couldn't tell her that, so instead he just nodded, and at the same time pushed into her mind, easing her curiosity, making her want to change the subject.

He'd never felt guilty about this before. It simply hadn't bothered him to control things. He liked to be in control.

So why was he feeling like such a bastard?

She smiled at him. The sight of her face, the innocent happiness in those eyes, made him feel worse. "Thanks," she said. "I feel a lot better."

He swallowed the guilt and forced himself to smile back, a feat made even harder when she said, "So what about that woman? You never finished explaining."

This was just what he deserved. "Elizabeth. My ex."

Cecelia nodded.

He sighed. The temptation was there to lie, to smooth it over, to tell her some glib story and make her accept it. A month ago...hell, a week ago that's what he would have done. Cecelia deserved better, though.

*Or it's just that you're already telling her so many lies you figure the truth just once won't hurt.*

Now he wanted to tell himself to shut up. Instead he picked up the soap and started gently rubbing her back with it. "Things didn't end well," he said.

"That seems kind of like an understatement to me," she said.

"Well, yes. I guess it is. Things ended horrifically. I didn't want them to. It just happened."

"But what happened?"

"Do we need to talk about this?"

"No," she said, turning to look him in the eyes. "We don't have to. We can talk about what other room in your house you'll sleep in while I take your bed by myself tonight instead, if you prefer."

He tilted his head sideways. "Okay, then. She wanted a permanent commitment, and I wasn't ready to give that to her. She still has a hard time with it, and it's difficult for her to see me seeing another woman."

"Is that what we're doing? Are you seeing me? Are we seeing each other?"

"No, the sex is payment for me helping you. Jesus, Cecelia, what do you think of me?" *Bastard. What she thinks is that you're a liar and a sneak, and she's right. Now isn't the time to play the Hurt Feelings game.*

"I didn't mean to imply...I'm sorry," she said. "This is just all still a bit strange to me. Being here, I mean. You."

He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. You're right. I keep forgetting you're not...I mean, that you've been through so much."

He'd almost said he kept forgetting she wasn't a vampire. *Way to keep cool, there, Julian.*

"It's because I've handled everything so well," she said, smiling.

He raised an eyebrow and gave her a long up-and-down look. "You do handle things very well. That's why I like being with you."

She blushed. He loved that. She actually blushed. "No, seriously."

"Seriously." He sighed and rubbed his soapy hands along her arms, then looked her in the eyes. "Yes, Cecelia. This isn't high school. We can see people and admit we like them without giggling. Or being embarrassed."

"I'm not embarrassed," she said. "I just hate to cause trouble."

"Let me worry about that," he said. "Elizabeth is here because we're in a dangerous situation, and I'm reluctant to ask her to leave the house. She should stay away from you, though, and you should remember her problem isn't with you. It's with me. Just try not to let her bother you."

"Easier said than done."

"Yes, that's true," he replied. "But I have faith in you." He nibbled her shoulder gently. Beneath the faint soapy taste was the salty tang of her skin. "I think you can manage to come out ahead."

"I appreciate that. And I appreciate you explaining it to me."

"You deserved an explanation. I would have given you one before, if you hadn't stormed out of here like that."

"Sorry about that," she said. "Oh boy...you have no idea how sorry I am about that."

"I think I have some idea," he said. "Look, don't get upset again. We still have a lot to talk about. And Tristan and Edward both want to talk to you too. They were pretty impressed. Edward said he'd never had to fight so hard to hold on to a woman as he did on that roof."

"Who are Tristan and Edward, anyway? How many people live in this house?"

"Family. There's four of us."

"You don't look alike."

"Family just the same. Tristan and Edward were orphans. My mother took them in, and we grew up together. Elizabeth...she came later. She needed a place to live, and we let her move in."

"And they're all still here."

"They've given me their loyalty. I give mine back."

"How very Michael Corleone of you." She ran her hand across the surface of the water, smoothing it under her palms. "And you all work together? Killing vampires, or whatever?"

"Actually, I'm a business consultant. I help corporations run more efficiently and treat their employees better. Tristan and Edward do work with me, though, yes."

"Any openings? Looks like I might need a new line of work."

"I think what you do is a bit more important, don't you? You'll get back to it, as soon as we figure out what the problem is."

"Mmmm," she said, smiling as she leaned back against him. "I don't think I ever want to get out of this tub. Creating a vaccine that alters DNA back to its original form doesn't seem so important when I'm this comfortable."

He only wished that were true. Cecelia's vaccine to eliminate blood diseases was the whole problem. If he could get her to give it up just by putting her in the tub, he could solve all of his problems.

Almost all his problems, anyway.

He didn't say any of this, though. "Feeling better?"

"Much better. The water feels so good."

Julian couldn't help himself. He ran his hands over her shoulders and down across the slopes of her breasts, letting them fill his palms. Her nipples were hard. The sharp intake of her breath as he slid his hand across them made his heart leap.

She rolled her hips slightly, shifting position. The movement made the fullness of her cheeks press against his cock. He groaned. "That's not all that feels good," he murmured, letting his teeth scrape her earlobe gently as he spoke.

She tilted her head to the side, giving him better access to her neck. The scent of her blood filled his nostrils. It was intoxicating. He inhaled deeply, tasting the fragrance,

letting it overwhelm him.

He ran the tip of his tongue up the exposed side of her throat, and she sighed. Her skin was soft under his fingers as he cupped her breasts, lifting them in his palms, his thumbs teasing her erect nipples.

Her hips were rolling again under the water. Every movement made her ass brush against his cock, slow, fluid motions that set his pulse pounding. He was swollen with need and she teased him, pressing him between her round bottom and the muscles of his stomach. The water added a curious kind of suction to the movements, caressing him.

Her head fell back onto his shoulder. He could look down at her breasts, still lifted in his hands. The rosy color of their taut peaks stood out in sharp contrast to the paleness of her skin. Gently he pinched one between his fingers, and felt her body jerk against him as she gasped.

"Julian...oh God, Julian."

He didn't answer. He was too focused on her.

He used his legs to spread hers, keeping her thighs on top of his. She moaned again, a tiny sound in the back of her throat, as the water caressed her exposed pussy.

Her hands were up around his neck. He lifted his own to hold them, then slid them down her body, watching her hands cover her own breasts then move past them. Her eyes were closed as he guided her hands farther down, over the slightly rounded curve of her stomach.

She gasped as her fingers touched her own clit, then moaned in a different way when he continued to steer them along her body to her legs. He rested her palms on her inner thighs, and with gentle pressure forced her to spread her legs farther.

"It feels good to touch you," he whispered into her ear. "It feels so good to have my hands on your body, to watch you as I touch you."

Her back arched as he touched her clit, letting the water do most of the work. Her tiny movements increased, rubbing her ass against his cock, bringing an involuntary gasp from his own throat.

"Does it feel good to you? Do you want me to touch you more, Cecelia?"

"Oh God," she said, her voice ragged with need.

"Can I make you come, Cecelia?"

"Oh, yes," she whimpered. "Please, Julian...please don't stop touching me."

Her breasts mesmerized him, as did the pale skin of her throat. Her pulse beat just below the surface, the blood pounding through her body, making her skin flush.

He slipped into her mind, sharing her pleasure, feeling her desperation, her need to forget everything that happened earlier. The need to erase it, to move on, to affirm the life that flowed through her body. It was a feeling he knew well, one that he shared, and the knowledge of how desperately she needed to feel him inside her was intoxicating.

Her body shuddered on his lap, her thigh muscles trembling as his fingers worked

at her clit, sliding in and out of her cunt. He cupped her entire pussy in his palm and clapped his hand gently against her skin, pulsing the water against her. She moaned softly and arched further, the cheeks of her ass cradling his cock between them.

He grasped her throat with his hand, pulling her head back, exposing her to him more, and she screamed his name as her orgasm ripped through her body.

He expected her to pull away, to rest, but she didn't. Before she had even finished shaking she lifted her ass, reaching down to grab his engorged cock and guide it into her. The feeling of her cheeks sliding down his stomach as her pussy engulfed him in her burning wetness made him shake.

She cried out as she impaled herself upon him. Julian's entire body clenched. Just that one thrust took him to the edge. He had to fight to regain control over himself as he watched the muscles of her back work under her smooth white skin, as she pumped her hips upward, fucking him.

She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes opaque and hooded with pleasure. Julian tried to look away, but couldn't. He couldn't stop staring into her eyes, falling into them, as she caressed him deep inside her body.

His mouth was dry. It seemed like forever that they looked at each other, looked into each other, until finally he slipped his hands under her ass and lifted her, rising with her, leaning her forward over the other side of the tub, her hips out of the water.

His wet fingers gripped them tightly. He looked down and saw the sweet curve of her behind, watched his cock disappear into her heat and reappear coated with her juices. It was bewitching.

He increased his pace, egged on by her cries. She matched his new rhythm, pushing back against him as he thrust forward, a frenzied ritual of lust.

"Oh God, Cecelia," he gasped, breathless. "Oh God, baby."

"Julian!" Her voice was muffled and as spent as his own. Her pussy clenched around him, squeezing him.

He pulled her upright, bringing one hand around to keep her pelvis steady, still thrusting into her as she shattered apart around him. His fingers wound through her thick hair as he exposed her throat and pierced it with his fangs, sucking, swallowing the hot rush of her sweet blood as his body spasmed with the force of his orgasm. He bent farther forward, clutching her to his chest like the precious thing she was, removing the knowledge from her mind and sharing her pleasure.

He closed the wounds quickly as she leaned away to look at him. He tried to look her in the eyes, but couldn't.

Why was he feeling so guilty? It's not like he could tell her what he was doing. She'd run away. She wouldn't be safe if she ran away. He had to keep this a secret. He wasn't being a jerk, he wasn't taking advantage of her, he was doing what had to be done.

Yeah, right. Maybe if he kept telling himself that, he'd start to really believe it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The insistent ringing of her cell phone woke Cecelia from her doze. Drowsily, she reached for the phone, only to jerk upright when she saw who was calling.

"Shit, Doug, I'm sorry," she said as she hit the green button.

"At least you're alive to be sorry," her lab assistant said.

His words shocked her, made her feel short of breath. "What?"

"When you didn't come in today, or call, I thought something had happened to you," he said. She could hear the anger in his voice. "What the hell is going on?"

"Oh, Jeez, where do I begin," she said. Julian told her not to tell anyone where she was, not even Doug. Quickly she tried to come up with a good story. "I had to go out of town," she said. "A family emergency."

His voice changed, a little. She pictured his brown eyes softening with concern. "I hope everything's okay."

"It is, but I could be here a little longer."

"Are you at your mom's?"

Doug had the phone number for Cecelia's mother. "No, no. I'm...uh..." If she told him she was at a hotel, he'd want to know why she wasn't at home. Damn! What had Julian said to tell him?

That she was staying with a friend. Shit. Julian was a much better liar than she was, why hadn't she thought this out before? He could have helped her.

Because she was too busy freaking out about stabbing a vampire with a metal pipe, probably. Excuses, excuses. She couldn't help but smile even as she tried desperately to think where to say she might be.

"What?" Too late, she realized Doug was speaking.

"I said, where are you then? Is there anything I can do to help?"

She sighed. Better a story mostly true than a complete lie. "Look, Doug, I didn't have a family emergency. I met a guy."

He was silent for so long she was afraid he'd hung up on her. "You met a guy. And that's reason enough to skip out on work and scare me half to death?"

"You've done it," she said defensively.

"I'm not the boss. You are. I'm also not a girl. You know I worry about you."

"Yes, I do know, and it never fails to irritate me."

"Sorry for caring," he snapped. There was a pause, then he spoke again. "Okay, I'm sorry. I don't mean to imply that you can't take care of yourself. But come on, wouldn't you worry if I didn't show up for work, and you hadn't heard from me in three days?"

"I guess so."

"Plus your car is still out front."

Fuck. She'd forgotten the car. Was there anything she *had* done right?



Yes, there was. She blushed.

"I, uh, I had Janet pick me up after work on Friday," she lied. "We went out for a drink."

"And that's where you met this guy?"

"Yes."

"And so I assume you're at his house."

She nodded. No harm in admitting that. "Yes."

"Where does he live?"

*Don't tell him where you are.* The memory of Julian's voice was in her mind like a command.

"By the beach," she said. Vague enough. Most of South Florida was by the beach.

"Where? I'll come get you."

Now she was growing alarmed. "Thanks, Doug, but there's really no need. I'm fine."

"Cecelia." The exasperation in his voice made a flush or irritation rise in her chest. He had no right to get mad at her for this. "You're not fine. You're at some strange guy's house without a car. Do you even know this man, at all? Other than fucking him, I mean."

"Fuck you, Doug. I'm not the one who jumps into bed with every man I meet."

He paused again. She could almost feel him weighing responses in his mind. Finally he said, "I'm sorry. That wasn't very nice of me. And you're right, I do jump into bed with almost every guy I meet—or at least, I did, until I met Robert."

"Yes, how is Robert? Still avoiding any discussions about your relationship, or meeting your friends, or anything serious to do with anything?"

"Ouch."

"Yeah, well, don't get so snotty with me next time."

"I didn't mean to get snotty. I'd just feel a lot better if I knew where you were."

"Well, I don't want to tell you," she said. "I'm having fun and I'm perfectly fine, okay? It's just—" The need to keep quiet about Julian warred with the need to discuss him with her friend. And Doug was her friend, her closest friend, despite what a jerk he was being. "It's just this guy, he's really kind of swept me off my feet," she said, lowering her voice. Julian wasn't in the room, but she didn't know where he'd gone or when he would be back. "It just feels really, I don't know, right."

There. She'd admitted it. Trusting Julian with her body was no longer the issue.

Trusting him with her heart was.

"Uh-oh," Doug said. "Are we about to experience another famous Cecelia man crash?"

"Why are you being such a dick?"

"Because somebody has to be," he said. "If this guy is so great, why is he making you skip work? Why can't you tell me where you are? Won't he go to your house?"

No, *he won't* was on the tip of her tongue, but she caught herself in time. "He isn't making me do anything," she snapped. "And we're not at my house because his is bigger."

"Oh, a rich guy," Doug said. "So that makes it all right that he's taking complete charge of your life and not letting you go to work?"

"He's not 'not letting me go to work'," Cecelia said, aware that Julian was in fact doing just that. "I'm choosing to miss one day, one fucking day of work, to spend time with him, Okay? So what?"

"So you'll be in tomorrow," Doug said, sounding relieved.

Shit again. "No, actually, I won't."

"Cecelia, tell me where you are right now. I'm coming to get you."

"You know what, Doug? It's none of your business. I'm hanging up now."

"Wait, Cecelia, don't—"

"Goodbye, Doug."

She sat there for a minute with the phone in her hand, staring at it like she'd never seen it before. Was that really Doug? Her always cheerful and supportive assistant? The man who'd always encouraged her to be crazier, take more risks? What the hell was his problem?

Tears sprang to her eyes and she wiped them away with quick, harsh movements. Fuck Doug. He wasn't her boyfriend, he wasn't her boss, and he sure as hell wasn't her father.

These thoughts didn't help, though. She still felt miserable and alone. Her best friend had just treated her like a child, a stupid child who didn't know anything.

Her finger hovered over the numbers on the dial pad. She could call him back, apologize, explain the situation to him.

If he would believe she'd been attacked by vampires outside the lab, and she was staying with Julian not just because he was the best sex she'd ever had in her life, but because that life was in imminent danger of ending if she went home.

Sure. Who wouldn't believe a story like that?

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth pulled herself away from the closed door to Julian's bedroom with a tiny frown. So the good doctor planned to stay, did she?

Julian's plan, she guessed. The bastard seemed totally smitten with the woman, although Elizabeth couldn't see why. Sex alone wasn't enough to keep Julian around forever. His breaking up with her was enough to prove that. Sometimes she still woke up in the middle of the night, her body throbbing with unfulfilled need, dreaming of

Julian's hands...his mouth...his perfect cock rammed deep, deep inside her.

She, Elizabeth, had been the perfect playmate—open for anything, willing to try anything. She and Julian had spent entire weekends just exploring each other's bodies, touching, teasing, tasting.

It made sense, after all. They were both vampires. They had the same urges, the same feelings.

Elizabeth was strong enough to take whatever Julian dished out. If he wanted to be rough, she could be rougher than any human. If he wanted to be gentle, she could be gentler than any human.

They were perfect for each other. Why couldn't he see that?

Because the doctor bitch was in the way, that was why.

Well, she could do something about that.

Sweeping her blonde hair behind her shoulders, she knocked on the door, and composed her face into an innocent smile as Cecelia opened it.

"Hi, Dr. Barnes," she said. Wouldn't do to appear too familiar with the woman. "I'm Elizabeth."

Cecelia stared at her for a beat. Elizabeth's smile never wavered. "May I come chat with you?"

Cecelia nodded. Elizabeth thought the other woman looked like a cow, with those big brown eyes. She widened her own smile at the thought. "Thanks," she said, sweeping past Cecelia into the room. Her nostrils flared; Cecelia's scent was all over everything in here.

She walked to one of the chairs by the closed curtains and sat down, indicating the other. Cecelia sat too, still not speaking.

In fact, Cecelia had no idea what to say. Why on earth this woman would want to come and talk to her she didn't know, and why on earth she'd let Elizabeth in was another matter entirely.

She was curious. She could admit that frankly to herself. She wondered what Elizabeth might say about Julian, now that she knew Julian's side of the story.

And she was a little bored, and wanted to take her mind off Doug. Elizabeth was a distraction, albeit one with what Cecelia was certain would be a sharp sting. She prepared herself for battle.

"It's nice to properly meet you at last," Elizabeth said. "I've been awfully curious about you."

"Have you?" Cecelia kept her eyes on the other woman, her voice indifferent. "Why?"

Elizabeth smiled. It looked to Cecelia like the expression hurt. "Whenever one of my friends finds a new woman, I always want to make her acquaintance."

"What an odd habit," Cecelia said. "Don't you trust them to make up their own

minds who to date?"

She had to hand it to Elizabeth. Her face didn't change a bit. "Of course I do. I just like making new friends."

*I'll just bet you do*, Cecelia thought, but what she said was, "And I hope you and I can become friends, of course."

"Do you?"

"Sure," Cecelia said, and was surprised to realize it was only half a lie. Part of her would like to know this woman. She had to have some redeeming qualities for Julian to have been involved with her.

Elizabeth didn't seem to know how to respond to that. Finally she said, "I heard you had some excitement last night."

"Good news travels fast."

"Oh." Elizabeth gave a tiny laugh. "It does in this house. You know Julian. He's never been any good at keeping secrets. At least, not from me."

Cecelia smiled inwardly. Elizabeth was going to have to do better than that. Cecelia wasn't one of those women who would hear a nasty rumor about a man and instantly believe it. If Elizabeth wanted to play the "it's me he really loves" game, she was welcome to play it by herself.

"It's nice to be confided in," she replied. "Julian's told me quite a bit about you too."

This time there was a tiny muscle twitch in Elizabeth's cheek. Cecelia felt stupidly proud of herself.

"Oh, you mustn't believe a word Julian tells you," Elizabeth said. "He's a dear, isn't he, but the truth just isn't in him. He tells people what they want to hear, I think. Don't let that strong-man act fool you. Deep down, Julian's as weak as a woman."

"Funny, how we say 'as weak as a woman'," Cecelia mused. "I don't think I've ever met a woman who didn't have the heart of a duelist, have you?"

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "Now that you mention it, I don't believe I have," she said.

"The weaker sex," Cecelia snorted, and was surprised when Elizabeth burst into laughter that seemed genuine.

"The weaker sex, indeed," she agreed. "If men only knew the kinds of things women think about in private, they'd never dream to call us weak."

Cecelia smiled too, although she wasn't fool enough to think that this one moment of begrudging conviviality meant anything. It did show her a glimpse of the Elizabeth that Julian must have known before, though, and she felt a sharp sense of regret that she likely never would have a friendship of any real kind with her.

"Like you, for example," Elizabeth said. "I heard you impaled a vampire on a pike."

"It wasn't exactly a pike," Cecelia said, blushing. "It was just a regular piece of

metal. And it was really an accident."

"Accident or not, I'm impressed. Weren't you scared?"

Cecelia tried to think of a way the other woman could zing her with the question, but couldn't. So she nodded. "I was terrified. But I didn't really think I had a choice."

"You probably didn't," Elizabeth said. "It's a good thing they didn't have a chance to use mind tricks on you."

"Mind tricks?"

Elizabeth's china blue eyes widened. "Julian didn't warn you?"

"No."

"Oh, dear. Well, someone had better do it, right away. You need to start learning how to sense them in your mind, so they can't trick you."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Vampires can enter your mind," Elizabeth explained, with the slightly impatient air of someone trying to teach a two-year-old how to tie their shoes. "They can compel you to do things."

"Jesus, does everyone but me know everything about vampires? Was this a subject I missed at school or something?"

Elizabeth laughed again, the genuine laugh. "No. It's just that, well, we've all had dealings with them before."

"That's what Julian said."

Now Elizabeth's smile widened. It was not the nice expression she'd just worn. "I guess people start to talk and think alike, after being very close for a long time."

*Walked right into that one.* "Just like they say people start to look like their dogs, you mean?"

Elizabeth ignored the comment, but Cecelia smiled to herself anyway. "My point is, Julian knows a lot about vampires, but I guess he just didn't think to tell you about the mind tricks. You have to be watching for them."

"How do I know if someone's entering my mind, though?"

"You feel it. It's like riding a bicycle—you practice and practice, and then one day it just clicks. You should practice."

"But I don't know what I'm practicing for."

"Just focus on being aware of your mind. It's like meditation. Relax and try to feel all the corners of your mind. It will take a while, but eventually one day you'll feel it—and then you'll know if someone else is in there who shouldn't be."

"It sounds weird."

"It is, actually. But if you plan to be with Julian, you'll have to know how to do it, so you can help him."

Cecelia was noncommittal. "Maybe I'll try it."

"Oh, you should. It's really important to defend yourself."

"I've always done my best."

"I'm sure you have," Elizabeth said. Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "I'm sure you have."

## Chapter Seven

"What are you doing?"

Cecelia nearly fell off the bed. She hadn't heard Julian come in.

"Nothing," she said, blushing. She'd been practicing feeling her mind, the way Elizabeth recommended. She wasn't feeling much, though, so she was forced to admit that she didn't think it was going to work.

Julian stood by the bed. "I wanted to talk to you."

She sat up. "So talk."

"I want to bring your research — all of your work — here. I want to look at it."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, okay. It makes sense, since you might have some idea what it is the vampires want." She smiled at him. "You were expecting an argument?"

"Frankly, yes."

Her eyebrows lifted. "And why on earth would you have expected that?"

"Maybe because you argue with me constantly?"

"No, you argue with me. I'm always wonderfully giving."

He reached for her, his hands caressing her upper arms as he pulled her close. "I know something you can give me," he murmured.

The knock at the door made them both groan.

"This better be good," Julian said, giving Cecelia a quick kiss on the lips before getting up.

"You locked the door?"

He raised one eyebrow at her and smirked as he opened the door.

Cecelia recognized the man who walked in as Edward, one of the men who'd come to rescue her.

"Hi, Edward," she said.

"Hi, Dr. Barnes," he replied. His cheeks were faintly pink, and Cecelia knew he was remembering her state of undress on the roof. Had his hands touched any part of her aside from her arms? Probably. Oh well. Preventing her from tumbling to her death the way he had probably entitled him to a little feel.

"You've seen me practically naked, Edward. I think it's safe to say we're on a first name basis."

"Cecelia, then," he said, nodding at her, before turning back to Julian.

"Julian, I need to talk to you."

Julian turned to Cecelia, but she was already getting up. "I'll go down into the kitchen, I'm kind of hungry anyway."

The men watched her go.

"She's really something, Julian," Edward said.

Julian nodded. "I know."

"How are you going to tell her?" Edward sat down in one of the chairs while Julian poured them both drinks.

"That I don't know."

"Maybe she won't be too mad."

"Are we talking about the same woman here?"

Edward shrugged. "I don't know, I just thought maybe... I mean, she really seems to like you."

Julian sat down and sipped his drink, his eyes hooded. "She won't, when she finds out what I am. What I've been doing."

"What do you mean, what you've been doing?"

"Edward, I've been lying to the woman. I've been controlling her mind."

"You're still doing that? Why? Once you made the connection that first night, you knew everything you needed."

Julian glowered at his friend. "I know that," he said nastily. "But there have been a few times...she's asked questions."

"So you tricked her."

"I steered her away from that line of inquiry."

"No, you tricked her. You played mind games with her. You messed with her free will, Julian."

"And what would she have done if I hadn't? She would have left, Edward, and Valentin's men would have gotten her, and she'd be dead now."

"So she should be grateful, then." Edward's face had the careful, blank look of a man who doesn't want to push too far.

"Yes!" Julian sighed. "Fuck, Edward, I don't know. I don't know anything anymore. I don't know what's happening with Elizabeth. I don't know what to do about Cecelia. I don't know how to stop—I don't know how to fix this."

Edward watched his friend shrewdly. "Don't know how to stop what?"

Julian shook his head.

"Why don't you just tell her? Just see what happens."

"I can't."

"Because you're afraid she would leave, and you're falling in love with her."

Julian blinked. "No. I don't want her to leave, because she'll be killed."



"Uh-huh. And that's why you're feeling so guilty about the lying. Julian, I've seen you with countless women. You've never felt guilty about lying to them before. You've never thought slipping into their minds was such a bad thing to do. So what's changing it now?"

When Julian was silent, Edward continued. "It's that you love this woman, and you know she's going to hate you when you tell her what you've done. So you're lying to her to protect yourself. That's pretty shitty, Julian."

"Don't tell me what's shitty. What's shitty is that all of this is happening to begin with. What's shitty is that Valentin can't just let her go, and let me deal with it."

"You're not his master."

"Maybe I should be."

They sat there for a minute, staring at each other. Finally, Edward spoke. "You really want to take on Valentin over this? Over a woman?"

"No!" Julian downed the rest of his drink and poured another. He really could have used a cigarette right about then, but Cecelia didn't like the smell of them. The fact that he was refraining because she didn't like it made him angrier, and he got up and fished the battered cigarette case out of his desk.

He sat back down and lit it. That was better. "Look, Edward," he said. "This is going to war with Valentin anyway. We all know it. It's only a matter of time before he comes for her, or for us, anyway. So why not go to him? A little preemptive action? And then." He took another drag and blew it out slowly. "Then, we integrate anyone in his family who wants to come. And it's over."

"And the ones who don't?"

Julian didn't reply. Edward finished his own drink and started turning his glass in his hands.

"Well, Julian," he said. "I guess it's not a bad idea. I just wish I knew why you're doing it."

"I told you. I'm tired of dealing with all of this. I'm tired of worrying about him all the damn time."

"Yes, but you're not usually so bloodthirsty."

"People change."

"Sure they do."

Julian glared at him. "I'm sick of this uneasy truce, Edward. They do something sneaky to us, we do something sneaky to them—"

"Yeah, it's fun."

"It's not fun, Edward. It's enough. I'm tired of looking over my shoulder, wondering when Valentin is going to strike for keeps. I want this done with."

"And he's threatening the life of the woman you love."

"Yes, damn it!" Julian stood up. "No. I mean, no. I just don't want him threatening

the lives of any more innocent people.”

“Bullshit, Julian. Why are you trying so hard to keep from admitting it?”

Julian sat back down and looked into the swirling contents of his glass like the answers to life were hidden in it. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I just don’t want this to go bad.”

“Like with Elizabeth.”

“Yes, like with Elizabeth. And she didn’t have half as many reasons to hate me as Cecelia does.”

“You’re going to have to tell her,” Edward said. “If she loves you, she’ll forgive you.”

He stood up and left the room, patting Julian on the shoulder as he passed.

Julian didn’t move. “If only I could figure out how to forgive myself.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Elizabeth rolled over in bed. It was almost dark, time to get up and go on the prowl.

Quickly she showered and changed. Best to be out of the house before Julian could appear and start bugging her about not staying out too late.

The ringing of her cell phone interrupted her eye shadow application, and she picked it up impatiently.

“Yes?”

“Elizabeth?”

It was Daemon.

“How did you get this number?” she demanded, as she crossed the room to the bed. The red silk duvet was tangled and twisted, and she shoved it out of the way before sitting down.

“I have my ways.”

“Well, you need to have ways of leaving me alone,” she said. “I’m not letting you into my house, and I’m not really interested in talking to you.”

“I’m interested in talking to you. Why don’t you meet me?”

“I’m not meeting you,” she replied, before she realized that she actually wanted to.

“Why not?”

“Because you’ll try to set me up again. I’ll end up back at your junior-grade den of sin while you fawn over me and try to convince me you’re interesting.”

“Nonsense. I’m only interested in your mind.”

She could hear his smile through the phone, and was surprised to be smiling too.

“Come on, Elizabeth,” he said. “Why don’t you meet me? It could be fun.” When she was silent, he wheedled, “Just one drink...”

She laughed in spite of herself. “Okay, one drink. But that’s all. And no funny

stuff.”

“Oh believe me, Elizabeth,” he said, his voice suddenly sending chills through her entire body, “there’s nothing funny about my stuff.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Told you,” Elizabeth said. “I knew this was just an excuse to get me here. Just an excuse to get into my pants.”

She’d had several drinks with Daemon, followed by a snack—a young couple making out in a lifeguard tower, who would wake up in the morning with nasty hangovers—followed by more drinks. Now they were back at his place, and Elizabeth was happier than she’d been in a long time.

Daemon was so fun. So willing to be reckless, so willing to take advantage of his superior strength and speed to really get things done.

Not like Julian, who’d always insisted on doing things the human way. Oh, sure, his looks and money gave him most of the advantages anyway, but still.

Daemon was willing to play. And if there was one thing Elizabeth liked to do, it was play.

“I don’t need an excuse.” There was laughter in Daemon’s rich voice.

“I think I do,” she said.

He leaned closer to her, ostensibly to open the front door, but managing to brush his chest against hers as he did so. “What will it take to get you into my bed, Elizabeth,” he said. “What excuse can I give you that will make it easier for you to spend the night with me?”

She laughed. “I can’t spend the night here. You’re the enemy. You want to kill my family.”

They were inside now, and he motioned her onto the dark suede couch as he poured fresh drinks for them both. Handing her one, he said, “I don’t want to kill anyone, Elizabeth.”

“Why do you always say my name like that? It’s kind of weird.”

“I like the way it feels on my tongue,” he said, kneeling at her feet. He put one hand on her knee. “I like the way a lot of things feel on my tongue.”

She stared at him. “Where do you come up with these crap lines? ‘I like the way things feel on my tongue’? Is that really the best you can do?”

“You’re always picking on me. So it’s not a great line. So what? It’s true.”

“So just say what’s true, then,” she said. “Stop trying to be Casanova and just be Daemon.”

“You’d like that?”

“Not really. I don’t particularly like Daemon either. But anything is better than the feeling I’m in some cheesy porn movie.”

He shook his head. "You're a mean woman, Elizabeth."

"I wouldn't be here if I was a nice girl, would I?"

He grinned. "No." The moment was over. He sank himself onto the couch next to her. "But you're not as bad as you think, either."

"Oh, no. Don't start pretending you know me so much better than I know myself. I hate that."

"So do I," he said. "What I meant was, you're not as bad as some of my family. You wouldn't sell yours out the way mine would."

"Loyalty doesn't make me such a good person."

"No, but it does redeem some of your less stellar qualities."

She bristled. "Like what?"

He took a drink. "You're basically a bitch. You're selfish and rude. You only care about yourself. You have an ego that's really something to behold, especially since you're not quite as beautiful as you like to think you are. And you know the worst part?"

She was tempted to throw her drink in his face, but something about the way he said that last line stopped her. She contented herself with scowling at him. "What?"

His hand was scorching hot on her thigh, even through the fabric of her pants, and when he leaned in closer to her the scent of his skin made her eyelids grow heavy.

"The worst part," he said huskily, "is that I don't care. I'm crazy about you, Elizabeth, and I want to make love to you so badly I can hardly think about anything else."

"I'm not one of your chippies." She wanted to sound confident and haughty, but her voice came out as a breathy squeak.

She cleared her throat. "You're my enemy. I can't have sex with you. You can be as smooth and seductive as you want, it's not going to change anything. I don't want you."

He was silent for a long moment. "I understand." He stood up and held out his hand. "I'll take you back to your car now, if you want."

Disappointment flooded through her. He wasn't even going to argue? He claimed to want her so badly, but he wasn't going to fight to have her?

She shrugged. As she suspected, he was just feeding her a line, probably still trying to get her to reveal her family's home. If he really wanted her he wouldn't have given up so easily.

She placed her hand in his and let him pull her to a stand. "That's fine," she said. "I'm sure my family will be—"

Her words were stopped by the warm pressure of his lips on hers.

There was nothing tentative about Daemon or his kiss. He obviously took for granted that she wanted this, despite what she'd said, and she realized he was right as

she found herself returning the kiss with equal passion.

Her lips parted and his tongue found hers, teasing her with light strokes, diving in and out of her mouth. She followed it back into the warmth of his mouth, and gasped when he caught it with his teeth, biting just hard enough to send a shiver through her.

He freed her hair from the clasp that contained it at the back of her neck, running his fingers through it, tugging gently. The sensation made shivers down her spine.

She leaned into him, pressing herself against him. Her breasts crushed against his chest, her nipples so hard and tight she was certain he could feel them through the layers of clothing that separated their skin.

As if confirming this, he removed one hand from her hair and brought it down to cup her breast through her shirt, the thick pad of his thumb rubbing across the peak. She gasped against his mouth and shifted position a little to give him better access.

In response he pulled away completely. She started to protest, to reach for him, when he let go of her. His eyes gleamed.

"Tell me again," he said, his normally cool tones rough with need. "Tell me how you don't want me."

Fury rose in her breast and mingled with the frustrated desire that still made her body tingle. "This was some kind of game?"

"This is no game," he said. He gripped her hips, bringing her body against his again.

She tried to suppress her gasp, but she couldn't. In this position, the hardness of his cock pressed against her belly like hot iron, burning into her, sending tendrils of delicious smoke throughout her body. "The only games I want to play with you are ones we both enjoy," he said, staring into her eyes. "Ones we both want. Tell me again you don't want that and I'll leave you be."

She tried, but could not find words. Instead she just stared helplessly at him, not understanding how this had happened. How had Daemon so easily conquered her?

"I...I don't know what I want," she whispered.

Disappointment was plain on his face. It caught at her heart in a way she would never have expected it to. "Then I'll take you back to your car," he said. He turned away from her, picking up his jacket.

"Daemon...I'm sorry."

He glanced at her, a smile on his face that didn't reach his eyes. "You have nothing to apologize for, Elizabeth. I hoped for a different answer from you, but you've done nothing wrong. It is I who should say I'm sorry. I think you need a friend, and I haven't acted as a friend should."

Now she felt terrible. She did want him, probably just as badly as he wanted her. The throbbing deep in her body, the wetness between her legs, confirmed that she wanted him desperately.

So why had she said no? Why had she allowed him to pull away from her, when his

touch made her sing in a way she thought she never would again?

*Julian.*

She knew that was the answer. She just didn't know how she felt about it any longer.

He was watching her carefully. "You don't need to explain," he said.

Tears sprang to her eyes. "You're being so nice to me."

He smiled, a hint of the old Daemon in it. "Don't tell anyone," he said. "I have a reputation to uphold."

She reached out and took his hand. "Um...if I change my mind...I mean, I don't want to sound like...I mean..." She shook her head. This was coming out all wrong.

He gave her hand a quick squeeze and dropped it. "Let me know," he said, putting on his jacket. "When you decide."

\* \* \* \* \*

Constantina was dark, dark of hair and eyes, and when she rolled onto her back her nipples were coffee-colored.

Valentin shifted in his chair, his beady eyes eagerly watching as Deleria advanced on her lover, licking her lips.

"I expect a better show this time," he said. "Last time was too quick." His voice had the curdling tone of someone speaking through too much saliva.

Deleria nodded obediently and pulled a small plastic vibrator out of her bra. Constantina moaned at the sight of it.

Valentin watched as Deleria knelt between her lover's open legs. Daemon shifted impatiently. This looked like it was going to be a long night, and he was not interested in the show. Valentin had summoned him just after Elizabeth left, and Daemon fought his growing irritation that whatever his master needed to discuss had to wait until after this miserable little display.

Deleria pressed the small buzzing vibrator against Constantina's exposed pussy. Constantina bucked her hips upward, her head thrown back. She used her hands to pull and twist her own nipples, her fingernails scratching at the delicate skin. Blood seeped into the wounds and started running down her breasts and dripping onto the floor. The smell of it filled Daemon's nostrils and made his stomach twist. Once he would have found this arousing. Now he was just bored.

Deleria smiled, showing plenty of fang, and leaned forward. With one hand she worked the vibrator, stroking it back and forth over her lover's shaved pussy. With the other she supported herself while she licked the blood from Constantina's nipples.

Valentin sighed and leaned back in his chair as the two women writhed naked on the floor in front of him. "Why do we not have the doctor yet?"

"I'm sorry, Master," Daemon said. "We're all working on it."

"Any luck with Julian's woman?"

"She's not exactly Julian's woman anymore." He tried to keep the edge from his voice.

"No, I guess she isn't. If she was, we wouldn't have a chance with her, would we?"

"I'm not sure we do, anyway."

Valentin's attention was drawn once again to the two women. Deleria had inserted the vibrator now, and Constantina was making tiny noises in the back of her throat as she pumped her hips forward, fucking the vibrator. Her hands groped for Deleria, pulling her on top of her, turning her so Deleria could work the vibrator while Constantina started licking her pussy.

"What do you mean? I sent you in there to convince her. Can't you even do that? You've seen her twice now. Where are my results?"

"It's not that easy," Daemon said, trying to keep hold of his temper. "She's very loyal."

"Loyal, my ass," Valentin said. "You're slipping, Daemon. Once upon a time, you'd have had her in bed already, begging to do whatever you said. I almost suspect that you don't care if we get the doctor or not."

Constantina was moaning loudly now, her hips working, driving the vibrator deeper into her body. Deleria braced herself with one hand on the floor, her thigh muscles taut and trembling. Her own moans grew louder, harmonizing, as Constantina's tongue brought her closer to orgasm.

"It's not that I don't care," Daemon said, raising his voice to be heard over the women. "It's that I don't understand why we have to kill her."

"Because I want her killed, that's why," Valentin said. His eyes were fixed on Constantina, on the vibrator still moving in and out of her cunt. "Because I want to send a message, and more importantly, because I want to get my hands on her research so I can alter her results."

"You can do that without killing her."

"That wouldn't be any fun at all."

"But it wouldn't start a war with Julian, either."

Valentin smiled as Constantina gave an ear-piercing shriek. Deleria joined her, arching back, her fingers tearing at her skin. Blood ran down her chest and stomach into Constantina's mouth.

Valentin leaned back in his chair with a grin of satisfaction that made Daemon ill and waved for the women to leave. He turned back to Daemon. "Why don't you want war?"

Daemon looked at him incredulously. "You do?"

"Of course I do. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't." He smiled at Daemon's shocked expression. "Oh, sure, I want the doctor dead. I like to kill people. Especially beautiful women. I could have some fun with her before she dies. But war with

Julian...I could have his family – my family – back. I could have his power.”

“You have to beat him first.”

“You don’t think I can?”

Daemon took a step backward, aware that he was going a little too far. “Of course you can – we can. I just thought we wanted to wait a little while, be more prepared.”

“We’re as prepared as we’re ever going to be,” Valentin said. He stood up, his bald head gleaming with sweat. “Find out where they live. That’s an order.”

“It may take a little more –”

“No more time.” Valentin walked away, heading for his chambers where the two women waited for him. He couldn’t actually have sex, Daemon knew, but he could feed from them while they did. He just liked to make everyone watch first, to make everyone see what he was getting. “End of the week, Daemon. I want it by then, or I want your head.”



## Chapter Eight

Cecelia rolled over in bed, not sure what woke her but suddenly wide awake anyway. Before her eyes even adjusted to the near perfect darkness she knew she was alone. Without Julian's regular breathing and the comforting solidity of his body next to hers the room felt huge and lonely.

She switched on the light and, blinking, slipped from between the soft sheets and padded across the floor to the balcony. The curtains were heavy and cool in her hands as she pulled them open, then turned the knob on the French doors and stepped outside.

The warm, salt-smelling breeze caressed her bare legs and made strands of her hair tickle her nose. She tucked them absently behind her ears, her gaze focused on the pool where Julian swam laps.

He moved with the same grace and power she'd come to associate with him, but this was different. She didn't know how to describe it, didn't even know how she recognized it, but she knew something was bothering him just by watching his arms slice through the water.

Should she leave him alone, or go to him? He might want to talk about it, whatever it was. But men didn't like to talk about their problems, not the way women did, and she'd never seen him move this aggressively before. Except in bed...

That decided it. She pulled on a pair of jeans and headed quietly downstairs and out to the patio, stopping only to grab a bottle of wine from the fridge and a couple of glasses from the cabinet.

"I wondered if you were coming down." His voice assailed her before she even closed the patio doors behind her.

"How did you —"

"I heard you open the balcony doors." Julian rested his upper arms on the edge of the patio. The bluish light from the pool shone off his wet skin and hair, making him look slightly alien. Unfamiliar. "Is that wine?"

She nodded. "I thought you might want a drink."

"You thought right. Bring me a glass, please."

Water swirled around him, making gentle sloshing sounds, as he leaned away from the edge of the pool and dunked himself back under, then rose again, wiping his eyes. Cecelia set a full glass in front of him, beads of moisture already condensing on the outside of it. He picked it up and tilted it at her in a lazy toasting motion, then drank it all down. The sound of the glass hitting the stone patio when he set it down seemed to

echo against the house behind her. "You know what the thing is about swimming, Cecelia?"

She sat down cross-legged on the patio, keeping her distance. She'd been right. Something was bothering him, and from the edge in his voice she didn't think he was going to tell her what it was. "What?"

"It always seems like a good idea. You look at the pool, and you think of how relaxing it will be, and how good it will feel. So you get yourself all changed into your swimming costume and trot on down, and get in, and then you haven't the faintest idea what to do next. And it seemed like such a good idea, and you know you wanted to do it and you had good reasons for doing it, but you find yourself wishing you were dry again."

She refilled his glass for him and took a sip of her own, hoping he might continue. When he didn't, she said, "So why not just get out?"

"Because you committed to that swim, and you're going to go through with it."

"It's not like anybody gets hurt if you get out of the pool, Julian."

"Are you sure?"

"What are you really talking about?"

He sighed, twirling the stem of his wineglass in his hand, staring at it with his brow furrowed. "I'm just wallowing, darling. Nothing to worry about."

"But...but I want to worry about it. You might feel better if you tell me."

He shook his head. "Old memories die hard. I've—I've agreed to do a particular job—"

"A consulting job?" She couldn't hide her curiosity about his work. It seemed so glamorous, dashing into a company, fixing all of its problems, then dashing away, presumably with a solid gold check for a million dollars in one's hand.

"Yes. Don't interrupt. I've agreed to do this job for a friend, but it means putting someone else out of business, and that someone else was...was once someone important to me."

"Like a girlfriend?" The thought sent a stab of pain through her heart. Had this man dated all of Florida?

He shook his head. "Like a father. Like...like a god."

"So why do it then?"

"Because he isn't what he used to be, and he doesn't deserve to keep his business." He finished his glass and held it out for her to refill again, but this time he grabbed her wrist as she started to move back away. "You should get in, the water's nice."

"I don't have a suit."

"I'm not wearing one."

She didn't know if she should be irritated at him for changing the subject or pleased that he'd even shared as much with her as he had, but realizing he was naked a few feet

away made both emotions fade. The sexual heat simmering between her legs since she'd gotten out of bed flared to a boil. She licked her lips. "Is that sanitary?"

"I don't care."

Tendrils of heat licked and twisted through her body, radiating from his hand still holding her wrist. She nodded, and he let go.

Her legs shook a little as she stood up, knowing he wanted her, knowing she would let him do whatever he wanted to her. That she would beg him to do whatever he wanted to her, if he told her to. She reached for the hem of her loose t-shirt and started to pull it up, then stopped. "Are you going to stare at me while I undress?"

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

Right. Stupid question. Feeling his gaze on her made her feel sexy, womanly. She raised the shirt more slowly than she normally would, feeling her wrists brush against her hard nipples as she exposed her belly, feeling her breasts swell as she lifted the shirt off her head.

He didn't move. The light threw ghostly patterns across his skin, across hers, and made his eyes glitter. The aura of anger, of aggression, still hung around him, and Cecelia shivered as she unfastened her jeans and started to lower them.

"No. Turn around."

More blood rushed to her pussy at the command. She obeyed, hooking her thumbs into her panties as she shimmied the waist over her hips, bending over all the way to lower panties and jeans to the ground and stepping out of them as delicately as she could.

The hissed intake of his breath was the only reaction she got from him. It was more than she'd expected. "Come here."

The ladder was about halfway down the pool, ten feet or so from where he rested. She headed for it, only to be stopped by his voice. "I said come here."

Mystified, she changed direction, stopping right in front of him.

"Sit down."

"But the patio's—"

His hand on her ankle cut off her words as effectively as a gag, and the gentle pressure he applied as he pulled her leg forward conveyed his message just as effectively. Just because he didn't always play dominant in the bedroom didn't mean she shouldn't obey when he did.

So she perched on the very edge, letting her calves and feet dangle into the water, which really was quite pleasant. The smooth stone warmed her bare bottom, making her want to squirm around, to scoot back from the edge and open her legs to get that heat in other, more sensitive places.

Julian came to rest in front of her, his hands on her rigid knees. He leaned forward and kissed one, then opened his mouth and scraped it with his teeth. She took a sharp

breath, and he glanced up at her. "Tell me what you would do, Cecelia," he said, moving to repeat the process with her other knee. "Would you take the job?"

"Haven't you already taken it?" Part of her wanted to just say yes, to just let it go. But he was asking her opinion, on something obviously important to him. She didn't want to treat his trust so cavalierly.

Or maybe he didn't care after all. The firm pressure of his hands coaxed her legs open, wide enough for him to start kissing her lower thigh. "I have taken it, yes. Because the future is more important than the past." His lips brushed against her inner thigh as he moved closer. Her pussy started to throb.

"But I want to know if you agree. I want to hear what you think."

What was he talking about? She wanted to concentrate, wanted to talk to him, but with his mouth so terribly, terribly close to the dewy flesh of her pussy it was almost impossible. The blood she needed for thinking, for hearing, for everything except being a living, needy nerve ending had all deserted her and rushed down to boil between her legs.

Apparently she waited too long to reply, because the soft sweetness of his lips was replaced by a hard nip from his teeth. She yelped. Only his grip on her thighs kept her from falling. "Talk."

"I don't know all the particulars," she said softly. The breeze from the ocean still whispered through the palms and over her bare flesh, making her feel vulnerable and daring all at once. "But I think if you really feel like this — oh..."

Julian's head dove between her legs, his hands forcing her thighs wider apart while he attacked her vulnerable pussy with his tongue. She balanced precariously on the very rim of the pool, her legs raised and her feet on his shoulders, bracing her upper body with her hands on the patio. Her nails scraped the stone as her fingers convulsed.

He slid the very tip of his tongue along the edges of her labia, touching her so lightly it hardly felt like a touch at all, while still managing to echo through her entire body. His hands left her thighs to snake up her stomach to her breasts. She arched her back, pressing them into his palms, but instead he closed his fingers over her nipples, twisting, pulling almost painfully. Pleasure shot in twin lines to her pussy.

His arms behind her, his hands on her breasts and his tongue between her legs held her frozen at the pool's edge, locked into place. He looked up at her. "I said talk."

Talk? About what? Her dazed mind tried to focus through the delicious haze of need, but the best she could come up with was, "I'm sure you know what you're doing, Julian...oh God..."

He nibbled gently at her folds, sucking them, tugging them. The sensation was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. He savored her like a piece of ripe fruit, licking, rolling, pulling her into his mouth, and she babbled above him in a state of frenzied bliss.

She almost screamed when he pulled his head away, only to yelp for real when something cold and wet dripped onto her heated flesh. He'd poured a little wine onto

her. The alcohol stung, but in her overexcited state the pain was another layer of pleasure, even as the coldness of the wine brought her back from the edge. Then he dipped his head back again to lick her clean and she heated up all over again.

His tongue slid inside her, circling the edges of her opening before gliding up to her clit again and sucking on it. She was going to die, right here, she was going to explode into a million pieces and she didn't even care as long as he kept doing that.

Her stomach muscles tightened, her thighs ached from trembling. Julian repeated the movement, fucking her with his tongue then sucking her clit, over and over, building a crescendo of passion that threatened to drive her insane. And all the while she talked, mindful somewhere deep down that if she stopped he might stop, and she could never, ever allow that to happen.

"You always know what to do," she gasped. Her head fell back; the sky swirled in a dizzying pattern of stars above her. "You always know what you're doing, oh please don't stop, oh yes, oh God, yes, yes!"

Her hips lifted off the stones with the force of her climax, pressing her pussy into his face, pleading with him to keep going. He sucked feverishly at her, his hands dropping to her ass and pulling her closer still, supporting her while she lost control above him.

Her vision was still blurry when he let her sink back to the patio, then rose from the pool like Neptune. Water poured onto her bare body as he scooped her up and carried her to one of the deck lounges, but his skin was warm.

He'd barely set her down when his mouth closed around her right nipple, pulling hard, making her cry out. She twined her fingers in his hair, not sure if she wanted him to stop or keep going, but dimly aware that it wouldn't matter anyway. He was in complete control, and the best she could do was hang on and enjoy the ride.

His fingers slipped between her legs, finding her achingly sensitive clit and rolling it between his thumb and index finger, while his middle finger traced the rim of her cunt. She moaned his name and squirmed toward him. She didn't want his fingers. She wanted his cock, wanted the entire hard length of him rammed into her as deep as it would go. The feel of it pressed against her hip as he crouched above her drove her insane. She reached down and grabbed it, squeezing as hard as she dared.

"Please," she whispered. "Please, Julian, I want you." She stroked from the base to the tip, gathering the bead of moisture there and using it to help her hand slide back down. His hips jerked forward. "Please, Julian."

In response he flipped her onto her right side and curled his left arm under her left thigh, lifting it, opening her legs. She closed her eyes and bit her lip, feeling him adjust his own position on the lounge, and just before she was ready to open them he rammed into her with one smooth, hard stroke.

His gasp of pleasure echoed in her ears, reverberated through her entire body. How or why he'd come to be so important to her didn't matter at that moment. Even how he

felt about her didn't matter so much at that moment. What mattered was he was inside her, protected by her even as he kept her safe.

What mattered was that nothing had ever felt so good in her entire life. Had the man taken classes or something?

With his arm holding her thigh up high enough to take her hips off the lounge she couldn't move. She was forced to stay still, exactly as he'd positioned her, and unable to moderate the speed or force of his thrusts. She tried to twist her upper body to gain leverage, but he fisted a handful of her hair and pulled, arching her back and taking away even that small opportunity for movement. Still he pounded into her, showing no mercy. He was like a machine, never stopping, never faltering. The delicious friction inside her grew, spreading heat through her body, setting even her fingers and toes alight. She was so sensitive she could feel every molecule of the air around her bouncing off her skin. And somewhere in her heart she knew he could feel it too, that they were the only people on the planet at that moment who were really, truly alive.

Her hands grasped at nothing, trying to reach him but unable to. He let go of her hair and grabbed her left hand, guiding it down between her legs. She gasped.

Her fingertips skimmed over her clit, just touching, rubbing against the thick column of his cock. Experimentally she reached down as far as she could go, circling her fingers around it and squeezing.

"Yes, baby," he gasped above her, and sped up his pace, his arm jerking and lifting her leg higher.

Cecelia tightened her grip and twisted her wrist to the right. Now every time he thrust into her, his movement made her palm hit her clit, while she was able to form an even tighter ring for him. Waves of heat rolled from her pussy through her body as he voiced his pleasure behind her.

His thrusts grew faster, looser. He swelled inside her, and she tightened her muscles, urging herself into the abyss.

"Come for me, Cecelia." His voice was harsh with need, ragged with the effort of holding back his own orgasm. "Come with me."

She did, squeezing her palm against her clit, letting that extra pressure and the command in his voice send her hurtling over the edge. His cock throbbed inside her, in the ring of her fingers, his voice raised in a wordless cry of pleasure above her.

Her thigh felt cold when his hand left it, but he slid up to lie behind her, pulling her close so she could rest her head on his arm and entwining their legs together. Cecelia looked up at the stars, unusually clear in the never-dark city sky, letting her breathing return to normal and the throbbing between her legs calm down.

Finally she spoke. "I'm sure you're doing the right thing, Julian."

He pressed his lips to her shoulder. "I know I am, baby. But thanks. It makes me feel better about it, anyway."

"Does it?"

He rose up above her and kissed her lips, the first kiss he'd given her since before she'd gone to sleep. His eyes loomed above her, still mysterious, but with depths she could discern even in the darkness. "Yes. It does."

Before she could answer he stood up and took her hand, pulling her off the lounge. "Come on. Let's go finish that bottle and watch a movie."

\* \* \* \* \*

"This makes me nervous," Cecelia said. "It's dark. It isn't safe to be here."

Julian nodded, glancing at her as he steered the car through the heavy evening traffic on I-95. "It's not a great situation," he agreed. "But we have to get there while the building is open, and not too many people are around. So we could pick dawn or dusk. I figured dusk was better."

"Because you hate getting up early," she said.

"Yes. Because I hate getting up early. So?"

When she didn't reply, he placed his hand on her thigh for a minute before returning it to the shift knob. "Sorry. I don't really like this any more than you do."

"Edward and Tristan are already there, right?"

He picked up his little silver cell phone and waggled it at her. "They're watching and their phones are on."

"So we should be perfectly safe."

"As safe as we can be, yes. Nowhere is perfectly safe. We have to get those files. And it's best to get them when your assistant isn't around."

Cecelia frowned at the mention of Doug. Since their conversation the day before, he'd called three more times. Each time he'd tried to convince her to leave Julian's place and go home, or at least come stay with him. The last time she'd finally gotten angry and slammed the phone shut.

He hadn't called again. That was another thing to worry about. She couldn't go home and her best friend hated her and thought she was an irresponsible whore. Now she was about to go back to the place where she was originally attacked, thereby making herself into a moving target for a group of vampires who wanted her dead.

All in all, not the greatest situation she'd ever been in.

It was hard to believe she'd struggled and worked so hard to earn respect as a professional and as a woman, and now the most important thing in her life was trying not to become a snack.

"What are you thinking about? You look a million miles away."

She sighed and leaned back. "I wish I was. I don't want to do this, I don't want to deal with any of this. I just want to wake up, and go to the lab to work just like I used to, and pretend none of this craziness ever happened."

"You can't spend your whole life hiding behind a Bunsen burner," he said. She

didn't fail to notice the edge in his voice.

"Says who? What's wrong with trying to? Science is solid. It does what it's supposed to do."

"No, science does nothing. It's objects that do things."

"You knew what I meant."

"I did. I also know what you meant when you said you wish none of this had ever happened, but it still isn't the nicest thing in the world to say."

She was silent for a minute. He was right, although she was surprised that he cared. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize," he said. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't."

His little phone rang. It was obviously Edward, giving them the all clear, and Julian took the next exit off 95 and headed west toward her lab. "You know the plan."

She nodded, then realized he wasn't watching her. "In and out," she said. "Throw everything in boxes and sort it out later. Edward and Tristan keep watch outside. Some of your other friends wait in the parking lot in case there's trouble. Don't talk to anyone, and don't waste time getting my personal things."

"Right," he said. "Very good. And what do you do if there's trouble?"

"Run like hell?"

He made a face at her, and she sighed. "If there's trouble I stay behind you until Edward or Tristan can get me in the car. I don't try to fight and I don't try to run. You'll protect me."

"Right again."

"I'm not entirely comfortable with that," she said. "I did impale a vampire last time. I'd like to be able to defend myself."

"And that's something we can start working on. But for now, it's best if you leave that to us."

"I'm not used to being a shrinking violet."

"You're not. You're just smart enough to let us do the dirty work."

She rolled her eyes, but didn't argue. They were silent the rest of the drive.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cecelia looked around at the wreck that used to be her clean, tidy, efficient little lab. "I think that's it," she said, reaching for the last box. Her voice cracked on the words.

"I'll take it," Julian said, picking it up before she could get a hold on it.

"Don't be stupid." She pulled it back from him. "If they come to get us, you need your hands free."

"And you need to not be holding a heavy box," he replied.



"I can handle it," she snapped. "Why can't you just let me do something on my own?" She turned away from him. Tears stung her eyes.

"Hey." He stroked her arm, asking her with the touch to turn and look at him, but she did not. He didn't remove his hand, though, and its warm pressure made her feel a little better.

"I wish this wasn't happening," she said, after a minute. She rubbed her eyes with one hand, trying against logic to force the tears back into her head. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Cecelia." He took hold of both her shoulders now, gently turning her around to face him. He looked so concerned about her that she wanted to start crying all over again. "I know this is hard on you. Believe me, if there was any way I could make it easier, I would do it. But there isn't." He reached up and stroked her face. "You're strong enough to do this, baby. This is just temporary. We'll take care of the problems, and you can come back here and set everything up again. You haven't lost, okay? You're not giving up. You're just...taking a break."

"Most people don't take breaks from work under penalty of death," she sniffled.

"No, but who wants to be like everyone else?"

In spite of herself, she laughed. "That was a really bad joke, Julian. I expected better from you."

"I can but try," he replied. He tilted her head up so he could look in her eyes. "It's all any of us can do. But you'll succeed. I know it."

His eyes told her how much he believed what he said, how much he believed in her. It was enough to make her heart ache, a new and different kind of ache than the one over losing her lab.

This was more than that, a feeling she hadn't experienced in so long she'd wondered if she still could. The defensive shell she'd built around her heart was starting to shred, and its destruction hurt.

"Julian..."

His hands were still on her face as he pulled her closer to kiss her. This was different too, more tender. He wanted nothing from her at that moment. She felt it in his lips. He wasn't trying to seduce her or quiet her or convince her. He was giving her something, giving her a piece of himself, something she could hold on to and keep close when she needed it.

There was a promise in that kiss that he had not yet made in any other way, and she returned it with hers.

Warmth flooded through her body, hardening her nipples, welling between her legs. She stepped into him, pressing herself against the solid maleness of his chest. He gasped, and the kiss changed again, becoming something even deeper, something both more and less satisfying.

He tasted faintly of smoke and cloves, and smelled like vanilla. She wanted to wrap

herself in the smell and flavor of him, his lips, his tongue, his body.

She felt his cock harden through the fabric that separated their bodies. It excited her. Everything about him excited her, sending sparks of need shooting through her veins, through her every nerve.

He'd been holding her lightly, as if she would break. Now the pressure of his hands increased as he moved them from her face to her neck, pressing her against him. He tugged gently at her hair, driving another gasp from her lips.

"This isn't a good time," he whispered, pulling away from her. He was panting, the hot little puffs of his breath heating her skin.

"I know," she replied.

His fingers entwined in her hair still more as he pressed her head to his chest. "I'm so close to not caring," he said, his voice shaky. "My God, Cecelia, making love to you is worth risking death for."

She swallowed. "I know what you mean."

They stayed like there, clutching each other, for a moment that may have only been seconds or may have been an eternity, while their breathing slowed and their heartbeats returned to normal. Finally he pulled away.

"We need to go," he said. "I'm not looking forward to this any more than you are, but if we don't leave now we're sitting ducks."

His words threw cold water on the flames that still banked in her breast. Squaring her shoulders, she said, "Let's go."

He picked up the last box and turned back to her. "We have a lot of people out there to help us. Just worry about getting into the car, okay?"

"I'll try."

He touched her face, a light caress that sent a shiver through her body. Some of his fearlessness seemed to transmit itself to her as well, because suddenly she felt stronger. "I know you can do this," he said.

She nodded.

She wanted to pause and take a last look back at the lab, but dared not hesitate. Julian was walking purposefully down the hall, his heels clicking on the shiny terrazzo floor, and she hurried to stay close behind him.

She kept her head down, thankful that she didn't see anyone she knew. While her research technically belonged to her, it still wasn't a good idea for the higher-ups at Butler to know what she was doing.

It was almost completely dark when Julian pushed open the exit doors. She felt the oppressive heat rush in at them, then heard the shouts.

It was like opening a door into hell.

The sun was bright red on the horizon, the clouds the same unreal scarlet. The light

cast on the fighting figures in the parking lot glowed with red, both from the sunset and from the blood that flowed from wounds, blood droplets on the faces of those she knew and those she didn't, blood smears on the pavement and the cars parked in a protective circle around the entrance to the lab.

"Come on!" Julian shouted. He reached back and grabbed her arm, yanking her from her horrified stupor to follow him to his little black Mercedes roadster.

The few feet to the car felt like a mile, run through water. Her heart racing with terror, she followed him, forcing herself not to look at the battle taking place around them. She knew they'd been spotted. How could they not be?

He threw open her door and tossed the box inside, grabbing her hand and ushering her into the passenger seat in almost the same movement. She went in headfirst, her face pressed against the headrest as she scrambled to pull her legs in behind her.

He slammed the door shut as she tucked her feet beneath her and started twisting around. The car rocked as bodies slammed against the passenger side, and she screamed, unable to stop herself.

She managed to press down the button that locked the door just before she heard the handle jerk outward.

She was blinded by the crush against her door, unable to see Julian. If he didn't make it back into the car...the ignition was empty, of course. He had the keys with him.

Something flew across the windshield. Cecelia realized with mingled horror and relief it was Julian, flung over the hood of the car. He disappeared on the other side, and her heart rose in her throat before the driver side door wrenched open and Julian pulled himself into the car.

A deep cut marked his forehead. Blood flowed down the right side of his face and neck, soaking into the collars of his white t-shirt and gray button-down.

The car rocked back and forth. Vampires leaned over the hood, leering at her through the windshield, slamming against it with fists, scratching at the glass with long, filthy fingernails.

Cecelia bit her lips to keep from screaming as Julian fitted the key into the ignition and turned. The powerful engine roared to life.

The shouts of those outside were muffled, but Cecelia heard someone else shouting, loud and clear over the dull roar of the fighters. "Julian! Julian!"

Julian picked up his cell phone and fitted it into a slot on the dash. "Edward. We're ready."

"Ready too."

Cecelia had forgotten about the phones, and she almost sobbed with relief at the calm, collected tone of Julian's voice. They might as well have been watching a mildly interesting film as fighting for their lives through a crowd of vampires. For once she didn't even feel a twinge at admitting she was glad he was there to take care of things. She didn't think her teeth would ever stop chattering.

"We're pulling out," Edward said. "Heading for you."

"Good."

Julian put the car in gear and revved the engine higher.

The shouts outside grew louder, turning into screams. Cecelia watched, open-mouthed, as the vampires gathered around the car leapt away.

"Are they letting us go—ooooo!" The question turned into a scream as a van raced toward them, ready to smash into the front of the car.

## Chapter Nine

She threw her hands over her face and shrank back into the seat, terror making a continuous howl from high in her throat.

"Cecelia! Cecelia! Stop!"

The thundering sound of the van colliding with the roadster never happened. The roadster jerked backward, reversing at high speed. She peeped out from between her fingers to see the front end of the van still bearing down on them as they outran it in reverse.

Julian swung the wheel to the right. The rear end swerved, putting the car out of the van's path. She felt Julian slam the car into first as the van sped past them and out of the parking lot.

He turned back to the left so fast his hands were a blur and followed it, grabbing pavement with the tires.

She didn't breathe until they were back out on Cypress Creek Road, when she emitted a shaky laugh.

"We did it! Oh my God, did we do it?"

"Not yet," he said grimly, glancing into the rearview mirror.

Her heart sank as she turned around. They were being followed. Bright headlights aimed at them made the interior of the Mercedes glow and bleached out Julian's skin, making him look gaunt and pale. She wanted to reach out and touch him but did not dare. He needed to focus on his driving.

"Plan B?" Edward's voice through the cell phone was muffled with excitement.

"Looks like it."

The car behind them swerved into the left lane, trying to pass. Julian swerved too, increasing their speed. Cecelia didn't dare glance at the speedometer.

Luck was with them as they hit the large intersection of Cypress and Powerline, and the light was just turning green. She expected them to race right through it, but a truck pulled into the center of the intersection and stopped, blocking their way.

Julian swore. Edward echoed him through the phone as they swung to the right, racing through a gas station, then heading south on Powerline. The truck in the intersection pulled forward to follow.

They were in the middle of a high-speed convoy cutting through regular traffic. It was terrifying.

The light at Commercial was yellow when it came into view. "Julian!"

"We have to run it. We can't stop."

Edward laid on the horn in front of them. Cecelia heard answering horns, but was too scared to watch. She covered her eyes with her hands again and braced herself for the collision.

The car jerked to the left, rolling over something hard and high, tilting sideways. She peeked. They were half on the median. Edward's truck was already in the intersection, swerving left, narrowly avoiding being hit. The cacophony of horns was almost deafening. Cecelia cringed deeper into her seat.

They came off the divider with a rattling thud and spun to the left, fishtailing slightly before straightening up into the right hand lane. She looked behind them. The car was still on them, the lights still blinding her.

Julian jumped the curb again, half on the sidewalk, following Edward. Traffic cones from the construction at the railroad tracks flew into the windshield and scattered in the dry grass beside the road. Cecelia fought to keep her scream in her throat.

They crossed the tracks, the undercarriage of the Mercedes scraping against the metal and sending sparks shooting back at the van behind them, and raced up the ramp onto I-95, heading south.

"We're going the wrong way!"

"No. We're not going home. Safe house."

She nodded before she thought. Obviously he couldn't see her, so she spoke. "Okay."

He patted her thigh quickly in response before resuming his concentration on the road, shifting the car into fifth and tailing Edward's truck into the HOV lane.

"Call them," he said, and it took a moment before Cecelia realized he wasn't talking to her, but to Edward. The low hum of the dial tone filled the car, and she reached forward and hung it up.

"Thanks."

The headlights of the van behind them still shone bright through the rear windshield. Cecelia wondered how Julian could still drive with those lights shining at him, especially at these speeds. A glance at the speedometer told her they were going over a hundred miles per hour.

Still, he seemed to have it well in hand as they zipped through the traffic, ducking in and out of the HOV lane as they passed slower traffic. They'd timed this well. Rush hour was over and the evening traffic hadn't quite started yet, so it wasn't as scary as it might otherwise have been, but Cecelia still clenched the armrest and gritted her teeth.

The cell rang. Cecelia glanced at Julian and pressed the send button.

"They're coming." Edward sounded just as calm as Julian.

"Good."

"Who's coming?"

Julian patted her thigh again. "Friends."

"Don't dismiss me," she snapped before thinking. Her nerves were at the breaking point. The last thing either of them needed was an argument, but she didn't much feel like allowing him to patronize her either.

"I'm not dismissing you," he said, glancing in the side mirror and swerving into the next lane over, following Edward, passing a sedan full of elderly people. "Do you really need to know their names?"

"Do you really need to keep them from me?"

"For fuck's sake, Cecelia, just be quiet and let me drive."

Damn him. She didn't want to sit still and be quiet. She wanted to argue, to scream, to release some of the tension in her body.

What she didn't want to do was die, though, so she bit her lip to keep from snapping back and sunk farther into her seat.

The honking of horns followed them down the road as they reached the Ives Dairy exit. At first Cecelia thought there'd been an accident at the side of the road, but when they got closer she saw it was actually a curious kind of convoy, made up entirely of rented panel trucks like the one Edward drove. The trucks entered traffic en masse and began crossing lanes, edging up to the Mercedes.

Cecelia turned to Julian. "Friends?"

He nodded. "Shh."

Curbing the impulse to smack him, she squeezed her arms tighter around her body.

Julian slowed down, letting two of the trucks merge in front of him. Two more pulled up next to them, a third behind, effectively blocking both them and the van that chased them into a box. The road itself, and the other traffic, was completely hidden by rented trucks.

"Exiting," Edward said.

"Call me when you get there," Julian replied.

"Will do."

Edward broke the connection.

"You can talk now," Julian said. "Although we're not safe yet, so I'd appreciate it if you hold off on screaming at me until we get where we're going."

"I'm not going to scream at you. I just wish you'd explain this shit to me before we get going. And I don't like being dismissed with a pat on the head and a grin. I'm an adult, Julian, a grown woman, not a little girl."

"Obviously I know you're not a little girl. And I didn't mean to treat you like one. But I thought we agreed you were going to let me handle this."

"Handle it, yes. But not keep me in the dark."

"You didn't need to know."

"That's not the point and you know it," she said. God damn him! How could he be so romantic and supportive one minute, and the next such a controlling ass? "The point

is, I don't appreciate being patronized."

"Can't this wait?" he asked tightly. "I did ask you not to start an argument until we're out of the car, did I not?"

She flung her hands in the air. "There you go again. Why does everything have to be exactly the way you want it?"

The truck ahead of them sped up, and Julian sped up with it. "God damn it, Cecelia. I thought you had more fucking sense than this. We're in a car, going well over the speed limit on one of the busiest highways in the country, being chased by a van full of angry vampires who want to kill you. Now for the last time, will you *shut up and let me save our fucking lives?*"

She shoved herself into the far corner of the car, smashed up against the door. Knowing he was right didn't lessen the tension in her body one bit. "Fine."

He groaned and glanced at her, but did not reply. Instead he reached forward and pressed a few buttons on the cell.

"Yes?" It was a voice she hadn't heard before, with an accent more glottal and sing-songy than Julian's, but unmistakably English as well. One of the nameless friends, she supposed.

"Are you all ready?"

"We are."

"Let's go," Julian said.

Cecelia started to sit up a little and look around, only to fall back into her seat as Julian swerved to the left. He almost scraped the low highway divider, bringing the roadster's front end forward so far and fast it looked like they were going to slide under the back of the truck.

Cecelia gave a little shriek and covered her eyes. She was going to die. She'd made him so angry he'd decided to just kill her himself. She braced herself for the collision.

Instead of the crash she'd been expecting, though, she felt the car jerk back as Julian hit the brakes, then sped forward again. She opened her eyes. The blinding headlights were gone. There was a panel truck behind them.

"Richard says he's ready."

"Okay."

The trucks behind and next to them slowed. Julian pulled into the space created by them in the next lane.

Cecelia looked at the road signs. "We're going to South Beach?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"Hush."

She obeyed, watching with fascination as the trucks behind them fell back still farther. She could no longer see the van that had been following them. It was too



effectively blocked in.

Julian swung left, following the exit, racing across the Julia Tuttle Causeway so fast Cecelia was afraid they were going to leave the road at the top of the bridge and plunge into the water below, its calm surface brightly colored with the reflection of Miami's lights.

More horns followed them as they sped down the causeway and onto Alton Road, tires squealing as they rounded the bend.

Julian made at least three U-turns in the minutes that followed, taking side streets and zipping around the large parking garage at Mt. Sinai Hospital until Cecelia was dizzy, before getting on Collins and heading north.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was as weak and shaky as she felt.

"Making sure we're not being followed."

"I thought the trucks took care of that."

"I'm just being cautious," he said. "We're here, anyway."

He turned the car into a large, brightly lit parking lot. Cecelia looked up and almost started to laugh.

"This is your safe house?"

"Yes. Is there a problem?"

She indicated the building. "Uh...this is the Fontainebleau, Julian. It's not a safe house, it's a luxury hotel."

"It's the safest place we can be," he said. "It's big, it's well protected, it's public but private."

"And it has expensive sheets and room service," she said.

"What's wrong with that?" He stopped in front of the valet.

"Nothing," she said nastily. "Just that you're good at landing on your feet."

"And aren't you glad I am," he replied, lifting the emergency brake and reaching for the door handle. "Otherwise you might not be here."

\* \* \* \* \*

She padded silently out of the bathroom across the thick tan carpeting, wrapped in a fluffy white robe.

"Feel better?" Julian's voice was curiously flat, and she noticed he hadn't moved the whole time she was in the bathroom, just stayed in his chair, clad in a robe identical to hers, a glass in his hand.

They'd barely spoken since they arrived in the suite, save to discuss the room in polite tones. Cecelia didn't know what to do. She wanted to apologize for starting a fight with him, but she didn't know how. He seemed so distant, so cold. Not the Julian she'd come to know.

"Yes," she said lightly. "Much better. Don't you?"

He grunted.

"Did Edward call?"

"Yes."

She sat down in the chair next to his. "So he made it...wherever he was going."

"Yes."

There was silence. She sighed. "Julian...I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have picked a fight. I don't know why I did. I was just...freaked out, I guess, and I don't handle stress very well sometimes."

"Oh." He lifted his glass again. Cecelia noticed the bottle next to him was almost half empty. She'd never seen him drink like this before, but he barely seemed affected at all.

"You know, you might be concussed," she said. "You probably shouldn't be drinking."

He glared at her. "I'm fine."

"You might feel fine now, but later —"

"I said I'm fine."

"God damn it, Julian, I'm sorry! I said I was sorry. How many more times do I have to say it?"

He emptied his glass with one swallow and slammed it down on the low table next to him. "You know what, Cecelia? Not everything is about you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm not mad at you, okay? I just have a lot on my mind right now."

"Like what?"

He laughed, a humorless chuckle. "You can't be serious."

"There's no need to be that way," she said. "I was just asking. I want to help."

"Really?" He poured another glass without offering her one. "You want to help me? There's a novel idea."

"Don't be an asshole."

"For fuck's sake, Cecelia. What do you think I'm thinking about? What do you think could possibly be on my mind right now, as we speak? Maybe the fact that I can't go home? My family is spread all over South Florida? We were all almost killed because of me?" He stood up and strode over to the sliding glass doors on one wall. "Perhaps that's it, do you think? Maybe I'm just a little upset right now, because I risked everyone's life for you, for your work, and once again, you haven't even bothered to fucking acknowledge it?"

He swung around to face her. "What do you think, Cecelia? Seriously. Do you think this is fun for me? Do you think I'm some fucking teenager who thinks this stuff is exciting?" He shook his head. "Okay, never mind. But that's not the point, is it? The

point is, you're getting angry with me for not telling you all of my plans, or not sharing enough with you, and I can't even tell—" He stopped and rubbed his head. "I don't even know what we're going to do with all of this information we've just gone to such great lengths to get. And I'm afraid I've just wasted everyone's time."

She had the distinct feeling that this was not what he wanted to say, but decided to let it go. Maybe once he calmed down she could get him to talk more.

He emptied his glass again. "So you tell me, Cecelia, what's wrong? What's bothering me?"

"That's not fair," she said. "What about your revenge? I thought this was all about defeating those vampires, and using me as your weapon. If anything, you're the one who caused all of this, taking us to the lab to get my work."

"Jesus," he said, shaking his head. "Do you really think it's still about that?"

*Oh, shit.* She didn't know what to say. He was right, right to be angry and right to yell at her.

What was wrong with her? She'd been spending so much time lately worrying about herself. She hadn't even stopped once to think how much he was risking for her...and why.

Sure, he liked winning, she knew that. Finding a perfect weapon to use in that victory was a plus for him.

But he wouldn't be going this far, putting so many people at risk, if there wasn't more to it than that. Hadn't he proved that earlier? Hadn't he been making it very clear to her for the last few days that there was more to his motives than the desire for revenge?

Even if it was just that, she owed him her thanks. Every day she spent with him was a day he gave her, by virtue of saving her life.

So here she was, in an outrageously expensive suite in a world famous hotel, alive solely because of the interest this man had shown in her, and she repaid him by sniping and moaning and ignoring his needs.

"Shit, Julian," she said finally. She could barely look at him. "I'm sorry."

"I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, you should have." She stood up and crossed to him, reaching out tentatively with her hands then pulling back before she touched him. "I've been a real idiot, haven't I?"

"Yes." He gave her a half-smile and shook his head. "No, Cecelia, you haven't been an idiot." He reached out for her, pulling her close. He smelled of soap and whiskey and something else, something that was just Julian.

His cheek rested on her head as he said, "I shouldn't have yelled at you. I just...sometimes it's hard to carry everyone's weight on your shoulders."

The tone of his voice, the tension in his body told her what a difficult admission that was for him to make, even if she hadn't already come to know him well enough to

guess.

"No, you should have yelled at me," she said. "I can be a real selfish, insensitive bitch sometimes, and I deserve to get called on it." She pulled her head back to look him in the eyes. "I'm really, really sorry, Julian. And...I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me. I do appreciate it."

"Don't mention it."

"Ha, ha. Seriously." She put her hands on his face. "I know you'll know what to do. And if you don't...that's okay too, because we can figure it out together. Some people actually think I'm kind of smart, even if I don't always act like it."

Not for the first time, she grew warm just looking at him, just seeing him look at her. He was so attractive. Not just his face, but himself. He was just Julian, and she knew at that moment that he was falling in love with her just as hard and fast as she was falling for him.

"How can I make it up to you?" she whispered.

He smiled, his eyes still tired but with some of their usual spark. "I'm sure I can think of something." He untied her robe and slipped it off her shoulders, making her shiver from the air-conditioned cold and the intensity of his gaze.

He touched her shoulders first, running his hands lightly along the delicate ridges of her collarbones and down, over her breasts. Her nipples rose to meet his caress.

He passed over them, feeling the curve of her waist, the flat of his hands sliding over her stomach and back to her hips, stroking her belly, then back up her rib cage.

She was trembling now, watching his face as he touched her. His eyes were flat, black and deep, his face almost expressionless as he examined her like a piece of sculpture.

Everywhere he touched goose bumps raised on her skin. She wanted to reach for him, but did not dare.

He spun her around and lifted her hair off her shoulders, touching the curves of her ears and the nape of her neck before dropping her hair again. He continued his exploration, the sharp points of her shoulder blades warming under his hands, the small of her back tingling when he ran a single finger all the way down her spine to the top of her buttocks. His hands found her hips and turned her to face him again, leading her as lightly as a dancer.

"Get on your knees," he said softly.

She did, lowering herself to the floor. She reached out and unfastened his robe, opening it, exposing his hard cock.

The skin was smooth under her tongue as she ran it from the tip to the base and back up. His gasp seemed to echo in the silence of the room.

He spread his legs slightly, bracing himself against the wall, as she continued to lick him, swirling her tongue around the swollen head, flicking it lightly over the ridge on the underside.

His hands were warm on her head as he rested them there, not pressing down, just placing them on her head. A benediction, a caress that said more than any words could at that moment how much pleasure she was giving him.

The thought made her hot. His cock in her mouth, solid and warm, made her want to feel it filling her elsewhere, made her pussy swell with heat and moisture.

Slowly she sucked it deeper, letting the head touch the back of her throat. He uttered a small, choked cry as she did so, then another, different kind of sound when she released it. Her hands sought out his flat stomach and slid upward. His chest hitched with the small intakes of his breath.

She looked up and met his gaze. He watched her so intently, his hands now tangling in her hair, massaging her head. Not breaking the connection, she took the base of his cock in her hand and let her tongue play down its length again, and was rewarded by the fluttering of his eyelids.

He was leaning against the wall now, his legs shaking as she swallowed him and released him, taking her time, savoring the feel of him in her mouth. It was a new sensation to have Julian so vulnerable to her, to know that she was giving him pleasure and taking none. If he was dominating her by having her on her knees before him, worshipping him, she dominated him as well, for she held the power to please him.

She sped up her movements, reaching out for his balls and giving them a gentle tug. His hips bucked forward, then again as she ran her fingernails over the tight skin of his sac.

She leaned down farther, leaving his cock, to take that skin between her teeth. Ever-so softly, she nibbled on it, the hair on his thighs soft under her palms. She sucked one ball into her mouth, holding it in the warm cavern, before returning to his cock and licking the tiny bead of moisture from its tip.

His hands clenched in her hair, tugging it, pulling her up from her knees to face him again. His cock was wet and hot against her bare skin as Julian kissed her.

She knew from his body how desperate he was, how close she'd brought him to orgasm, but there was no rush in the way he kissed her. Instead he explored her, taking his time, telling her with his lips and tongue what he was feeling, what he was thinking. The knowledge sent flames shooting through her body.

Her breath came faster, and she panted into his mouth, her hands roaming his body, finding the firm muscles of his ass and squeezing it, pressing his cock into her belly.

Still his touch was featherlight, barely stroking her. It was frustrating and incredibly hot at the same time. She felt delicate, sexy, the way he always made her feel.

He sank to his knees, taking her with him. She pushed his robe off his shoulders, needing to feel his bare arms around her. The whole night, the lab, the vampires, the car chase, flew out of her head. There was only Julian and herself, two people in a room high above the city with the sound of the ocean coming in the open windows.

He braced her waist with his arm and she leaned back, trusting utterly that he

would not let her fall.

She expected him to speak but he did not. Instead he turned his attention first to her right breast, then to the left, sucking her nipples, rolling them between his teeth. When he gently bit down and gave a little tug, she gasped in surprise, and her fingers wound through his hair to press him closer.

He sucked for so long that she was writhing beneath him, her voice saying his name a choked whisper.

"Please, Julian...please..."

In response he gave her a light spank, a warning to be quiet. She understood. This was something to be done in silence, as near silence as possible. An act almost holy in its importance.

She lifted her hips, pressing the wet lips of her pussy against the swollen head of his cock.

Julian felt a surge of satisfaction as that slight friction made her come, her body straining against his, her legs spreading even wider apart.

Without warning, he thrust three of his fingers into her pulsating cunt, hard. She cried out, her body bucking helplessly against him. He removed his fingers and lifted her into a chair next to them before attacking her pussy with his tongue.

Her rich nectar poured from her, filling his senses as he traced his tongue delicately along the swollen folds of skin. The rushing of her blood was so loud he barely heard her moans over it as he reinserted one finger and began fucking her with it, following the rhythm of his tongue.

He removed his finger and slid it slowly downward, toward the tight ring of her ass, probing gently. She stopped moving for a moment and he could feel her indecision. Then he simultaneously sucked her plump little clit into his mouth and slid the tip of his finger into her ass.

She gasped, and paused on the precipice for a long moment before he twirled his finger and sucked harder, feeling her uncertainty change to pure, unbridled bliss.

He brought his other hand in to join the fun, sliding his thumb into her cunt, keeping his pace steady, moving his fingers in and out like pistons as he twirled and sucked at her clit.

He felt her tense, hovering on the brink. He heard the blood rush down to her cunt as her entire body trembled, and let his fangs emerge to pierce the thin, nerve-rich skin on her clit. She came instantly, her hips raised so high off the chair that Julian had to grasp them to keep her steady.

She screamed his name again and again as he sucked both her blood and the creamy evidence of her orgasm down his throat, his mouth clamped hard over her pussy, his head clenched between her quivering thighs.

Finally her body stopped throbbing, and he reluctantly closed her wounds and raised himself up in front of her to slide inside, his cock stretching her walls, making

her gasp.

One hand curled around her neck, holding her steady, as he thrust into her still deeper. She caressed him, holding him, welcoming him. He bathed in her heat, gloried in the tight grip of her muscular walls. Everything he saw and felt was Cecelia, making him real again, reminding him how little the world mattered if he could have the peace he found in her body.

He groaned, his face buried in her neck, and picked up his pace. Her hands couldn't keep still, running over his shoulders, his back, the muscles of his arms.

He felt the tension building in her body. His movements came faster, pounding into her with a ferocity that made it hard to breathe, hard to think. He showed her body no mercy and she did not ask for any, her eager hips rising to meet him, working toward the release they both needed so desperately.

Her loud, panting breath was hot on his skin. He squeezed her neck, tilting her head back, arching her body, and used his free hand to pull her leg up, resting her calf on his shoulder.

Still he did not ease up on her, thrusting into her, heat spreading from her pussy into him, through his entire body.

"Julian," she gasped, "oh my God, Julian!"

His response was a wordless roar, an animal sound, cried out from the depths of his soul into the room, through her ears into her soul. Her body shook. She felt his cock swell deep inside her and let herself go, her orgasm rushing through her veins like mainlined amphetamines, driving every conscious thought from her mind until all she could do was cry out his name and cling to him.

## **Chapter Ten**

Julian signed for the room service and tipped the waiter, then closed the door. He wasn't particularly hungry – stress always affected his appetite – but he guessed Cecelia would be.

He owed her at least a nice meal, before he told her the truth. He had to tell her the truth. He couldn't keep lying about what he was, what he wanted.

He already felt like a shit for taking her work from her. No matter what his intentions were, the fact remained that she trusted him, and he was trying to ruin her career. He couldn't keep taking his anger at himself out on her.

Would she tell him to fuck off? Would she agree to set her work aside, and try something else? Would it matter how he felt about her?

He wished he knew. God, how he wished he knew.

She came out of the bedroom, dressed in one of the outfits he'd bought yesterday and thrown in a suitcase as a precaution, and sat down at the table. "What are we eating?"

She sounded so cheerful. He hated to ruin that.

"I know you like a good steak," he said, "so I got one. Potatoes, veg – anything you want."

He lifted the lids and watched her smile spread across her face. She was so lovely. It made him so happy to make her happy, and it hadn't made him happy to do things for other people for a long time.

She loaded her plate and started eating, her eyes widening in appreciation. "Aren't you having anything?"

"I'm not really hungry," he said, wiping his damp palms on his trousers.

"Are you sure? It's really delicious."

"I'm sure. Listen, Cecelia...we need to talk about something."

"I've been thinking about that," she said.

"What?"

"I've been thinking about that," she repeated. "About what we'll do next. I was thinking, if the vampires are after something in my research, we could alter it and give it to them. Maybe after we figure out what exactly they're after, we can make some changes, make them think whatever I'm doing is different, or is failing, or whatever." She took another bite of steak onto her fork and waved it at him. "Are you sure you don't want some of this? It's really delicious."

"No, really, you go ahead," he said faintly. He was having trouble formulating a



response, she'd thrown him so completely off track.

"I mean, assuming we can figure out what their problem is," she continued. "But I think we can, don't you? We're pretty smart."

"What are you talking about?"

She smiled. "I'm helping. I said you didn't have to do this all on your own, and I meant it." She saw his face and stopped. "I mean, not that you couldn't figure it out on your own, Julian. I have complete faith in you, you know that, right? I just want to help, stop being such a," she shrugged, "millstone around your neck."

"You're not a millstone," he managed. "Don't ever think that."

"Okay. But I haven't helped with strategy or anything, and I want to. So that's what I think we should do. Figure out the problem, and lie about it. Then I'll keep working in secret, because obviously whatever I'm doing has them scared, and then," she lifted her fork, the piece of meat still impaled on it, "after I've made my brilliant discovery, whatever it is, we bring it out and beat them. They won't be able to do anything to me once my work is out, right? Or rather, it won't make sense anymore."

He sank into his chair and picked up the bottle.

"Yes," he said finally. "I guess that's one way to look at it." *Julian, you pussy.* He cleared his throat. "Um, that's a really good idea." It was. Damn her.

"Great!" She finally popped the food into her mouth. "I feel much better now, don't you?"

No! He nodded. "Yes."

"Hmmm. I'm not sure what to do about Doug, though."

"He'll take it badly, I assume."

"Doug takes everything badly," she said. "He's having kind of a rough time in his personal life."

"Oh?" Julian leaned forward.

"He's got some boyfriend who doesn't treat him very well. Robert, his name is. He's very possessive of Doug."

"And Doug doesn't like it?" He took mental notes. If he could get to Doug before Cecelia, he—

Damn it! He was doing it again. Trying to deceive her, to control things. Why did he keep doing this? Why couldn't he just tell her the fucking truth?

Here he was presenting himself as the good guy, the hero. When he was lower than the worst villain, because he was deceiving her, and she was the person he should be more honest with than anyone else.

Because she was the woman he loved.

"I don't think the possessiveness bothers him, so much as the intimacy issues," Cecelia was saying.

"What?" Julian tried to pull his focus away from his own vileness and back to what

she was saying.

"I think it's the intimacy issues," she said. "Instead of the possessiveness."

"Robert doesn't want to commit?"

"Robert doesn't want to do anything, especially go out with Doug's friends. It's like he's hiding something."

*Of course. Here it comes.* "Hiding what?"

She shrugged, finishing her steak and reaching for the cheesecake he'd ordered. "Who knows? All I know is I think he's a liar, and he's stringing Doug along."

"Maybe he has a good reason for hiding whatever he's hiding."

"There's no good reason to hide anything from someone you're in a relationship with," Cecelia said. "Especially not someone you claim you love. If you love someone, you don't keep secrets from them."

Julian finished his drink in one gulp and got up for another. His hands shook as he poured. "Maybe he's ashamed. Or he's scared."

"That's such crap," she said. "Men pull that shit all the time. 'Oh, baby, I was scared that if you knew I was a convicted felon you'd leave me, and I love you too much to bear it' or something. Whatever. The fact is, if you can lie to someone like that, you don't really love them, and that's that."

Julian's heart twisted in his chest. "Maybe he's not lying at all. Maybe he's just shy."

"No. He's hiding something. And Doug just accepts it, and lets this guy run his life for him."

"Not everyone can be as strong as you," Julian said, trying desperately to move the subject along.

"It's not a matter of strength," she insisted. "It's just brains. Once people start lying to each other, where does it stop? How can you believe anything anyone has said, after they've lied to you and they know it?"

"I don't know," he said softly. "I wish I did."

"Why?"

This was his chance. He knew it. *Say it, now. Cecelia, don't hate me, but I can't lie to you anymore and I have to tell you I'm a vampire, but it doesn't matter, does it, because I'm falling in love with you and I'll do anything, anything you want if you'll just forgive me and tell me it doesn't matter.*

*Julian, you pussy!*

He shrugged. "I guess I just think there might be a good reason for deception," he said. "And it matters less what the lie was, but why the lie was."

"You sound like a radio psychologist," she said, grinning and taking a sip of her drink. "Or Dr. Seuss."

He walked over to the table and sat down. "Pass me some of that cake, Sam-I-am."

\* \* \* \* \*

Beside him Cecelia slept, her dark hair curling on the pillow behind her, making a delicate contrast to the pure white sheets. In sleep her face lost the faint wariness it usually held, became something more pure. He wanted to possess it, to keep it safe, even as he knew it was already too late. No matter how much he loved her, no matter how much he took care of her, he could never erase what the rest of the world had done so carelessly.

It was nothing new. People had always been cruel, had always been uncaring. If he wanted he could have thought of a hundred examples far worse than the general neglect Cecelia had dealt with from her family. Hell, he'd performed some worse examples in his lifetime. That didn't mean his stomach didn't twist with rage at the thought that someone, somewhere, had made her feel bad.

He knew it was a way of assuaging his own guilt—wasn't he treating her worse than anyone had, by lying?—but it didn't matter. What mattered was he watched her sleeping, heard the soft sounds of her breath, and something inside him gave. He wasn't falling in love with her, he was already there. Already at the bottom of that fathomless sea, unable to move because his love for her wrapped around him so tightly, and with no desire to move anyway. He loved her, loved her so much and so deeply that he was ready to kill the man he'd once thought was the only truth in the world to protect her. He was eager to do it, waiting to do it, ready like he'd never been before.

And he couldn't tell her. Because until he told her the truth about himself, he couldn't tell her anything else, and until she knew the truth she couldn't really love him back—if she did love him back, if she felt the same way he did. He thought she did, tasted it on her lips and in her blood and felt it in the magic of her body, but until he heard it he couldn't believe it.

She stirred, the sheet and blanket sliding down to expose her ripe breasts. Without thinking he reached out and grabbed the right one, testing its soft weight in his palm. Her nipple hardened and he raised himself up on his elbow to lean over and kiss it, run his tongue over it.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she gave him a sleepy smile. "Is it morning already?"

"No." He sucked her nipple into his mouth and reached for the other one, finding it stiff and erect. Her gasp was like music in his ears as she arched her back a little. "Does it need to be?"

She shook her head, and he lowered his hand to slide down her stomach, over the short curls covering her mound and down into her pussy. Heat radiated from her, warming his hand as he slipped one finger into her tight channel. Already she was getting wet, and his finger moved easily, gathering moisture on the tip and sliding back out to rub over her clit. Her legs parted, their motion making the sheets whisper and shift.

Her lips were soft under his as he kissed her, slowly at first, letting the growing urgency in her body as he toyed with her clit dictate the passion of the kiss. When her hips started lifting to meet his fingers he rolled on top of her, not removing his hand.

"I want you," he whispered into her mouth. "Cecelia."

His words, or the sound of her name, or the light, rapid circles he made with his fingers, drew a soft little moan from her lips. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders, her palms sliding down his back.

Wet heat engulfed his cock as he rocked his hips forward and entered her, unable to keep from shuddering with pleasure. His throat felt tight as he started moving, shifting his weight, gliding in and out of her. Making love to her, as slowly and gently as he could.

She tightened around him as the pressure inside her and the determined movement of his fingers on her clit brought her to a shuddering climax beneath him. His mouth caught her cries, savoring her abandon. The muscles in his arms corded and shook as he braced himself above her, while their tongues tangled together in a soft, wet dance and their bodies joined beneath the sheets in the dark, cavernous hotel room.

Her nipples rubbed against his chest with his every movement. Her hips matched his rhythm, rising and falling, taking him deeper into the heat of her body. Above even their soft, quiet cries her heartbeat echoed in his ears, reverberated through his body, giving pace to his thoughts.

*I love you. I love you. I love you.*

His orgasm took him by surprise, shaking him, making him convulse and grab hold of the beautiful woman he longed to possess. Her arms tightened around his shoulders, her voice whispered his name as his left hand cradled her cheek and he buried his face in her throat. Still he throbbed, pleasure surging through his body so completely he saw stars. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him even closer, as if sensing his need or the emotions behind it.

Finally he came back down, pulling away from her and giving her a kiss. *I love you.*

Julian was a wealthy man, and he'd lived long enough for several lifetimes. But at that moment he would gladly have given all of it up, every penny and every minute of those hours before she came into his life, to have been able to tell her how he felt and have the chance to hear her say she felt the same. He needed that like he needed to breathe.

There was only one way to get it. He could not fail.

\* \* \* \* \*

This was wrong.

It was so wrong on so many levels of wrongness that Elizabeth had lost count of all the ways it was wrong. After what had happened two days before...her family injured, scattered all over South Florida because it wasn't safe to be at their house for the time

being...

The last place in the world she should be was walking up the front steps to Daemon's house.

Yet here she was.

She hadn't been able to put him out of her head. Him, or the devastating kiss they'd shared. Now the world was falling apart around her and somehow she knew the only person who could really make her feel better about it all was Daemon.

If he even wanted to help her. If he was even still interested in being her friend, much less anything else.

She tapped on the door, almost hoping he wouldn't hear so she could leave without taking this last, irrevocable step, but luck was—or wasn't—with her. The sight of him when he opened the door made her breath come a little faster.

How this happened, or why, wasn't even important anymore. What was important was that she wanted him, needed him, and she saw by the way he looked at her that he knew it.

"Elizabeth," he said. "What a lovely surprise."

"Um..." She couldn't think of a damned thing to say. What was wrong with her?

He stepped back. "Come in, please. I was just about to have a drink. Want one?" He gestured her in, his silver cufflinks catching the light like stars in the sky of his black shirt.

"Drink sounds good," she managed, following him down the hall to the living room.

He poured her a vodka straight up and handed it to her before sitting down with his Scotch. "Some mess our families have gotten themselves into, isn't it?"

His conversational tone upset her. He was being so impersonal. Maybe now that Julian was in hiding and she couldn't give Daemon any information about where he was, he didn't want her anymore?

A year ago she would never even have guessed that there was a man out there who didn't want her. Now she knew better.

"It is," she said unsteadily. "That's why I'm here, actually. I mean...it's all so fucked up, isn't it?" She took a hefty swallow of her vodka, and he poured her more immediately. "There was a big fight, a big stupid fight, and I can't go home, and neither can anybody else, and all this is happening because—I don't even know why this is happening, and I'm so tired of it all, and I'm so tired of everything being so uncertain and so messed up and...and..." She sniffled. "And I guess I just wanted someone to talk to."

"And you chose me?"

"Should I not have?"

He shook his head, setting down his glass. "No, I'm glad you did. I think we have some things to talk about, certainly."

She eyed him suspiciously. "What things?"

"All kinds of things." He waved his hand. "Cabbages and kings, as they say."

"So you're the walrus?"

"Goo goo ga joob." He raised an eyebrow. "Seriously, Elizabeth, I've been thinking. We need to end this. This fighting between our families isn't good for me, it isn't good for you, it isn't good for any of us."

"And you know how to end it." She leaned back in her chair and took another drink. She had a feeling she knew what he was going to say. *Give us the doctor, Elizabeth, and we can end all of this fighting.*

Problem was, not only did she not know where the doctor was, she wasn't sure she wanted to give her up anymore.

Cecelia Barnes hadn't done anything to her. It was Julian Mansfield who had. If Elizabeth was honest with herself—and she was trying to be—she knew Julian hadn't really done anything to her, either. He wasn't in love with her. That wasn't his fault, any more than it was hers.

She might have come by this knowledge in an effort to justify coming here to Daemon's house, in an effort to justify climbing into his bed. That didn't make it any less true.

He was watching her carefully. "I think I do. I think I have a pretty good idea how. Will you help me?"

"Yes." She didn't even need to think about it. Whatever his plan was, she had no doubt it would be a good one.

"Good." He took another drink and nodded. "Good. That makes me feel a lot better about it."

"You need to feel better about it?" she asked quietly.

"I do."

She stood up on legs that shook, and reached for his hand. "I think I can help you with that."

He looked up at her, the old Daemon grin back on his face. "Oh?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. This was an irrevocable act, one that she knew might be dangerous.

Problem was, she didn't care. She wanted him. She liked him. Hell, maybe she even loved him. Either way, she wanted to find out.

He stood up and put his hands on her face. She shivered at his touch, at the spicy scent of him that seemed to invade her entire body. "Elizabeth," he said softly. His thumbs traced slow circles on her cheekbones as he leaned forward, and she closed her eyes, ready for his kiss.

It didn't come. Instead he kissed her forehead, so lightly and gently it felt imaginary. Then her closed eyelids, then the tip of her nose. Her body filled with heat,

running through her veins, gathering in her pussy, making her limbs feel loose and her skin supersensitive.

Still he did not kiss her. She opened her eyes and found him looking at her, exploring her with his eyes, from the top of her head down her body. His hands gathered her hair at the back of her neck, tangling in it, tugging gently to tilt her head back farther.

She gasped when his lips touched her throat. She was shaking, now, humming with excitement. This was...this was better than anything she'd felt for a long, long time.

He nibbled her neck, his teeth scraping gently against the sensitive skin, his tongue darting out between them to trace her veins.

"You taste so good," he murmured. "Elizabeth."

Her hands found his waist, twisting the soft fabric of his shirt in shaking fingers. She needed to hold on to him. If she didn't she would probably fall to the ground, a puddle of flaming goo.

Finally he kissed her. By now she'd been waiting so long she was desperate for his mouth, desperate for his tongue. Her response made him groan, and he returned her passion with a dizzying thoroughness.

"Elizabeth," he said again, swinging her off her feet and into his arms.

Their lips stayed fused as he carried her to his bedroom, touching, tasting, taking each other's mouths with a ferocity that set Elizabeth's body alight. Her entire being was focused on Daemon, his mouth, his arms holding her up, his chest hard and broad against her. How had she not seen him this way before, not seen how perfect he truly was for her?

But then she had, hadn't she? Otherwise she wouldn't have agreed to see him the other night. Wouldn't have thought of nothing else since she'd left him.

It didn't matter. His hands were on her now, strong and sure, his body close to hers as he lowered her to the massive four-poster bed in the middle of his bedroom.

"Take off your clothes." His voice was like silk against her skin. He stepped back from her, his eyes hooded with desire.

She obeyed, slowly unbuttoning her blouse and sliding it from her shoulders, exposing her tiny black lace bra.

His hissed intake of breath made her heart beat faster as she unfastened the clasp, and let the straps slide down her pale shoulders. Her breasts still rested in the cups, nipples hard against the sheer fabric.

"Off." She barely heard him over the roaring of her blood in her ears.

The bra slid from her arms and fell on the floor, unnoticed by either of them.

He did not move, just watching as she stood up to unzip her skirt and let it puddle at her feet. Underneath she wore nothing.

Still he did not move. He just stood, his breath rasping in his throat. She could see the thick outline of his erection against the fabric of his trousers.

She reached for him, but he caught her hand before she could touch him, lifting it to his lips. He nibbled her fingers one by one, sucking them slowly into his mouth and releasing them. She closed her eyes, tiny sounds of pleasure escaping her throat as she let herself be carried away on a wave of pure sensation.

"You're more beautiful than I dreamed you would be," he said, his voice husky.

He kissed her palm, his tongue darting out to taste her skin, then moved up, kissing and licking a trail up the inside of her arm, moving closer to her to kiss her shoulders, back to her throat. His shirt was soft and warm against her bare breasts, rubbing her nipples.

His hands found her waist again and held her fast while he pressed his cock against her. She groaned, grabbing his shoulders and returning the pressure with her pelvis, begging him with her body to undress, to let her see him, to let her feel his skin against hers.

"Elizabeth," he whispered. "I watched you for so long, wanted you for so long."

"Then take me," she moaned, tugging his shirt up out of the waistband of his pants and slipping her hands underneath. His skin was soft under her palms, the muscles beneath it hard.

He pulled away just long enough to untwist the cufflinks, letting them fall onto the thick carpet. He pulled the shirt over his head, not even bothering to undo the buttons.

She ran her hands up and down his chest, through the hair that grew there, her fingertips grazing over the small hard nubs of his nipples. She delighted in his gasp, in the way he shivered as she stroked him.

She moved her hands lower, grabbing his belt and unbuckling it slowly. He stood still, hands at his sides, as she slipped the belt out of its loops and dropped it to the floor, then pulled down his zipper.

He inhaled sharply when she reached down the front, her small hands finding his cock and stroking it. His eyes fluttered shut, then opened, watching her.

He pulled her close to him again for another kiss, deep and slow. Elizabeth felt his soul in that kiss, his heart, something deep inside him that yearned for her, only for her. It was intoxicating. She wanted to drink it, to drink him, to swallow him whole and keep him safe inside her. She needed to do it. It was an actual physical ache deep inside her body.

"I can't wait anymore, Daemon," she moaned into his mouth. She tugged his trousers down so she could run her hands over the smooth, firm muscles of his ass, warm and solid.

"What the lady wants..." She felt him smile against her mouth.

She wasn't sure how he did it, but the next thing she knew she was in the bed, the black silk sheets cool and smooth under her heated skin, and Daemon was kneeling before her.

He lifted her leg, running his hand down the length of it, kissing her toes. She



giggled.

"Hush." His mouth slid down her instep, to her ankle, up the back of her calf. It didn't tickle now. She was tense, expectant, waiting to see what he would do next.

He dropped her leg to kiss her knee, the top of her thigh, his teeth scratching her skin. His cock brushed against her foot, and she rubbed it gently.

He moaned low in his throat and kissed the place where her thighs met her hips. His tongue traced a line across her lower abdomen, darting down into the soft curls of her mound and back up.

She gasped, her legs parting under the pressure of his hands and the promise of his tongue.

"So beautiful," he said again, leaning in to put his face between her thighs.

His breath was burning hot on the delicate skin of her pussy, his fingers almost as warm as he stroked her, softly, parting her lips to press a kiss to the hard little mass of nerves of her clit, a gesture so intimate Elizabeth's entire body melted.

Her head fell back as he began playing with her in earnest, his tongue sending shivers of delight through her body as he laved her slick skin, caressing her clit, delving into her cunt and back out. His hands were firm and sure on her trembling thighs.

"Oh God, Daemon..." He pulled her clit into his mouth and sucked on it, scraping his teeth along it. His fangs were pinpricks of painful pleasure on that most sensitive part of her body.

"Yes," she begged. "Oh God, do it, do it Daemon, please..."

His fangs pierced her clit. A rush of pure energy ran through her body, her muscles tensing and contracting, her body shaking as she came, her blood racing into his mouth.

He stayed there for what felt like forever, before he finally licked the wounds closed and reared up above her, his lips red with her blood. She watched as he licked them clean.

His eyes bored into hers. It was so intense she had to fight not to look away, but she didn't. She was trying to be different, to be a new Elizabeth, a better and more open one. So she met his gaze and did not falter, even when he slid his thick cock all the way into her tight, wet cunt.

He didn't blink either, but she saw the way his eyes glazed with pleasure. "God, Elizabeth," was all he said.

Hearing him say her name as their gazes locked and their bodies fused was almost too much for her. Her body shook. Her inner walls gripped him as he pulled back, then thrust in again, deep and slow.

Pleasure flooded through her body, invading every muscle, every nerve. It took her over completely, and she surrendered with a sigh.

He was gasping now, saying her name with every exhalation as he found a rhythm. His mouth took hers again, his teeth capturing her tongue. Her own fangs lengthened, ready to bite, to feed when they both came. She tingled with anticipation.

One of his hands circled under her back to press her close to him. The other found her breast and caressed it, sending shock of delight from it down to her pussy and through the rest of her body.

She tensed. Her blood raced to her pelvis, making her dizzy.

Something in the quality of his thrusts changed. He was still controlled, still expertly riding her body in exactly the right way, but she sensed his unwinding and couldn't wait anymore.

"Come on, Daemon," she whispered, barely able to speak. "I want to drink from you while you come."

He answered with a groan, and tugged at her hair to pull her head to the side, exposing her throat. His own was just in front of her mouth. She could smell his blood under the spicy scent of his skin, hear it rushing through his veins.

She couldn't wait anymore. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him all the way into her, and shifted her head to sink her teeth into his throat.

He did the same to her as his cock swelled inside her. The pleasure and pain of the bites fed off the other just as the two vampires fed off each other. Elizabeth thought her body was literally going to fly apart as they fed, as they came together, Daemon's blood pouring across her tongue so fast she could barely keep up with it.

His thoughts were hers, his feelings...his memories. She saw how he'd watched her, saw herself through his eyes as a temptress surrounded by flame, saw herself laughing and felt his devotion to her. Just as she knew he felt her uncertainty and her ultimate decision that he was too special not to take a chance on.

They stayed locked together for what felt like forever, their shared pleasure sending them into higher and higher realms of ecstasy, before finally crashing back to earth with a start and lying, totally spent, in each others arms.

He kissed her, long and slow. The taste of her blood was in his mouth.

"I knew you'd be worth the wait," he said shakily. "Oh, Elizabeth...my God, you were worth the wait."

"Now, now," she replied. Her own voice was none too steady. "Careful with the sappy stuff, Daemon. People will start to think you're a pushover."

He slid out of her and laid down on the bed, pulling her close. Her head rested on his chest. She heard the solid, reassuring thump of his heart beating beneath the skin. "I'll always be a pushover when it comes to you. Just tell me what you want. I'll get it for you."

Her eyes filled with tears. She had no doubt he was absolutely serious. "I just want to feel safe again," she whispered. "Can you give me that, Daemon? Can you give me safety?"

He tilted her face up so he could look her in the eyes. "I think I can, darling," he said. "I think I can."

## Chapter Eleven

"Julian. I've been waiting for you."

Julian stepped into the room, every nerve picking up danger. Tristan, Edward and the rest of his men followed.

Valentin smiled and indicated a chair.

"No, thanks. I'll stand."

Valentin shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Julian scanned the room. It hadn't changed in all these years, still the same cold marble floor, the same white walls decorated with paintings Valentin had collected over the years. Art was a passion for him, something that never seemed to combine with the other aspects of his character.

Something was missing, though. "Where's your second-in-command?" It wasn't just a gibe. He'd expected to see Daemon here, and worry tickled the back of his mind. Elizabeth hadn't been heard from since the night before.

He knew she'd been seeing Daemon on the sly, knew she'd been at his house a few times. What he didn't know was what that meant about her loyalties...or Daemon's.

"He's busy," Valentin said smoothly. Julian knew the old master well enough to see that Daemon's absence concerned him too. If he hadn't been planning to kill Valentin, to end all of this now, he would have felt sorry for Daemon. Valentin's anger was not an easy thing to deal with. He should know.

"You know why I'm here," he said.

"Of course I do. You know why I allowed you to get in, don't you?"

Julian nodded.

Valentin stood and walked toward him. Julian could feel Valentin's power coming off him in waves, like a foul-smelling ocean. "So." Valentin stopped several feet away. "It comes to this."

Julian shook his head. "It's your decision, Valentin."

"But I don't understand why. Why fight me over some woman? Especially when you know I'm right."

"You're not right, Valentin. It isn't necessary to kill her."

"No, but it's fun." Valentin stepped close, letting his hand caress Julian's face. Julian closed his eyes and turned his head away, but Valentin didn't seem to care. "Remember how much fun it was, Julian? Remember how much fun we used to have?"

"That was a long time ago."

Valentin folded his hands together in front of his chest, his eyes gleaming with

faraway memory. "A very long time," he said, "but it seems like only yesterday in my mind, when you were first made. I taught you how to hunt, Julian, how to feed. How to kill. I made you what you are today."

Julian squared his shoulders, tense and ready for the fight. "You have no idea what I am today, Valentin."

"Shall we find out?"

As if on cue, the others in the room stepped back, creating a wide circle. Julian and Valentin watched each other warily, waiting for the first blow.

It came. Julian forced his power outward, clashing into Valentin's protective psychic walls. The old vampire stumbled backward, sweat beading on his forehead. He smiled.

"Not enough, Julian," he said. "Not nearly enough."

His first blow hit Julian like a train, knocking him down. The skin on his forehead opened, sending blood trickling down past his eye.

"First blood," Valentin said, chuckling.

Julian spun himself around on the floor and leapt up, using the momentum to shoot back at Valentin, feeling Valentin's skin open underneath the weight of his attack.

Valentin screamed and rushed for Julian, his talon-like fingers clawed. Ready to cut, to slice. He went for Julian's face.

Julian only dimly heard the sounds as the others began fighting each other. His entire being was concentrated on Valentin.

The smell of blood filled his nostrils, lengthening his fangs, sending sparks of hungry rage flowing through his body.

He swung at the older vampire, sending energy with the blow, feeling it fly like a knife from his hand. Valentin's hands fluttered to his own chest, where a line of blood appeared, dark red against the pale linen of his shirt.

With a roar Valentin swung back. His fist and the energy blow behind it struck Julian's face, snapping his head back. He tasted his own blood in his mouth.

He retaliated almost before he had time to register what had happened, his left hand balled in a fist, flying out to catch Valentin solidly in the jaw.

It wasn't enough. He knew it even before the blow landed, even before Valentin stumbled back but did not fall.

Julian was forewarned though, and followed the punch with a roundhouse kick that landed squarely on Valentin's wounded chest. The older vampire fell, but leapt back to his feet before Julian could rush forward and pin him to the ground.

Around them were the screams and shouts of the wounded, a dim roar in Julian's ears. He and Valentin circled each other warily.

"I thought you would be loyal forever," Valentin said sadly. "I thought you would be my child forever."

"I grew up." Julian swung, sending power shooting out behind his fist, catching Valentin again on the chin. Blood flew in an arc from his mouth, splattering the marble floor.

Valentin retaliated instantly, hitting Julian in the chest with a brutal kick that almost knocked the breath from his body.

He did not fall, though, standing his ground against the older vampire.

"You have grown," Valentin said, gasping. "I did not expect you to be so strong."

Julian shrugged. Valentin took advantage of the pause to swing again, but Julian was ready for him, ducking, coming back up with another punch that sent Valentin sprawling.

This was it. Julian leapt on him, fangs bared, ready to bite, to tear, to drain the blood from Valentin's body. He was pumped up enough to tear Valentin's head from his body with his bare hands.

Killing his former master bothered him, no matter how necessary he knew it was, but it didn't matter. He would do anything to save Cecelia.

Roughly, he jerked Valentin's head back, exposing his throat, and lowered his face to it. Valentin struggled beneath him, his hands beating ineffectually at Julian's arms and shoulders as Julian pierced the skin of his throat to drain his blood.

The blood that flowed across his tongue was foul, old, but full of power, and Julian forced himself to swallow. If he was going to beat Valentin he needed to take that power into himself, no matter how he loathed the process.

Hands pulled at his shoulders, struggling to yank him from the old vampire's body. He tightened his grip, refusing to let go, locking his fingers around Valentin's neck.

Something slammed into the side of his head with enough force to make him black out for a second, stars creating bright trails behind his eyes. Pain exploded through his body. He tried to get up but was met by the tip of a boot in his face.

Julian spat out blood and started again to get up. His own blood ran down his face. He couldn't see who fought him, could only smell and sense his opponent.

Through the rushing of blood and the echoes of shouts in his ears he heard Edward call his name, and shouted a reply.

He stood up, facing the vampire who fought him, a dim stationary shape against the moving mass of bodies in the room. Marshalling all of his power, and some that he'd taken from Valentin, he swung his fist outward, sending power behind it. The blow hit its target with a satisfying crunch of bone.

Edward was next to him now. "Where is Valentin?"

Julian wiped blood from his eyes and looked at the spot on the floor where he'd left the old vampire. Nobody was there.

"Fuck!" He looked around the room, noticing now that the crowd of fighters was thinning as Valentin's men exited the room. On the floor in front of him was one of Valentin's commanders, knocked out cold.

Julian's legs went weak. They'd lost. This was his gamble, his desperate attempt to defeat Valentin and end the threat to Cecelia's life...and he'd failed.

Holy shit, he'd failed.

He could not go to her and tell her she was safe, tell her he'd taken care of the problem—and then tell her the truth about himself, hoping and praying she would see what he'd done for her as his apology, his proof to her that lying was not what he'd wanted to do.

Three days of struggle and cunning, to find Valentin's lair, to work out a plan, all without letting Cecelia know just what exactly he was planning to do. All for nothing. Valentin would come back, stronger than before now that he knew how powerful Julian had become. The minor conflict that had simmered between them for years was now a full-blown war, one where no one was safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Doug, I'm not going to discuss this again," she said when he answered the phone. He'd been texting her all day, begging her to call him, and she'd finally set this up because she knew Julian was going to be out. He said he had some things to do with Edward and his family.

"Thanks for calling," he said. "And I don't expect you to. Can't we just talk about anything? I haven't seen you in a week, Cecelia, or really spoken to you. You're my friend. I miss you."

In spite of herself, she was touched. "I miss you too. But when you start yelling at me, it kind of makes it easy to forget that."

"I know," he said in a conciliatory tone. "So I haven't called to do that. I just wanted to say hi, and see how you're doing, and reassure you that I'm fine, even though I found myself suddenly unemployed."

"It's not permanent unemployment. It's just until I figure a few things out."

"So you say," he replied. "But like I said, that's not why I'm calling."

"But you can't resist rubbing it in a little bit."

"I'm only human," he said. The smile in his voice was reassuring. "I just wanted to chat. See how things are with you. With your mystery man. Still holed up in his mansion?"

"Actually, we're on a little vacation." She crossed the room to step out onto the balcony.

Outside it was still blisteringly hot, even at midnight, but the view of the moon over the ocean was incredible. In the distance she could hear the sounds of cars and traffic, the insistent *thump-thump-thumping* of bass on the stereo systems. Sounds she normally hated.

It didn't matter here, though. She was high above it all, on a balcony at the Fontainebleau. Hell, she kept expecting to see James Bond chasing Goldfinger down

one of the hallways.

"Oh?" There was a pause. "I won't ask where, because I'm sure you won't tell me. I just want to know you're all right."

She shivered.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. A goose ran over my grave." She shook her head. "I'm fine, really. My mystery man is treating me wonderfully and we're having a great time together."

He sighed. "I guess I'll have to accept that. And I'm happy for you, really. If this guy is what you really want...then I'm glad. And I'd like to meet him someday."

"You will," she said. "I promise." For some reason, she felt like crying. She really did miss Doug, missed joking with him and working with him, and commiserating when Robert was being difficult—which was always.

"How is Robert?" Hearing about the mundane worries and problems of Doug's life with Robert was just what she needed.

"The same. Did I tell you what happened last weekend?"

Cecelia leaned against the railing while Doug talked, happy to finally be discussing something other than herself.

She cut him off, though, when the door opened and Julian walked in.

"Doug, I gotta go. I'll talk to you soon, okay?" She threw the phone down and ran to the door. "Jesus! What happened to you?"

He looked terrible. He was pale and shaky, his clothes filthy with dried blood. Not at all like the always-perfectly-turned-out Julian she knew. Not like *any* Julian she knew. He looked defeated, down, but like he was walking some kind of tightrope of energy. He almost hummed with it.

He raised his hand, shrugging. "I got in a fight."

She took his arm, but he pulled away, striding past her to the bathroom. "I'm taking a shower."

Was she supposed to follow him? Should she leave him be, and wait until he came out to tell her what happened?

For a minute she stood, biting her lip, before hurrying after him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian ducked into the shower as the door flew open and turned the water on full, barely holding back a scream as the icy blast hit him.

"Julian?"

"Yes?" The water was warming up now, so he was able to sound normal.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said, grabbing the soap and lathering up carefully. His muscles still

ached, his cuts and scrapes burned raw. His blood still pumped with adrenaline. Worst of all, he was hungry. Valentin's blood had helped him heal, but it wasn't what he needed now. The desire to feed from Cecelia was so strong he could hardly talk, and he'd rushed into the shower to try to calm himself down before he did something he would regret.

"You didn't look fine," she said, mercifully not opening the shower door.

"Just a little tired," he said. He'd sworn he wouldn't drink from her again until he told her, until he had her permission. It was wrong.

But God help him, he craved the comfort and satisfaction of her body, the feeling of her life force flowing through him, so badly. After the night he'd had, it was next to impossible to keep his vow.

"What in the world happened – oh, no." Her shadowy outline moved back from the door. "You went to their lair, didn't you? The vampires."

"It's not really a lair, Cecelia," he said dryly, scrubbing his scalp with his fingertips. "It's not a smoke-filled cave with gargoyles everywhere. It's just a house, like any other house. Except full of vampires."

"I'd rather think of it as a lair. I don't like thinking of them looking and acting and talking just like us, when they're...murderers."

Cecelia..." For once he was glad he couldn't see her face, glad she couldn't see him. He didn't want her to see him. "Maybe I gave you the wrong impression of vampires, or maybe your situation did. They're not all evil. They don't all kill people. Some of them *are* just like us. They shop and eat regular food and..." He cleared his throat. "Fall in love and have children...and they're just as fucked up and confused about it all as you are."

Her silence told him she was not convinced, but she let the subject drop. "So you went there," she said. "What happened? Did you get them?"

He swallowed. "No."

"Was..." she paused. "Was anyone killed?"

"No."

"So it's not that bad, then," she said, relief in her voice. "You'll get them next time."

That hurt. "I don't know if there will be a next time, baby. I had surprise on my side, and now I don't. They'll be waiting. They'll be ready."

"But you'll be readier," she said. "I'm not sure that's really a word, but if it is, that's what you'll be."

He rinsed his hair, letting the sudsy water run down his face, wishing he could wash away everything that had happened tonight, wash away all the pain. Not the physical pain. That much he could handle.

He wasn't so good at handling the pain of failure, though. He wasn't good at that at all, and her faith in him made it worse.

Worse, because he'd never much cared what anyone else thought, and now, when



he'd found someone whose opinion did matter to him, he'd failed her.

He was silent for a minute, staring at the soapy water swirling around the drain. "I'm sorry," he said.

"You haven't done anything to be sorry for."

"Oh, come now, Cecelia. Haven't we all done things we're sorry for?"

"That's kind of morose and cynical, even for you."

"I'm spreading my wings."

"Your wings of misery and sarcasm?"

"Why not? We all have our little gifts."

"It's so pleasant to be around you when you're like this, you know that?"

He was done showering, but didn't feel yet like leaving the steamy tub. "I am just as the good Lord made me, dear," he said, trying to lighten the mood. Trying to distract himself from the hunger that made his body ache like an exposed nerve.

"Did He deliberately make you impossible to deal with?"

"He likes His little jokes."

"So does someone else I know." Her tone told him she wasn't thrilled with his decision to change their conversation, but she was accepting it.

"Who were you talking to when I came in, anyway? Seems awfully late to be on the phone."

"Doug. He was telling me about his latest Robert problems, and making sure I'm okay."

"You didn't tell him where we are?"

"Of course not."

He shrugged. "Can't blame me for being cautious."

"Can't blame me for being offended you'd think I needed you to babysit my conversations."

"No, I guess you're right there." He turned off the water and stood, dripping. "Sorry. I'm not good at this whole 'trusting others' thing."

"What a shock," she said without rancor.

"No need to be cruel."

"I'm learning from the master."

"I think you did just fine on your own," he said, reaching for a towel.

If anything could make him feel better, it was the look on her face as he stepped out of the tub. The knowledge that she wanted him just as badly as he wanted her, the way her gaze raked up and down his naked body. Blood rushed to his cock. He didn't try to stop it. If ever there was a time when he needed her, it was now. He wanted her to see that.

Hell, it turned him on to let her see that, to watch her face as she watched him

harden under her gaze. Her skin was already flushed with steam from his shower, rosy and glowing.

She cleared her throat. "Looks like you managed to avoid being too badly injured."

"Luckily," he said. The word came out through a throat already growing constricted. The dampness in the room made her hair curl, turning it into a reddish halo around her face where tendrils clung damply to her cheeks. "A few bruises." His headache was disappearing as he looked at her, the outline of her hard nipples obvious against her shirt.

Unfortunately, his gnawing hunger was not. It was difficult to control himself. He wanted to grab her, to bend her over the bathroom counter and take her roughly from behind, to sink his fangs into her throat and swallow her essence.

"You're a lucky man," she said. The tiny quaver in her voice made his blood roar. "I've noticed."

"I feel lucky," he replied, letting the towel fall from his hands. His cock was fully erect now, damp with water from his shower. He felt his balls like weights, hot and heavy, sensitive even to the droplets of water that ran down his stomach and over the skin of his sac to run down his thighs.

She took a step toward him. She wasn't close enough. God, didn't she see how he needed her? How desperate he was?

Her hand stroked his arm, running from his elbow to his shoulder. She barely touched him but he shivered, goose bumps rising on his skin.

"Cold?"

"No," he gasped. "Quite the opposite."

She smiled and reached out for his other shoulder, to stroke it the same way. He grabbed her hand before she could. He couldn't take this anymore.

Keeping his gaze on hers, he lowered her hand, turning it so he could rest his cock in her palm. Her fingers closed around it, squeezing gently.

He moaned. He couldn't help it. His eyes wanted to close, his body wanted to shake. He wanted to thrust madly into her hand, to watch as she jerked him off, to tear her clothes off and shoot his seed onto her bare belly.

He managed to stay still, though, as she slowly ran her hand up the length of his cock and back down, catching the bead of fluid that emerged from the tip and using it as a lubricant.

"Is that good?" Her breathy whisper filled his head, almost driving out what remained of his sanity.

He managed to reply. "Yes."

She was closer to him now, her face filling his vision. "Do you want me to keep doing it?"

"Yes."

With her free hand she opened the buttons of her top and slipped it over her shoulders, taking her hand from him for an instant to let it fall from her wrist. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her nipples taunted him.

His head swam. He wanted to speak but didn't trust his voice. Instead he lifted arms that felt leaden to stroke her breasts, watching them fill his hands, feeling her heart beating beneath them.

She brushed his hand away and stepped closer, still caressing his cock, until her nipples brushed his chest. She moved gently from side to side, rubbing them against him, sending shivers of pure heat through his body.

"I missed you," she said softly. "I thought about you."

The words, both sexy and innocent, made his eyes sting. "I thought about you," he finally managed to say, his voice low and unrecognizable to himself. "I thought about nothing but you." The truth felt terrifying and safe at the same time and made him shudder.

She smiled, that soft, sexy smile that set his heart pounding even faster, and pressed her lips against his chest, letting her tongue dart out to flick his nipple, scraping her teeth over his skin.

Need crashed over him, so hard and fast it turned his vision black. With a growl he spun her around, bending her forward on the bathroom counter so she could brace herself against it with her arms.

His heart and mind wanted to go slow, to make love to her, but his body just wanted to take, to bruise, to *fuck*.

His body won. Without preamble he slammed into her hilt-deep. The beast within him, the vampire who craved her blood, roared with delight as Cecelia's back arched and she cried out. Her voice mingled with his as he too yelled, a wordless cry of triumph.

Gripping her hips so hard his fingers hurt, he pulled back, then thrust again, and again, watching himself slide into and out of her, watching her skin grip his. The scent of her arousal hung heavy in the air like some exotic, expensive perfume, driving his sexual fury even higher.

A glance in the bathroom mirror showed him Cecelia's face transported by pleasure, her eyes closed, her mouth open as she cried out again and again in time with his thrusts. The folds and fissures of her cunt massaged him, provided delicious friction against him as he ruthlessly stretched them, bruised them, forced them—and her—to comply to his demands.

He reached down between her legs, finding her hard little clit and rubbing it, feeling it stiffen further. He pinched it lightly, tugging on it, then letting go and grazing it in a circular motion with his palm. Her cries grew louder. So did his.

His free hand braced the top of her ass, and he shifted so he could slip his thumb into the puckered entrance and fuck her with it that way, filling her cunt with his cock and her ass with his thumb, continuing his assault on her clit with fingers soaking from

her juices.

Her cunt swelled and tightened around him as she came, shaking, screaming, a flood of hot liquid pouring from her to drench his cock. "Julian!"

He almost fell apart, but stopped himself just in time, holding himself back. Instead he smacked her ass, hard enough to feel the vibrations deep inside her. His handprint showed red on one soft, round cheek as blood rushed to the surface. It took every ounce of strength he had not to turn completely feral at the sight.

"Cecelia," he groaned, "Fuck...Cecelia...I could fuck you a million times and it wouldn't be enough. It's never enough."

She didn't reply, but her cunt still spasming around him told him everything.

He pulled out and flipped her around, propping her up on the counter. Her legs closed around his waist, pulling him close so he could sink back into her. Glasses and jars flew to the floor as he swept them away with his free hand, heedless of the sound they made hitting the tiles. He let her slide a little farther back, resting her more securely on the cold tile so he could thrust into her with more force.

The fever raging in his body still gripped him, gripped them both. Her arms were back, bracing herself on the counter, her legs open so he could watch their bodies joining. Her pussy gleamed, her dewy lips plump and pink above his thrusting cock, so engorged it looked almost purple. Filled with blood. He groaned and closed his eyes, then squeezed her waist, pressing her closer to him, urging her to put her arms around his neck and hold on.

This she did, her breasts bobbing against his chest with every movement.

He changed his pace, feeling himself getting ready to come apart, rolling his hips with every thrust. Heat poured into his pelvis, building to an unbearable level. Every muscle in his body vibrated and tightened as he leaned forward to kiss her, raising one hand to squeeze her breast and tug at her nipple. Her mouth tasted sweet, and he savored it, savored the connection with the last bit of sanity he had left.

Her head fell back, exposing her throat. The beast in him roared, shook, all but flew from his body in eager, blinding need.

He pulled her closer, tangling his fingers into her hair to yank her head to the side, keeping her gaze from him or the mirror.

He came. His body vibrated, trembling with a force like he'd never before experienced. His cock jerked deep inside her, sending waves of unbelievable pleasure through him. He felt her burst apart around him, her fluids joining his. Her fingernails dug into his back, breaking the skin, sending exquisite pain shooting through his body. His hoarse, low shout turned into something even deeper, something that rumbled in his throat as his vision went red.

Now. *Now!* *NOW!* He fisted his hand in her hair and lowered his face to her throat, his fangs tearing through her skin, slipping into her mind with ease and tasting her passion and pleasure along with her blood. It was enough to send him back into a second orgasm, something he'd only experienced once or twice in his life.

He spun on a thread, barely attached to his body, riding huge endless waves of pure pleasure, sending webs out through her to share it with him.

Then something in her mind closed down on him like a steel trap.

## Chapter Twelve

Cecelia had been practicing. After her talk with Elizabeth, she'd devoted a few minutes every day to trying to detect invasion into her mind, to warding it off. Once or twice before she'd thought she felt something, but had not been able to pin it down.

Now, as her body convulsed in pleasure so intense it was like pain, as she screamed his name and heard him roaring behind her, she felt it again. Something...indefinable, something *there*, slipping through the corners of her mind.

She didn't know how she was able to catch it. Maybe it was the incredible state of her mind, barely conscious. Maybe it was the distraction of what was happening to her body.

Somehow, as easily as she would pick up a pen to write, she found the invader and grabbed it in triumph.

Triumph that turned to horror as she realized that this...invader...felt familiar. *Was* familiar, and it was Julian, and then she felt the tingling pain in her neck and his mouth covering it, and her ecstasy turned to cold horror.

She pressed her palms to his chest and shoved, hard, but he started pulling back from her first. Guilt and fear were plain on his face.

As plain as the blood—*her* blood—that was still on his lips.

Her stomach heaved. For one dizzying moment she thought she was going to be sick. "Julian?"

"Cecelia. Oh, Cecelia...let me explain..."

"Julian?" She was aching already, her soul shrieking in horror and panic and betrayal.

"Oh my God, Cecelia, oh my God, I'm sorry, oh Jesus, Cecelia baby, you have to believe me, let me explain, Cecelia, please don't go—"

She ran, past him out of the bathroom, back into the bedroom of the suite to grab the nearest item of clothing she could find and throw it on.

It was one of his shirts, crisp and white, and as it billowed down around her she smelled the clean scent of him on it and tore it back off.

He appeared in the doorway as she yanked on a pair of jeans. She wished she could take a shower. She wanted desperately to erase him, every trace of him, the scent of him, from her body. Her eyes burned with the need to cry. Her throat ached with smothered screams.

"Please let me explain."

She ignored him and found a t-shirt, yanking it over her head, not bothering to put

on a bra. She just wanted to get out, away from him, away from this room and the memories of their time together.

"Cecelia, please."

"Explain? Explain? What could you possibly explain to me, Julian? If that really is your name, I mean."

"It is." He walked closer to her, his hands out, palm up, a gesture of supplication that made her body ache. He looked so sad, so lost, standing there with his robe haphazardly thrown on. It almost broke her heart...until she remembered what he was, what he'd done. Then her heart disappeared, replaced with a small cold stone.

She waited until he got closer to her before she swung. "You motherfucker!" The palm of her hand hit his cheek with enough force to jerk his head to the side and send pain shooting up her arm to her shoulder. Her hand itself went numb. "You bastard! You complete and utter fucking...bastard!"

He didn't move. "You're right to be angry."

"Oh, am I? I'm so glad you approve, Julian. Otherwise I might have worried."

When he didn't reply, she continued. "After all, making sure vampires approve of my actions has been an important part of my life until now. Why change? That's what you are, isn't it? A vampire? A fucking vampire?"

He nodded.

The full force of what she'd just said, the full truth of what just happened hit her, and she sank back against the wall, grateful to have something to hold her up. Her legs were shaking. "You're a *vampire*, Julian," she whispered. She could hear the naked pain in her voice and hated herself for it. "You lied to me. How could you lie to me?"

"I didn't want to."

"Someone forced you to lie to me against your will?"

"I didn't mean it that way," he said. He was looking at her so steadily, so earnestly, his dark eyes begging her to believe him. "I meant...I just couldn't think of a way to tell you, that's all. I didn't know how to tell you. I wanted to, I was going to, I just..." He balled his hands into fists and looked down at them. "I didn't know how."

"How many times, Julian?"

"What?"

She folded her arms across her chest, suddenly cold. "How many times did you...feed from me? How many times was I your dinner? How many times did you sneak into my mind?" She started to panic. "My God, was any of this real? Did you invent it? Is there really a Valentin? Was I really attacked?" She pressed her palms to her head, tears rolling down her cheeks now. "Did you make me do all of this? The...the sex? Did you manipulate me into it?"

"No!" For the first time there was a hint of anger in his voice. "No! Fuck, Cecelia, what kind of man—never mind. No. I swear to you I didn't manipulate you to get you in my bed."

"But you did other times."

He sighed and hung his head. "Yes."

"And the attack? Valentin?"

"All real." He looked up at her again. "Cecelia, what I did was wrong. It was so, so wrong, but I never meant to hurt you, or to scare you...and I didn't lie to you about Valentin. I didn't set you up to be attacked. I did save you. I did bring you to my house to keep you safe. I wanted to help you."

"By playing the fucking Jedi Mind Trick on me."

"No, no! Where do you get these things?" A ghost of a smile crossed his face before he obviously remembered what was happening and sobered back up. "I clouded your mind," he admitted. It made her feel a little better that he at least forced himself to look at her while he admitted his betrayal. "Once or twice. To keep the truth from you."

"Did you think you could keep it from me forever?"

He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "Oh...no. No, you didn't, did you? You—oh, what an idiot." She laughed weakly, burying her face in her hands. "Of course you didn't think you could keep it from me forever. You weren't planning on being with me that long, were you? Just long enough to use me for whatever reason, to get your revenge...stupid woman, always so ready to believe your lies...oh my God, I can't believe how dumb I am!"

She pulled away from the wall to find her shoes, picking up a plastic bag as she walked and throwing things into it at random.

"No! Damn it, will you listen to me?" He spun around and came after her in a blur of motion. He'd been keeping that from her too, she realized, remembering the strength of his arms holding her up, the way he'd appeared next to her on the roof of her apartment building, the blur of his hands on the steering wheel.

He was gentle, though, when he touched her, grasping her arm just long enough to arrest her movement and letting go the instant she stopped.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? You have no idea how sorry I am, and how much I regret lying to you, how much I hated myself for lying. I still do. And I will never stop being sorry, but damn it, it didn't mean anything. It was me being an asshole, a scared, miserable asshole, and that's all. It's nothing to do with how I feel about you."

He swallowed and took her arm again, pulling her around to face him. Both his hands were on her shoulders as he looked her in the eyes. "I love you, Cecelia. I'm in love with you. Please...please don't leave, not like this. Give me a chance to prove it to you."

He might as well have reached into her chest and torn out her beating, bloody heart.

"You don't love me," she said, her voice shaking. "If you loved me you would have told me the truth. You wouldn't have fucked with my mind." Her voice rose. "You manipulated me! How am I supposed to believe you love me when you could do that to



me? That's not love, Julian. That's not treating me as your partner, your equal! It's treating me like a possession—it's *making* me a possession, a fucking bystander in my own life! How dare you, how fucking dare you do that to me!"

She wrenched herself from his grasp and raced around the room, shoving her feet into her shoes.

"You can't leave," he said. "They're still after you."

"I know," she snapped. "I know they're after me. What will they do, Julian? Something horrible, like drink my blood? Oh, that's right, you did that already." She tied her shoelaces quickly and stood back up. "I'm not going home. I'll go somewhere else. Somewhere far away, maybe, and I'll figure out what to do myself. Maybe I'll try to talk to this Valentin guy and see if he'll leave me alone if I give him whatever it is he wants."

"You can't," he said, so forcefully she stopped to look at him. His face was even paler than usual. "He'll kill you, Cecelia. Really. It's what he wants to do."

"Yeah? At least he's honest about who he is and what he wants, then," she said. She crossed the room to pick up her purse. She had to try three times to get it to sit on her shoulder and stop falling down her arm.

"It's genetic, Cecelia."

She turned to look at him. He was still clad in the fluffy white hotel robe, standing with his hands hanging at his sides, his shoulders stooped.

"What?"

He shrugged. "Vampirism. It's genetic. That's why Valentin is after you, why he wants you dead. It's why I was watching you, trying to keep you safe. When you become a vampire, your DNA alters."

She stood absolutely still. "You knew this."

He nodded.

"You knew all along why he was after me."

He nodded again. "I was going to try to convince you to take a different direction with your work and abandon what you were doing."

"So why didn't you?" Her voice was still shaky, but with anger now. The bastard.

"I wanted...I wanted to see it," he admitted. "I was hoping you were wrong, or that I could make it look like you were." He obviously saw the look on her face, because he hastily continued, "That was before we met. Once I got to know you, and I realized how I..." He raised his hand, as if he was going to cover his mouth with it, but let it fall back down again.

"Well, once I got to know you. I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to see you fail, but I couldn't see you succeed. I thought if Valentin knew I had you and your work, he'd leave you alone, and I'd have time to decide..." His voice trailed off as he realized what he was saying. Once again, he was telling her he had planned to make the decisions.

"In the lab, you were so supportive," she said. "Just like someone who actually cared about me would be."

"Damn you. I won't say it again, because you obviously didn't like hearing it, but you know I do."

He was wrong. She did like hearing it. The problem was she couldn't believe it, couldn't believe him.

Most of all, she couldn't believe she'd been so damn stupid. How had she not seen the signs? How had she been so entranced by him that she'd not even paid any attention to the enormous hints scattered everywhere around him?

She wasn't just angry at him. She was angry at herself, for being so easily tricked. He must have thought she was a real idiot, and that was what truly made her ill.

Her heart ached too much to even begin to understand that, though. All she knew was he'd lied, and manipulated, and hurt her, and at that moment she hated him for it.

"You don't even know what love is," she said.

She swept past him, refusing to look at him as she did so. Her hand was on the doorknob when he spoke again.

"I'll die, Cecelia," he said.

She stopped and looked at him. He'd sunk to his knees on the floor.

"We'll all die. Edward and Tristan and Elizabeth...Valentin...all of us, all the vampires. If your work succeeds, if your vaccine is made, it will alter our DNA, removing the vampire sequence. If we drink blood that's received your vaccine, we'll die. If we're given it intravenously, we'll die. You'll kill me, Cecelia." He looked at her through eyes rimmed with red. "You'll kill me."

The part of her that loved him screamed, begging her to go to him, to take him in her arms and let him make love to her.

The stubborn, hurt, and angry part was stronger. "Too bad," she snapped, hoping her words hurt him as badly as he'd hurt her. "If I had a needle I'd inject you myself."

The last thing she saw before she slammed the door shut behind her and ran was Julian, still on his knees on the floor, his face buried in his hands.

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone rang, shattering the oppressive silence of the room. Julian grabbed it, hoping it would be Cecelia but knowing in his heart it wouldn't. "Yeah."

"Julian?" Edward sounded uncertain, upset.

"Yeah." There was a pause. "It's me, Edward. What?"

"You sound odd."

Julian sighed. "What do you want?" His head ached, and he rubbed it with the heel of his hand.

Edward didn't speak, but Julian could hear him breathing at the other end of the

connection. "Damn it, Edward," he snapped, "what the fuck do you want?"

"Um...it's Liz."

"What? What about her?"

Edward paused again. Julian was ready to reach through the phone and strangle him. This was the last thing he needed now.

Cecelia had been gone for three hours. Just long enough for Julian to realize she really wasn't coming back.

"Oh God," he said slowly, "if you don't tell me right now what the problem is I am going to kill you."

"Remember how we thought Elizabeth might be with Daemon?"

*Oh, shit.* "Yes."

"She's with Daemon. Santos Diaz saw them out together at one of those bars at River Walk. He said they were...he said they seemed awfully close."

This could not be happening. This could *not* be happening.

"So let me get this straight," Julian said through gritted teeth. "We're all in hiding, but Elizabeth and Daemon are out parading around South Florida like nothing happened, and we're just now finding out about it because your partner at the bar saw her and told us?"

The silence stretched between them like a rubber band, tense and ready to give. "Yes," Edward said. "I know I was supposed to call her, and keep calling her, but I just...I forgot."

Julian's vision went red. This was too much, too much for him to handle right now when he could still smell Cecelia on his skin, in the room. When the wounds she'd inflicted on him were still raw and bleeding and he didn't think they would ever stop.

"I'm sorry, Julian." Edward obviously took Julian's silence as anger at him. "I thought she was safe. I never imagined she would turn on us."

"Yes, you did," Julian said wearily. "You warned me, remember? You told me you thought she could be a danger to us, and I didn't listen, because I thought she could be hurt if we sent her away."

"But you were right," Edward said. "It was too dangerous for her out there."

"I'm so glad I kept her alive for Daemon." Julian leaned back in his chair, suddenly exhausted. "Look, I've got to go. There's nothing we can do about this right now anyway, it's almost dawn and I haven't slept and I just...I've got to go."

"Sure," Edward replied. "Yeah. I guess we should all get some rest. Sorry if I woke Cecelia when I called."

Julian cleared his throat, then did it again. The words didn't want to come. He had to force them out of his reluctant mouth. "She's gone."

"Where did she go? Down to breakfast with a guard?"

"No," he said deliberately. "No. She's gone. She's left me."

"Fuck."

Julian said nothing.

"She found out, huh? You didn't tell her, and she found out." There was a slight accusation in Edward's voice.

"Yes."

"How?"

Again Julian didn't answer.

"Oh." Another pause from Edward. "*Oh. Oh, God.*"

"Yes."

"Shit, Julian, I don't know what to say."

"*She* certainly did."

"I bet she did," Edward said. "Um, do you want me to come there, or something? I mean, I can just come hang out with you if you want."

It was tempting, but Julian wasn't ready to face Edward after Edward had warned him. After Edward had been right to warn him. "No, thanks," he said. "I'll talk to you later, okay? I'm going to try to get some sleep."

The men said their goodbyes and Julian clicked the phone shut.

So Elizabeth had indeed left them, turned traitor. Elizabeth was sleeping with Valentin's second-in-command.

It almost made sense, Liz and Daemon. He knew Daemon had wanted her for years, since long before she and Julian had become lovers. Daemon would probably make her happy, and Julian truly wanted Elizabeth to be happy.

He just never imagined that happiness would come at the expense of her family's safety and security.

The phone was warm and small in his hand. He set it down and picked up his glass, still half full of Scotch.

Cecelia had left him. Elizabeth had left him.

*Cecelia had left him.*

He thought about where she might be, if she was safe, if she would hate him forever.

If she would ever come back.

Most of all, he thought about what in the world he would do without her.

Pain gnawed at him, sharp teeth slicing through his skin, and left him tattered and torn, staring into his glass in his luxurious hotel room.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sheets were rough and smelled of industrial detergent, but Cecelia didn't care as she slid between them and pulled the prickly hotel blanket over her head. Her wet

hair was uncomfortably cold on her neck, but she didn't care about that either.

She hardly noticed her surroundings, anyway. All she could see was Julian's face, his guilt, her blood on his lips, his head buried in his hands as he knelt on the floor.

How could she have been so blind? Was it true, as Doug had said, that she turned her back on what she didn't want to see where men were concerned?

It was so obvious now, as she looked back. His mere presence in the parking lot that night should have told her something was up—"just passing by"? "I've had dealings with vampires before"?

He'd heard them outside her apartment door. How could he have, if he didn't have better hearing than a normal man? His strength, his speed...his fearlessness. She'd thought he was just brave. Now she understood his was the bravery of a man who is very, very hard to kill.

Except she could do it. Her work had the potential to kill him, to kill all of these creatures she hadn't known really existed until such a short time ago.

She'd thought about it in the cab. How terrifying her work must have been to him, to all of them. She didn't like thinking of it. If she thought of it, she started to understand some of his actions, and she didn't want to understand his actions. Didn't want to put herself in his place and see that in his position she would have done almost the same thing.

Almost.

She rolled over and squeezed her dry, irritated eyes shut. She needed sleep. She'd been up all night, checking in to this small hotel at the north end of Miami Beach and huddling on the floor of the tub while the shower turned cold, the spray like needles on her skin as she cried.

*How is Julian doing?*

*Never mind Julian! I don't care how he is!*

*Of course you do.*

*No, I don't.*

Her cell phone rang. She poked her hand out from under the covers and reached for it, turning it off. Whoever was calling her, she didn't want to talk to them. Julian, or Doug or anyone else. She just wanted to sink into the white oblivion of sleep, and wake up to find all of this had gone away.

She heard the maids rolling their cart down the hall outside. She heard hotel guests walking to their rooms, laughing. Heard children screaming in excitement as they walked to the beach.

Then finally, mercifully, she heard nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Are you sure you're ready?" Daemon's arms were tight around her, reassuring her

with his body.

Elizabeth nodded. "I'm more worried about you. Are you sure you're ready?"

"I've been ready for a long time," he said, smiling. "Trust me."

"You know what's funny? I do."

He smiled. "That's what I like to hear." He picked up his cell phone, dialed. "It's me."

He held the phone slightly away from his head, so Elizabeth had no trouble hearing Valentin on the other end.

"Daemon. It's about time you called me."

"I've been working on something. Remember how you wanted me to get Elizabeth on our side? I've done it."

Pause. "Julian's woman?"

Daemon squeezed Elizabeth's shoulders a little tighter. "My woman," he said. "She's putty in my hands."

Elizabeth stifled a giggle.

"Good," Valentin said. "And she knows where Julian is?"

"Not exactly," Daemon said. "After the mess-up at Butler he's been in hiding. They all have. But that's why now is the time to act. Elizabeth is fairly certain he'll be holed up somewhere with the doctor—just the two of them. If we can get to them—just us, no need to take a crowd—we can defeat him once and for all, and have the doctor too, before any of the others even know about it."

"Hmmm. It is a good idea. But how do we find them?"

"Just be ready," Daemon said. "Elizabeth has a few ideas. I'm going to pick her brain tonight to see what she comes up with, and then I'm going to come get you. Where are you?"

"The cabin."

Elizabeth looked quizzically at Daemon, but he shook his head. "I'll call when we're ready. Someone's there to drive you, or are you alone?"

"Gordon is here."

Daemon made a face. "Good," he said into the phone. "He can drive you when we're ready, then. I'll call."

He clicked the phone shut. "So that's it," he said to Elizabeth. "Wheels in motion."

She pressed her face to his chest. "Any regrets?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Not a one."

\* \* \* \* \*

"We need to find them."

Julian's body hummed with nervous energy, an energy he could not seem to dispel

no matter what he did. He lit another cigarette off the tip of the old one, catching Edward's look as he did so.

"What?"

Edward lifted his hands. "I didn't say anything."

"Good." Julian knew he was being a jerk. He didn't care. The hole in his heart had only grown while he tried to sleep, while he showered and picked at food and finally called Edward and Tristan to the Fontainebleau. He felt sick, wasted. His eyes burned and his chest ached and he thought if he didn't have something to focus on, something to do, he would collapse into a corner and howl like a dog.

Which didn't sound too bad, as options went.

"We don't know where any of them are," Tristan said. "They scattered after the fight, just like we did."

"I'm well aware of that," Julian snapped. "But apparently Daemon is still at his house, and I don't think he knows we know where it is."

"Liz does."

"And?"

Tristan shrugged. "I'm just saying she might have told him."

Julian sat down and picked up his drink, finishing it, refilling the glass in almost the same motion. Edward and Tristan exchanged looks but said nothing.

"Yes, Tristan," Julian said, "she might have told him. But she might not have. Is there some reason you don't want to take two hours to go there and see for ourselves?"

"No," Tristan said. "I was just —"

"Don't 'just' anything. Let's go."

"I think we should have a better plan first," Edward said. "And Julian, you know that. Look." He sighed and leaned forward in his chair. "I don't want to sound like an idiot, but I don't think you're really yourself right now. Maybe it would be better if you got some rest first. You look like you haven't slept in days."

"I'm fine."

"Right. Because you always chain-smoke, and you always drink like a fish, and you always rush into things without planning ahead. Shit Julian, you were a military commander for how many years? You were at fucking Waterloo, for God's sake. You don't just rush into things like this, and that's how I know something is wrong, because I've never seen you like this."

"We need you," Tristan said. "If we're going to do this and succeed, we need you. *She* needs you."

His words cut through Julian like claws. "She'll never come back," he said, his red-rimmed eyes staring at nothing. "But I want her to be safe. At least I can give her that."

"But you don't need to die in the process," Edward said. "So let's plan this out a little better, and we'll go later. You know I'm right, Julian. You're the one who taught

me.”

“Bastard,” Julian said. “You’re not supposed to be better than me.”

“I’m not, man,” Edward said softly. “I never will be.”



## Chapter Thirteen

Cecelia didn't see Doug at first. The interior of the restaurant was so dim after the bright late afternoon sun outside that she had to stand uncertainly by the door, clutching her purse to her chest, to let her eyes adjust.

She felt so vulnerable. She wasn't used to feeling that way. As she spotted him and made her way to the table, she was acutely aware of the eyes of everyone in the room, the fact that they were all strangers. Any one of them could be a spy, any one of them could be a vampire.

Any one of them could be plotting her death.

It was not a pleasant thought.

"You look terrible," Doug said as she slid into her seat.

"Thanks."

"No, I mean, you look fine, just...dragged out. Like you haven't slept in a week." Doug leaned forward and smiled. "I guess you haven't been sleeping much, huh?"

She swallowed. "It's over."

"I'm sorry." He took her hand. "Are you okay?"

The waitress came by to take their orders, sparing her the necessity of an immediate reply. She ordered a hamburger and fries in a voice made clear only through effort, and drank some of the soda Doug had already in front of him.

"I'm fine," she said. "But I need some help."

"Anything I can do. You know that."

"I'm going to take a little vacation, I need to get out of town for a while." It wasn't the best plan, but it was the only one she'd been able to come up with. "The research files are gone, as you know. But there's still some stuff to clear up at the lab. If you could do that, I'd really appreciate it."

"No problem," he said. "Do you want me to water your plants?"

"No," she replied, a little too forcefully. She didn't want Doug anywhere near her apartment. Honestly, she'd rather he not be near the lab, either, but she knew she couldn't ask him to stay away. He'd need to find someone else to work for. "Don't worry about my place. Just clear out the lab. Go during the day," she added, hoping the request didn't sound too strange.

If it did, he didn't indicate it. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know." That was a lie. She had an electronic receipt for a plane ticket in her purse, God bless Kinko's internet access. Her old college roommate lived in Seattle and Cecelia knew she was welcome to stay there any time. It was as far away from Florida

as she could afford to go. "I just need a break, you know?"

"Jesus, Cece, what did this guy do to you?"

She sighed. "It doesn't matter."

"It does. I don't like to think of you being hurt."

"And I appreciate you haven't said 'I told you so', Doug, I really do. Because you did tell me so." She bit her lip. "I guess I'm not as smart as I thought."

"None of us are, when it comes to relationships," he said. "We just do the best we can."

He leaned back as the waitress brought their food, and took a bite of his salad. "All I know is this guy Julian must be a real idiot to let you get away."

Cecelia managed to swallow a French fry. It tasted like cardboard. Something about what Doug had just said bothered her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She shrugged mentally. Didn't everything bother her these days?

"Thanks, Doug." She washed down the leaden fry with more of his Coke and tried to smile. "If only you were straight..."

He smiled back and finished the old joke, but his eyes were strangely sad. "If only you were a man."

They chatted through the rest of the meal, or rather, through the rest of Doug's meal. Cecelia barely managed to eat a quarter of her burger, and a few fries. She just wasn't hungry.

Doug noticed. "You know, when you barely make a dent in a pile of fries, I know there's a problem."

She forced a smile. "I had a big lunch."

"Uh-huh. When I have a lunch like that, it's usually because Robert's done something to make me feel like an idiot again."

"One of these days I'll have to meet your Robert. Any man who can keep you hanging on when he treats you so badly has got to be something to see."

"He's not so bad," Doug said. "Would you like to meet him?"

"Oh yes, right after I buy a big pile of diamonds and take them for a ride on my spaceship."

"Seriously." Doug signaled for the check. "He's at my house right now, if you want to meet him. I told him we might stop by."

She hesitated, but her flight didn't leave until almost midnight. She had time, and the prospect of meeting Doug's erstwhile boyfriend was almost enough to bring her out of her depression. She nodded.

"Let's go, then," he said. "I'll drive."

She didn't tell him she didn't have her car.

\* \* \* \* \*

Doug's house was small, a quiet, unassuming place in a tiny neighborhood in Tamarac. It was originally built as a retirement community, and the houses reflected that in both their age and their size—they were little more than cottages, really, with postage stamp-sized yards and wall or window air-conditioning units.

The sun had set by the time they reached it, making Cecelia nervous. She would never see night the same way again.

"I think Robert's asleep," Doug said as they walked into the tiny house. "I'll go get him."

Cecelia sat on the wicker couch and closed her eyes. She felt safe here, for the first time since she'd left Julian. It was only temporary, but it felt good for the moment.

Doug really was her friend. She felt bad for doubting him in the last few days. It had been nice of him to say Julian was crazy to let her get away.

Abruptly her eyes opened. Wait a minute. Doug did say "Julian", didn't he?

She'd never told him Julian's name.

Her mind racing, she sat as if glued to the couch for another minute, trying to be absolutely certain.

No. She hadn't. She'd never mentioned Julian's name to Doug. Not once. Not at all.

Time froze as she got up from the couch on unsteady legs. Her body felt made of jelly, like it wasn't completely under her control. Her muscles moved slowly but her heart was pounding like a jackhammer in her tight chest.

Grateful she was wearing tennis shoes and not heels, she started walking as silently as she could across the hardwood floor. If she could just get to the door...there was a convenience store just down the street. She could run like hell and get there.

*And then what?*

She had no idea. But anyplace had to be safer than this house, right now.

"Cecelia."

She froze in the middle of the room, on her tiptoes, the absurd thought that she looked like Wile E. Coyote running through her head.

Doug's voice was different, resigned somehow. "I'm sorry, Cecelia," he said. "I really didn't want this to go this way."

She turned around, half expecting her muscles and bones to creak, she was so tense.

Doug stood in the hallway entrance, an apologetic look on his face.

Behind him was a man Cecelia could only guess was the famous Robert. He was tall and lean, almost as thin and pale as the silvery white fangs that showed when he smiled. Just as they'd shone in the moonlight the first time she'd seen him.

"Dr. Barnes," he said, grinning. "I was hoping to see you again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian tossed and turned under soft sheets, his head buzzing, his heart aching.

He was hungry, and tired, but he could not seem to shut his brain down long enough to relax.

The room was still dimly lit, the last rays of the dying sun making the heavy curtains glow around the edges.

He closed his eyes. They flew open. He turned over, burying his face in the soft pillow. His legs itched. If he scratched his leg, he'd be breaking his comfortable position. If he let it itch, he wouldn't be comfortable either.

It didn't matter. It didn't matter what he did, or what position he was in. He couldn't sleep because when he closed his eyes, all he saw was Cecelia, the anger on her face when she said, *"I'd inject you myself."* Her horrified expression when she realized what he was, what he'd been doing to her.

At least that was better than some of the other images of her that came to mind. Naked in his bathtub...straddling him on the bed, her breasts high and full...her face, wild and free with ecstasy.

He'd rather remember her anger than her pleasure right now, but he didn't want to think of either. She was like a ghost he could not exorcise, and he knew it would be a long time—years, decades—before he could.

Finally he drifted off, only to waken again when Edward and Tristan knocked at the door of his room three hours later. They'd moved into the suite with him, ostensibly to plan, but he knew they just did not want him to be alone.

"Do you think he's asleep?" It was Tristan, whispering, muffled by the door.

"I hope he did get some sleep," Edward replied. "At least he's stopped the music."

"What's the matter?" Tristan replied, and Julian could practically see his grin. "Don't you like hearing 'Ain't No Sunshine When She's Gone' thirty times while you're trying to sleep?"

"It is just like a lullaby, isn't it?"

"I know I love it."

Julian lifted his head from the pillow and spoke to the closed door. "I can hear you."

The door opened. "I know," Edward said. "I don't care, but I know."

Julian sat up and rubbed his head. "What time is it?"

"About seven."

Julian nodded and got up, picking clothes out of a suitcase and taking them into the bathroom with him.

He hurried through his ablutions and was back in the living room of the suite quickly.

"Do I look like I got any sleep?"

"Not really," Edward said. "But you don't look worse, either."

"I'll take that," Julian said. "Not looking worse is always good."  
They didn't speak again as they left the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cecelia's hands hurt where the rope cut into them. Her muscles ached from being forced into one position for so long.

This didn't seem real. She was tied to a chair in Doug's living room, gagged, like some bizarre ornament.

The strangest thing about it was the room looked the same. Bright and airy, the light green and pink floral pattern of the cushions on the wicker couch and chairs, the pale shiny floor, the bright prints on the walls and the plants, all looked normal. Just like every other house in South Florida.

She should have been in a dungeon, or a filthy shack in the Everglades or something. Not here, bound to a chair and waiting for death in the middle of a quiet suburb built for old people.

Whatever the surroundings, though, she was in trouble. Big, major trouble. The kind people don't walk away from.

She almost didn't care. Julian had betrayed her. Doug had betrayed her. What did it matter what happened to her?

*That's bullshit, Cecelia. Julian and Doug aren't your reason for living.*

*You think you're stupid for not seeing that Julian is a vampire? For being so besotted you let the signs float right by you?*

*That's nothing compared to how fucking stupid you are if you don't try to figure out some way out of this.*

Doug came out of the kitchen to stand in front of her.

"I'll take the gag off," he said, "if you promise not to scream."

She nodded.

Her mouth was so dry when he removed the clump of fabric that she thought she would throw up. She gagged and choked, and did not refuse the glass of water held to her lips even though she wanted to spit it right back out at him.

"How could you do this to me, Doug? I thought you were my friend."

"I am your friend," he said. She saw his eyes and realized with horror that he really meant it. "That's why you're here, instead of already being with Robert's master. I told them I could talk to you, convince you to stop your research. You can do something else, and I promise I'll stay with you, keep working with you, to make sure you don't go astray again."

"You can't believe they'll be satisfied with that."

"Robert loves me," Doug said. "He doesn't want to see you get hurt any more than I do."

"He put up a pretty good front of wanting to hurt me, when he attacked me outside the lab. Why do that, Doug, if all they want is for me to stop my work? Why not just go through you, have you explain the situation to me?"

Doug looked sad. "You're too headstrong. You wouldn't have believed me."

"I would have believed you if Robert had come along. What are they really promising you, Doug?"

His eyes narrowed. "Robert loves me," he repeated.

She didn't know if she was even talking to Doug. Was this him, or was it Robert talking through him?

She cleared her throat. "Doug, untie me. Just let me go." She didn't take her eyes off his. "Look in my purse. There's a plane ticket there. I'm leaving. I'm leaving the field, I think. I can find other work. There are a lot of pharmaceutical companies that will hire me. Just untie me, and let me go, and we don't need to worry about this anymore."

"I can't," he said. "I would if I could. But I've been given my orders."

"By whom?"

He shrugged. "You know who. Don't make this any harder than it has to be, okay? We'll work this out. We could have worked it out a lot faster and easier if that dickhead Julian hadn't gotten himself involved. How could you be with that guy, Cece? He's so fucking smug. So superior."

Her eyes burned. "Superior to shits like Robert and Valentin's other filthy thugs, yes."

"Don't call Robert names."

"Fuck you, Doug. Your boyfriend is evil. He's a foul, murdering piece of shit, and if you don't see that, that's too damn bad for you, but I know the truth and I don't care what you do to me, I'll always know it."

"My boyfriend is a murderer?" Doug laughed. "That's rich. Considering that Julian was once Valentin's next-in-command. Want to know how many people he killed, Cece? Back before he decided he was too good to live like a real vampire?"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't believe you if you showed me the bodies, Doug, and Julian standing over them with their blood on his hands."

"That's enough." Robert entered the house, smiling widely. Did the man ever stop grinning? He was like a politician in hell. "Enough talking. I need to make some phone calls."

"I'll get the phone." Doug practically sprinted down the hall. Cecelia watched him pass. He was never that helpful to her.

Especially not now.

"Comfortable?"

"Not especially," she said. "But I guess it doesn't matter, does it?"

He shrugged. "I don't care, no. I was just making conversation."

"I'd rather be silent, if it's all the same to you."

He laughed. "I can see why Julian likes you. He can't keep his mouth shut, either. You'll banter on your deathbed, won't you?" He leaned closer to her, close enough that she could smell his sweat. "But then, I guess you are."

He stepped back when Doug came in with the phone, glancing at the both of them. "Everything okay?"

"Just fine, love," Robert said. "I was just reassuring Dr. Barnes here that we mean no harm."

"I told you," Doug said to Cecelia. She didn't bother to reply.

"Daemon?" Robert was on the phone now. "Yeah, I can't get Valentin, his phone is busy all the time. So I'm calling you. I have the doctor here. Where should I take her?"

Cecelia stopped listening. Who knew how many of them would be coming, what they would do to her. She was only sure it would be painful, and would probably last quite a while.

She was fucked, well and truly.

The last coherent thought she had before the tears came was to picture Julian's face in her mind, and wish desperately that she was somehow able to grab hold of him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Julian pounded on the door. When there was no answer he pounded again, harder.

Daemon's car was in the driveway. So was Elizabeth's. There was no way they weren't there, and since Tristan waited by the back door, there was no way they were leaving.

His fist slammed into the wood, again and again. He felt strong enough, energized enough, to break the damn thing down.

In fact, that wasn't such a bad idea.

He pulled his arm back, preparing to smash through the wood.

The door opened.

Elizabeth stood there, her blue eyes wide, hair hanging loose and shining over her shoulders.

"Julian," she said. "I wondered when you'd turn up." She stepped back, motioning for him to enter. "Come in, please. Edward too." She gave him a kiss on the cheek. If she noticed him wince at her touch, she didn't indicate it.

"Tell Tristan he can come away from the back door," she continued, closing the door behind them. "Nobody's going anywhere."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Julian said through clenched teeth.

She smiled up at him. "I would. We have a lot to discuss."

All of the replies that came to mind seemed inadequate, so Julian just frowned and followed her down the hall to the large, airy living room. His body was so tense he thought he might shatter if he brushed against anything too hard.

In contrast, Daemon lounged on the dark suede couch, holding a highball glass. "Welcome," he said, holding up his drink. "Bourbon?"

Julian shook his head. "This isn't a social call, Daemon."

"No, it isn't," Daemon replied, "but you might like a drink anyway. Certainly you should sit down."

"We haven't been friends for seventy years, Daemon. Don't act like we are now."

"We stopped being friends because you left the family," Daemon said. "Not because I stopped liking you."

Julian just stared at him. "How kind of you to say. The empty place in my heart has been filled."

Daemon smiled, but Julian saw the way the other man's eyes darted past him and knew that Daemon was scared. He could smell it too, a faint tanginess in the cool air of the room.

Elizabeth appeared at Julian's side, holding a glass. "Really," she said. "Have a drink. We have some things to talk about."

"I'm not here to talk," he said, but he accepted the drink anyway, after unobtrusively smelling it to make sure it contained only bourbon. He held it loosely, ready to drop it if he needed his hands free. "I'm just here to find out where Valentin is."

"He's at the cabin," Daemon said. "He's got Gordon with him, but nobody else. It's by Lake Okeechobee. If you want to follow me, I'll take you there."

"What?"

Daemon smiled and raised his eyebrows. "Elizabeth and I will take you there. Valentin is there, and he's only got one guard. It shouldn't be difficult for us all to kill him."

Julian downed the bourbon. "What?"

Elizabeth patted him on the shoulder. "You heard him," she said. "Daemon wants to join our family. For me," she added, lifting her chin slightly, looking Julian in the eyes. In hers he read the fierce pride, the happiness that she'd found, and was glad for her.

Not glad enough to immediately take Daemon at face value, though.

"You want to join us? Why?"

Daemon shrugged. "Look at her."

Elizabeth smiled and went to sit next to him. Daemon put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer, but his eyes didn't leave Julian's. "I love her," he said. "She wouldn't betray you. I'm sick of Valentin. I don't want your doctor to die."



Julian winced. "She's not my doctor."

"She is," Elizabeth said, before glancing to Julian's side. Edward stood there, and although Julian forced himself not to look it was obvious Edward had done something, because Elizabeth immediately said, in a bright, chirpy voice quite unlike her usual speech, "Daemon thinks he can bring quite a few members of Valentin's family over."

"That's interesting," Julian said, "but it doesn't explain why he's doing this, or what he wants in return, or why I should let him be part of our family."

Daemon stood up. "I told you, I'm tired of Valentin. I'm tired of seeing him kill people and listening to his increasingly paranoid ramblings and watching his stupid live sex shows."

"What live sex shows?" Elizabeth asked indignantly.

"Boring ones," Daemon said to her. "Very dull, unsexy live sex shows."

She crossed her arms and made a face, but didn't reply.

"And that's it," Daemon said. "I don't want to do it anymore. I don't respect Valentin. I respect you. I owe you something, man. You know what you did for me, all those years ago. But it's more than that now. You kept her safe," he said quietly, turning to Elizabeth. "You could have kicked her out. She's told me how she behaved. You would have been justified in doing it. Valentin would have done it. And he would have killed her, if he'd gotten hold of her. And he would have made me watch, because he knew it would bother me."

He cleared his throat and turned back to Julian, who was wishing he had another drink. "So that's it," he said. "Julian, we used to be friends. I'd like to think we could be again. I want to be with Elizabeth, and she wants to be with her family. So that's it. I'll help defeat Valentin. I know where everybody lives. I'll help you get rid of whoever doesn't want to come with us." He shrugged. "What do you say?"

Julian hesitated. He wanted to believe him. He wanted to kill Valentin so badly he could taste the old vampire's blood.

This was still Daemon, though, and while the two men had been friends, that was a long time ago.

He took a deep breath. "Okay," he said. "You help me get Valentin and we'll talk."

It wasn't what Daemon wanted, he knew, but it was as much as he could give.

Daemon held out his hand, but before Julian could take it Daemon's cell phone rang. "Sorry. It might be—"

Julian nodded and waved his hand. "Go ahead."

Daemon picked up the phone. "Yes? Oh, yeah, he...oh?" He glanced at Julian, his eyes wide. "Where? What's the address?" He snapped his fingers and gestured wildly at Elizabeth, who quickly found him a pen and paper. He scribbled something down, and held the paper up while he continued speaking.

"Yes. Good work, Robert. I'll get in touch with Valentin. You don't need to call him, okay? I'll take care of it."

Whatever he said next was lost. The roaring in Julian's ears drowned it out. The paper said, "They have her."

## Chapter Fourteen

Robert and Doug sat on the couch, engrossed in an episode of *The E! True Hollywood Story* while they ate Chinese food.

Nothing had been offered to Cecelia. She wouldn't have accepted anyway. Her stomach rebelled even at the smell of the food.

She tried to distract herself by coming up with plans for escape. Maybe this Daemon person would untie her, and she could brain him with the chair. Or maybe they would want to drive her somewhere. They couldn't take her outside all tied up. Someone would see.

But mostly she cursed herself. For leaving Julian, for saying such horrible things to him. Somehow knowing she was probably going to die this night changed her views of his lies. It was wrong, yes. She just couldn't bring herself to care so much right now.

She simply wanted him. Wanted him to hold her, to smile at her in that approving way he had when she'd said something funny or clever, or when she'd done something he liked. Or to look at her the way he did when she'd done something really right...like when they were in bed.

She tried to focus on the television, but couldn't stop the images. Couldn't stop feeling his hands on her body. Couldn't stop hearing his voice. The way he called her "baby" made her shiver.

Robert sat up, frowning. "That sounds like Daemon's car. Put her gag back in." He turned the TV off as Doug stood up and picked up the ball of fabric.

Cecelia shook her head. "I won't let you gag me again, Doug," she said.

Robert set down the remote and walked over to her, pulling his arm back to deliver a resounding slap to her face. "Shut up," he said.

Cecelia managed to keep silent, but her eyes welled up with tears. The entire left side of her face was hot and numb, her neck aching from being snapped to the side.

Doug glanced at Robert, but didn't speak. He stood in front of Cecelia. "Sorry," he said, lifting her chin with one hand.

She opened her mouth, letting him think she would be compliant, but when he got closer she dove forward, catching his fingers in her mouth.

His blood filled her mouth, making her stomach heave even as her spirit cried out in triumph. Between her teeth she felt bone and clamped down harder, shaking her head, appalled at the violence she was committing but oh-so glad she was doing it.

Doug screamed and tried to pull away, but she held him fast. Her vision was going red. She couldn't do this much longer without being sick, she knew, but damn it while she was still able she was going to see that the bastard never used his fingers with ease

again.

Her mouth hurt. Her teeth screamed in agony. She wondered if they were cracking as she twisted her head, trying to break Doug's fingers.

"Enough!"

Robert's second slap was even harder. She cried out, seeing stars in front of her eyes. Doug yanked his hand back, his sobs muffled beneath the ringing in her ears.

The knock at the door interrupted all of them. Cecelia froze. This was it.

Robert shot a disdainful look at the crying Doug and opened the door.

Cecelia wasn't sure what happened at first. All she knew was one minute Robert was in the doorway, the streetlights outside shining on his face, and the next he was up against the wall while a man she'd never seen before choked him.

Doug looked at her. "What—"

She ignored him. Ignored him, because now she saw Edward, and Elizabeth, and as tears starting rolling down her cheeks she saw Julian and screamed his name.

His hands shook with rage as he fumbled with the ropes that bound her wrists and ankles.

"Oh my God, Julian," she said, sobbing, her voice shaking. It tore at his heart. "Oh my God."

"It's over now," he managed to say. He couldn't look at her. The quick glance he'd gotten when he walked in the room was enough. He'd never be able to get the image out of his mind. She was covered in blood, crying, a bruise already forming on her cheek where he assumed one of those bastards had hit her.

He'd kill them for that. He couldn't wait to do it.

"Hold them," he ordered Edward and Daemon. "Don't let them move."

The two men obeyed. Julian saw the fear in Doug's eyes and allowed himself a thin smile at the man before turning back to Cecelia.

He freed her wrists first, then her ankles, rubbing them to try to soothe her skin. He didn't trust himself to speak to her. It was a pretty safe bet she was glad to see him. That didn't mean she'd be glad to see him again after they got out of here.

"Julian," called the vampire. Robert. Julian remembered seeing him before, but he hadn't made the connection. "Oh, Jooolian!"

Julian turned to him, eyebrows raised.

"Valentin's on his way, Jooolian. I called him." Robert shot a baleful glance at Daemon. "You think he didn't suspect you?"

Daemon shrugged. "I didn't care," he said.

"You should. He's your master."

Daemon glared at him. "Not anymore," he said.

"He says he still is."

"He can say whatever he wants. Doesn't make it true."

Edward watched them talk for a minute, then turned his attention from Doug to Julian. "What are we doing?"

Julian stood up. "Get Cecelia out of here. Take her home—I mean, take her wherever she wants to go. She'll be safe now," he said, glancing at her. Just looking at her hurt. "We'll stay here and make sure Valentin doesn't go after her again."

"You can't beat him," Robert said.

Julian raised an eyebrow. "Want to bet?"

"He's not coming alone. He's bringing the whole family. All thirty of them. You can't possibly beat them all."

"I don't need to," Julian said. "Just him. The others can make their own decisions."

"You're such a dick."

Julian laughed. "I knew there was a reason I liked you, Robert. You're so classy."

"Julian?" Edward had Cecelia in his arms.

Julian forced back his jealousy at the way Cecelia leaned into his friend and said, "Yes?"

"I'm going to get her out of here now, okay?"

Julian nodded. He could feel Cecelia looking at him but couldn't bear to meet her gaze. "Just get her safe and get back here. Call the Diaz brothers. Call everyone we know. Have someone wait with her and send the rest here. If Valentin is bringing his army, I want mine."

"I don't want to go," she said.

Edward spoke. "Cecelia...it's going to get pretty ugly."

"I don't want to go," she said. He could feel her staring at him.

"Nobody's going anywhere."

Julian turned. Valentin was in the doorway. Behind him were more men, some whom Julian knew, some he didn't. How they were all going to fit in this tiny house he had no idea.

He started toward Valentin, intending to rip his head off, to finish what he'd started days before, but was shoved back by Valentin's men.

The house filled with growls and rumbles. Daemon and Tristan let go of Doug and Robert and joined the fight, pulling people away from Julian. He heard Cecelia calling his name and shouted, "Get her out of here!"

The fight began in earnest. All he saw were vampires, flying at him, teeth bared. He fought them off, wounding them, sending them reeling into walls and Daemon and Elizabeth to finish, reserving his strength. His nostrils filled with the scent of Valentin. Bloodlust raged in his body.

He heard Cecelia scream again but did not dare turn to look, for Valentin was in

front of him now, fangs bared, hands in claws ready to tear into Julian's skin.

He sidestepped and grabbed Valentin's head, slamming it into the wall. The plaster buckled and cracked.

Valentin's nails dug into Julian's sides, ripping the skin. The pain was immediate and profound. Julian gritted his teeth and shoved again, sending Valentin's head through the drywall in a rain of dust. A pipe broke, sending water spraying out through the hole.

Valentin's fingers convulsed, tearing more. Julian felt a chunk of his flesh being pulled from his body, and dragged Valentin back through the hole, keeping his hands and arms well away from the gaping, fang-filled mouth.

Valentin's eyes were red, and blood ran down his face. "You still cannot beat me," he said, trying to grab Julian's face.

Julian saved his breath and brought his knee up into Valentin's stomach, doubling him over, then again into his face. Blood gushed from Valentin's broken nose.

The old vampire stumbled back, his hands covering his face. The sight filled Julian with a savage joy, and he flipped Valentin around, pinning his arms to his side while yanking his head back.

He leaned in, fangs tearing into Valentin's throat. This time he was prepared, and did not wince as the blood flowed down his throat, great choking waves of it, filling him with power, with rage.

Valentin screamed. Hands tore at Julian's hair, feet kicked at his legs. He braced himself against the wall to keep standing, to keep his grip. He would not be deterred. He would not lose this time.

Valentin's shrieks grew louder. His body was shriveling, shrinking, becoming frail and powdery in Julian's arms. Julian fought his distaste, fought to keep doing what he was doing despite the horror of it. The horror of the knowledge that Cecelia might be watching.

A body knocked into them, sending them to the floor. Still Julian held on. Over the roar of the fight he heard Valentin's heartbeat slowing...slowing...missing beats.

Someone was pulling at him, hitting him in the body and head. He could not let go. He was too close...

Valentin's body went limp. Julian removed his mouth from Valentin's throat, his body shaking with triumph and disgust and the red, red, river of blood that flowed through his body and made his vision crystal clear, made his muscles tremble with power.

He let go of Valentin and pulled himself back farther. From his boot he pulled his knife and raised it, only to be yanked away. One of Valentin's men threw him against the wall. He felt more plaster give, felt his body shout in protest.

A fist met his eye and he swung blindly, connecting with a solid thud and shoving the vampire out of his way before one of Valentin's men could find the old master and

feed him.

Someone was trying, holding a bleeding arm over his head. Drops fell on Valentin's face. Julian kicked the man off, planting his heel right on his old master's forehead, and raised the knife again.

This time he brought it down, all the way through Valentin's neck and into the floor beneath.

Cecelia cowered in the corner behind the ficus. One glance at the army of vampires was enough to convince her she had no business even attempting to be part of this fight, but she'd managed to trip a few of the enemy vamps as they passed by her, winning a quick smile from Edward.

Julian she could not see. He was engaged with Valentin. She heard them slamming into the walls, felt those walls shaking. Plaster rained down from the ceiling and the windows behind her rattled.

She wanted to cover her eyes but couldn't. The crowd of fighters was thinning. Bodies littered the floor. There was no sign of Doug or Robert anywhere. She hoped they were dead.

The plant fell over, exposing her. Hard hands grabbed her and lifted her from her hiding spot. She screamed again and fought, struggling against the vampire who held her, but his grip was too strong.

*Remember the self-defense class.* She took a step back with her right foot and brought it up, driving it into the vampire's groin. His sharp cry of pain filled her with joy, and she brought her foot back again to knee him in the face.

Not so successful this time. He had a skull like a rock. She hurt him, but hurt her knee just as badly.

Stumbling back, she heard Julian cry out in triumph. She fell on the couch and glanced over at him. He was covered in blood. It soaked his shirt, his face. Like a figure from nightmares.

No time to worry about it, or think about it now. If she came out of this alive, she would think of it then, decide what she was going to do. For now the vampire attacking her was not willing to give up. She looked at his face and realized he was the one she'd stabbed with the pipe. *Oh, great.*

There was nothing around to use as a weapon. She brought her knee up again as he leaned over her, but missed, managing only to hit him in the thigh. It barely fazed him. He grabbed her hair and yanked her head back.

She couldn't make a sound, but she could still try to move. Ignoring the pain as he pulled out her hair, she clasped her hands together and swung them around, connecting with the side of his head. The impact made her teeth rattle and sent pain shooting up both arms to her shoulders. It stunned the vampire just enough for her to try to slip out from beneath him.

Then he was pulled off her, the expression on his face one of almost comical surprise. Her arms struggled for a moment against nothing, before she realized what had happened and dove instinctively for the floor.

She hit something soft and realized with horror it was the body of a vampire, eyes wide open and staring. She shrieked again and recoiled, her back against the couch, stumbling as she tried to move sideways, away from the body and the melee that was the living room.

Hands reached for her, tearing out more of her hair, ripping her t-shirt. She thought she heard someone calling her name and turned to see Doug, blood pouring from a cut on his face. There was a ragged wound on his throat.

He reached for her. "Help me. Help me get out of here!"

Before she could reply, before she could even think of a reply, Tristan grabbed Doug, yanking him away from her. She opened her mouth to say something but couldn't make a sound.

"Julian wants him," Tristan said to her as he wrestled Doug away, back into the mass of fighting bodies.

She didn't want to think about it. Something in her was shutting down, not willing to deal with what was happening, the fact that this small suburban house had become a hell of vampires, the smell of blood so strong in the air she could feel it in the back of her throat.

The sliding glass doors in the kitchen might have been unlocked, but she could not get out. The room was on fire, the flames fanned by the slight evening breeze coming in the open window. The curtains burned merrily, picking up flames from the burner on the stovetop. The wooden cabinets were starting to catch.

She screamed, her voice hoarse. It made her throat ache even worse, like rubbing sandpaper on wounded skin.

The lady or the tiger. The fire or the vampires.

She turned away from the flames back into the fight. It seemed the crowd in the room had thinned. She wasn't sure if it was because more were dead or because they'd heard her scream, but the front door was open so she guessed the fire had something to do with it.

Edward was still fighting with Robert. They rocked drunkenly back and forth in front of her, struggling, blocking her way to the front door. She tried to duck around them only to be slammed in the head with someone's knee.

She fell to the floor. After the beating she'd taken just a while ago, this was too much. She was so damned tired. Her head felt like it was inflated with hot air, her skin tight across her cheekbones and her swollen eye.

Smoke filled her nostrils. The fire was getting more intense. Where was Julian?

She thought she saw him, fighting in the hallway. It looked like Julian, anyway, but her vision was hazy and she couldn't be sure.



She didn't dare go to him. If it wasn't Julian, she could be injured further. If it was, she could get him injured further. The front door was her only hope. She stood as quickly as she dared, her legs shaking.

Her foot hit something soft as she tried to walk and she fell again, landing on top of another body. Was there no way out of this place?

Something heavy slumped onto her legs, pinning them to the floor. Another body? She had no idea. Her eyes were tearing up, her lungs burning from smoke and despair.

She fixed her sights on the door and fought. If she could just get out...get out...

Julian ached. Even after the power he'd taken from Valentin he was sore and tired. His vision had long since cleared, his frenzy fading, as he fought on and on and on, trying to get out of the house alive.

He didn't know what had happened to Cecelia. Every time he thought he heard her voice he was attacked again, fangs tearing him, claws digging into his skin. He smelled smoke and blood, sweat and death.

Things were getting quieter, though. A good sign.

His arms shook as he hit his opponent one last time, throwing everything he had left into the blow, smashing the vampire's skull. His stomach churned. This wasn't the way he liked to see himself, wasn't the way he liked to know himself.

It certainly wasn't the way he wanted anyone else to see him.

For a moment he stood, chest heaving, as gradually his senses began to return. That was smoke he smelled. Half the living room was burning, the floor catching, flames spreading across it and catching the bodies that covered it.

Close to Cecelia, who lay with her eyes closed, her legs pinned by the large body of one of Valentin's guards.

He shoved the body off her, yanking her free, and lifted her up. He could still hear her heart beat, and when he moved her she coughed. It sounded better to him than anything he'd ever heard.

Tristan and Edward ran out before him. Daemon and Elizabeth were already outside, looking like they'd been through a war.

Which they had.

None of them were uninjured. None of them were clean. None of them had any regrets. Daemon and Elizabeth, in fact, grinned like loons as they stood in front of him.

Cecelia stirred, then jerked in his arms, her eyes flying open.

"You're safe," he said to her. "You're outside."

She looked at him, then back at the house. His heart ached. She looked so exhausted, so beaten. Not like his brave Cecelia. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like for her in that house, waiting for Valentin and death, watching the battle taking place around her.

"Put me down," she said faintly.

He did, although it almost killed him. She wasn't going to forgive him. Those three words told him that. It truly was over.

He blinked, his eyes burning, as he set her carefully on her feet and took a step back. She wasn't looking at him. She was watching the house burn, her face set in grim lines.

"Doug is in there," she said. Her voice was flat.

He cleared his throat. "Doug is dead."

She glanced at him, then looked back at the house. "You?"

He wanted to say no. He couldn't. He couldn't lie again. "Yes."

She nodded. He wanted to press her, to beg her to forgive him. To get her to talk to him again, to say anything but these monosyllables.

It was funny, how he missed talking to her the most. Missed their conversations, the way she took what he gave and handed it right back to him. It had been so long since a woman had done that he couldn't even remember it. Even Elizabeth had been mostly acquiescent. Frankly, that's the way he'd always liked it.

Then Cecelia had come into his life, and apart from being beautiful and sexy and smart, she'd been funny and clever and willing to stand up for herself. She demanded his respect, gave him hers along with her trust, and he'd repaid her by lying.

It made him sick.

"We should go," he said to no one in particular.

"I could sure use a drink," Daemon said, to the relieved laughter of the others.

"I guess I owe you all my thanks," Cecelia said, turning to them. "So I'll buy." She shot a glance at Julian, her expression unreadable. "It's the least I can do."

## Chapter Fifteen

Julian nodded. "Call them in."

Edward got up from the kitchen table and walked to the door opening it to admit Elizabeth and Daemon. Their cautious expressions turned to smiles as Tristan and Julian stood, smiling at them.

"Daemon," Julian said formally. "Welcome to the family."

The men shook hands, then hugged. Elizabeth watched, grinning. Julian hadn't seen her so happy in years.

Actually, now that he thought about it, he didn't think he'd ever seen her so happy. When they were together, she'd been happy enough, but had usually seemed nervous. Worried about how things were going, how they were doing as a couple.

There was none of that now. All he felt from her was pure joy and belonging, and if anything could make him feel better, it was knowing he'd been able to give that to her.

"We want the ceremony," Daemon said. "I don't know if you guys actually do that..." He looked around at the others.

"We haven't in years," Julian said. Daemon was talking about a *Valshdek* ceremony, an official welcome and exchange of blood. They'd done one when Elizabeth joined them right after he, Edward, and Tristan left Valentin, but hadn't had anyone new since. "But I remember how."

"We want a joining too," Elizabeth said. A wedding.

Julian smiled and nodded. "No problem."

"Maybe we'll be doing more than one?"

Julian's smile faded. "I doubt it."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Elizabeth said.

He wished she hadn't. Every word of encouragement, every reassurance by his friends that Cecelia would come back to him only made him feel worse.

"We should probably take a vote, anyway," Edward said. "Just in case." He put a hand on Julian's shoulder, then pulled it back. "I'd hate for you to go talk to her, and have her forgive you, and you have to interrupt everything to come down here and talk to us."

He didn't want to ask the question. He didn't want to see their faces as they smiled and nodded. There was no question what their answer would be, anyway.

He shrugged. If they wanted it, he would give it to them. It was impossible for him to feel worse than he did, anyway. "Does anyone have any objection to Cecelia turning and joining the family?"

"Are you kidding?" Tristan smiled.

"You wanted me to ask."

"We wanted to give you our support."

Julian nodded. "Thanks." It didn't matter. She wasn't going to forgive him, she wasn't going to want to stay, and she sure as hell wasn't going to become a vampire.

"She's probably waiting for you," Edward said. "You should go to her."

"Good luck!" Daemon called after him, as he started walking down the hall to the stairs.

"Julian, wait." It was Elizabeth, pulling the kitchen door shut behind herself as she came toward him. "I wanted to talk to you for a minute."

"What?"

She took his hand, looking him in the eyes. "I wanted to thank you. And...to apologize."

"You don't need to thank me, Elizabeth. You don't need to apologize, either. I'm just glad you're happy."

"I am," she said, but she didn't smile. "But I need to apologize."

He shook his head and started to turn away. "It's forgotten, all right?"

"No." Her fingers tightened on his hand, forcing him to turn back to her. "This is my fault, Julian. I talked to Cecelia one day. I told her about vampire mind control. I told her how to block it, what to do. To practice."

He'd wondered how it had come about. "It doesn't matter, Liz," he said. "Really. It wasn't your fault, it was mine. I made the decisions."

"Forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive."

She leaned forward and kissed him, a soft kiss on the cheek. It had been so long since she'd reached out to him in anything but anger or lust, and he was surprised at how good it felt. She was his friend again, and he was glad.

"It's going to work out," she said softly. "I know it will. She loves you, Julian." She reached up and patted his collar into place, her smile a little sad. "What woman wouldn't?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Cecelia paced the room, wearing nothing but one of Julian's billowy white shirts. Her hands twisted together, hidden by the French cuffs that covered them. She felt like a ghost.

Julian wasn't there. He'd been silent in the car, silent when they returned to his house. She hadn't spoken to him either, preferring to talk to Edward and Tristan, and their new friend Daemon, who seemed like a nice enough guy and was obviously totally besotted with Elizabeth.

Good for her. Good for them. Cecelia had no idea why she was even here, what she was doing, what she wanted, but she was aware of Julian's gaze all night.

Or at least, all night until she jerked awake and realized she was in his arms, being laid down in his bed. When she woke up, it was night again and she didn't know where he was. She helped herself to a shower, to some of the crackers and soda that had been left on a tray by the bed, and by the time she was done she felt almost human again too.

What she didn't know was how she felt about Julian, and about the conversation they were inevitably going to have when he came to her.

She loved him. She knew that, as much as she knew anything. He'd made her life complete in a way it hadn't been, given her something she thought she might never have. Her independence, her own strength. She'd never known what it was until he forced her to see it, grabbing her by the arms and shaking her until she realized she wasn't just some science geek, the girl whose parents barely tolerated her and who was the butt of so many jokes. Julian made her see she hadn't been that girl for a long time. She was proud of herself, really proud of herself, and that was a gift.

That didn't change what he'd done, though. How he'd used her and lied. No matter what his reasons were, the lie was still there. He hadn't trusted her, and that hurt.

Not to mention what staying with him would mean. She'd have to change, to become a vampire. She couldn't think of any other way to do it, to stay with him, and she'd been thinking about it for days. Could she really drink blood? His blood? Any blood?

The thought wasn't as disgusting as it might have been even a week ago, but she wasn't entirely comfortable with it, either.

She had no idea what to do, and the irony was, the only person besides Julian she could turn to for advice had betrayed her and died.

Her heart still ached when she thought about Doug. He'd been her friend. Granted, he'd been her friend who betrayed her and set her up, but still.

There was a knock at the door before it opened. Julian stood in the doorway.

"Can I come in?"

She shrugged. "It's your room."

He didn't move. "Can I come in, Cecelia? Will you talk to me?"

She nodded, her throat suddenly dry as she realized what she would say, what her answer would be when he asked. *If* he asked. "Yes."

He walked in and sat down in one of the chairs. Tension made his movements stiff. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay."

He nodded. "Sleep well?"

"Yes." She climbed back into the bed, pulling the covers primly around her bare legs. His eyes followed her movements, but he did not comment. "You?"

He nodded.

What was his problem? Why wasn't he talking to her?

He cleared his throat. "I should tell you a couple of things," he said formally. Funny. She'd gotten to a point where she hardly noticed his accent, but now it sounded as clear to her as when they'd first met. "Edward and Tristan brought your work back here after you fell asleep last night. It's all downstairs waiting for you, so you can have it back when you go."

He paused, as if waiting for her to respond. Cecelia had no idea what to say. What was he telling her? That he didn't want her anymore? That she could continue with her work? What?

When she didn't speak, he continued. "What you do with it is up to you," he said. "I won't—I can't—ask you to stop your work. I'd obviously be grateful if you did. But it isn't my place to ask."

Then she understood. He was giving her back her life. He was giving her victory.

Once she'd wanted this. The thought that he would concede to her, surrender. Now...now it just made her feel ill.

He was giving it to her because he didn't want her anymore. He didn't love her. It was plain from his expressionless face, watching her the way he'd watch a not particularly interesting nature program on television.

She blinked back tears. "I'm not going to continue," she said. "You guys saved my life. I wouldn't repay that by working to bring death to you all."

Some of the tension left his body. "Thank you."

They were silent, watching each other. She had to get out of here. Out of this room, out of this house. Away from him. She couldn't sit and keep watching him, that beautiful face she'd so loved still and passionless under her gaze. He really hadn't loved her. All this time, he was just using her, lying to her.

She sighed and, trying to keep her voice steady, said, "I'll go now."

Something flashed across his face just for an instant, replaced by the expressionless mask. He nodded. "Your car is in the garage. We picked it up from the lab after you fell asleep."

"Thank you." Her entire body hurt. She swung her legs out from under the covers and crossed the room to where her jeans were folded neatly on the dresser, turning her back to him to slide them on. "I don't have a clean shirt," she said. "I'll return this one."

"Keep it."

Surreptitiously she wiped tears from her face. He was really letting her go. He wanted her to go.

She'd been so certain. Just went to show how stupid she really was.

She slid her bare feet into her shoes and picked up her purse. Allowing herself one last glance at him as she walked past, she said, "Goodbye, Julian."

The doorknob was cold in her hand.

"Cecelia."

"Yes?" She turned the knob, just enough to disengage the bolt.

"There is one more thing."

"What?" Her heart was pounding in her chest.

He paused for so long she wasn't sure if he was going to speak, then said in the same blank voice, "If it interests you at all...I wasn't lying when I said I love you. I do. I'd really like you to stay. I don't..." He sighed. She could only see the back of his head as he bent it down to rub his eyes. "I don't want you to go. I want you to stay. With me."

Cecelia hadn't taken a breath since he first said her name. Now she did, a great gasp of air that tasted like happiness.

The bolt on the door clicked back home.

She said the first thing that came to her mind. "You could have said that first."

In an instant he was out of his chair, standing in front of her, his dark eyes staring into hers. They weren't expressionless now. Instead she felt like she could see all the way into his heart, into his soul. "Please." His voice shook. "Don't be funny now. I don't think I can take it. Just please tell me if you think you can forgive me or not, okay? Because if you can...if you can I'll spend eternity trying to make you glad you did, and if you can't, I'd rather know that now."

"You owe me an apology," she said. "And an explanation. And we have some things to talk about."

"You'll let me explain?"

She nodded. His hands touched her shoulders, so lightly she would have thought she imagined the caress if she hadn't watched it.

He crossed the room. "Drink?"

She nodded again and sat down in one of the chairs, waiting while he busied himself with bottles and ice. Her entire body was tense, expectant. Wondering what he would say, wondering how she would reply.

She almost didn't care. His broad, strong back moving as he fixed their drinks was one of the best things she'd seen in days. How she'd missed it. How she'd missed him.

He handed her a glass and sat down. "I first became aware of you from the article," he said. "*The Journal of Hematology*. Remember?" He glanced up at her to see her nod. "You were so...well. I thought you were beautiful. I thought you were interesting. I thought you were probably in danger."

"I guess you were right about that last one," she said.

He nodded. "That first night... We didn't know if you might be working with Valentin, acting as bait for some kind of trap. We needed to know, first and foremost, because having you here would be dangerous if you were a plant." He took a sip of his

drink. "So I seduced you. Hell, Cecelia, I wanted to seduce you. Badly. It was a good excuse."

The compliment made her tingle a little, but she wasn't about to let him off so easily. "I don't understand why you needed to seduce me to find out if I was a plant."

"I keep forgetting you don't know. Blood is what enables us to form a mind connection. Once we taste your blood, we're able to read your mind. To some degree, anyway. Enough to know if you're being deceptive. After we've tasted it, we can still make the connection."

"And it's easiest to take someone's blood during sex."

"Not always." He smiled a little, a glimpse of teeth that made her heart twist. "But it's certainly the most pleasurable."

"Anyway. I knew you weren't working with Valentin. I had intended to tell you the truth, tell you the situation and convince you to give up your work. But then...I liked you. A lot. I wanted to help."

He held up his hand as she opened her mouth to speak. "I know. I should have been honest. But I couldn't. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I kept telling myself I would tell you. My family wanted me to tell you. But by then," he took another drink, "by then I was starting to fall in love with you. And I knew you would hate me. And I thought if I could fix everything, make everything right..." He spread his hands, obviously at a loss for words. Not something she'd ever expected to see.

"You didn't think you could tell me until you had fixed everything for me?"

"I'm sorry. I behaved like a total git. I underestimated you, and I lied to you. You'd be perfectly justified if you walked out that door and never came back. But God, Cecelia, I hope you won't." His eyes were naked, pain and fear plain on his face. "Because I don't know how I'd manage to live if you did. These last few days...these last few days without you I thought I was going to fall apart. Just crumble into nothing. And I didn't care. I didn't care, because if I can't live with you I'm not sure it's worth it to live at all."

"We've only known each other a couple of weeks," she said, trying to deny her own feelings. She knew exactly what he meant.

"I've been around a long time," he said. "Long enough to know what I want."

"How old are you?"

He sighed. "I was born in 1646."

"You're three hundred and sixty-one years old?"

"Three hundred and sixty, actually. My birthday isn't until December."

"So you knew Keats."

He nodded.

"Who else did you know?"

"Do you really want to talk about this now? I'm trying to make a declaration here."



"Sorry. Go ahead." She smiled. She'd really missed this.

"I love you, Cecelia. That's it. I love you, and if you love me...I'll do my level best to make you happy."

She leaned forward, cradling her drink in both hands. "I'm just having kind of a hard time with the whole vampire thing. It's difficult for me to accept that, you know?"

He looked down. "All I can say is that the vampire part of me loves you too. I don't want it to be a problem, but I can't pretend it isn't there."

"Do you want me to become one? A vampire?"

"Yes."

She blinked. "That was fast."

"You don't have to. Or you can later, if you need time to get used to it. But I'm not going to lie to you, not anymore. I want you to. I want to share it with you. I want to share everything with you."

He stood up and rubbed his forehead. "Look, we can talk about this all night. We can talk about it for days. But you still haven't answered me, and I don't think I can take it anymore."

He took her by the shoulders and raised her up from her chair, pulling her close to him, close enough to feel the heat of his body. "If you don't love me it's just academics, isn't it? So tell me, Cecelia. Tell me how you feel, because I'm about to fall apart here, and I really need to know."

"You won't lie to me again?"

Something sparked deep in his eyes. "No."

"Promise."

"I won't lie to you again," he said. "Not ever. I promise."

"Okay."

"Okay? Okay what?"

His stubble was a little rough under her fingertips as she reached up to caress his face. "I love you, Julian. I'll do whatever you want. Be a vampire, live with your crazy family, whatever you want." Tears started in her eyes and she did not bother to brush them away. "Because I do love you, and I want to be with you, and I don't care what I have to do as long as it means I get to do that."

Her eyes closed involuntarily as his hand found her face, stroking her skin, sending shivers of heat through her entire body. Where he touched felt hot, overly sensitive, electrified.

"Are you sure?" His voice shook.

She nodded. "My God, Julian, if you don't kiss me right now I'm going to scream."

"We can't have that," he murmured, just before his lips met hers.

Searching at first, then when he found the confirmation he sought, more intensely. His lips asked the question and hers answered, until both of them were dizzy with it,

drunk with passion and desire and the realization that this kiss would never end. This kiss was forever.

His hands cradled her face, holding her steady, while hers found his waist and pulled him closer until there was no space between their bodies. No space for air, no space for doubt. She was in this, all the way, holding nothing back.

Their tongues met, caressing, teasing. She nibbled at his and his moan vibrated through her whole body.

He slid his hands down, tangling through her hair, then lower, stroking her back, reaching down to cup her ass and bring her into closer contact with the heat of his erection.

"I love you," he whispered, not breaking the kiss, but turning the kiss into something more. "I love you." Every word he spoke tasted like honey in her mouth, and she gave it back to him with her own whispers.

She glowed. Every nerve ending in her body crackled with light and heat. Every muscle ached for him, every inch of skin begging for his touch. Her pussy burned, weeping, desperate for him to fill it the way only he could.

Her hands traveled down, touching his stomach, the soft skin of his abdomen. He shuddered as her fingertips ran across the ridges of muscle and passed over his hips to his back, traveling up to his shoulder blades and down.

His breath was ragged as he kissed her neck, her throat. His fangs scraped her, two sharp pinpoints against her delicate skin. She was amazed by how the sensation aroused her. How knowing what he was, what he wanted to do, turned her on instead of off.

He was murmuring her name, his hot breath sending shivers through her entire body. He was shaking like a man facing a hurricane, and somewhere in the back of her mind she realized she was shaking too, that it felt as if the entire house shook along with them.

Finally she pulled back from him. "We need to do this now," she said. Her lips felt bruised. "I need to do this now."

For a second he looked confused. Then he took her hand. "Are you sure?"

She nodded.

He kissed her again, softly pressing his lips to hers, then led her to the bed. The buttons of his shirt were already undone, although she had no clear memory of undoing them, only of the feel of his skin under her hands.

He removed the shirt completely. She watched his muscles move as he opened the drawer of the bedside table and took out a small knife, opening it with a flick of the wrist.

"You don't have to—" he began, but she silenced him with a finger to his lips.

"I'm going to lose my nerve," she said. "Just tell me what to do."

He lifted the blade to his chest and in one quick movement ran it sideways, opening

a cut a few inches above his nipple. Blood oozed out, bright red against his skin.

She leaned over, not breaking eye contact. His gaze was filled with heat.

"I just...drink it?"

He nodded.

"Will it hurt?"

"Which one of us?" His fists were clenched at his sides, she noticed.

"Either of us."

"It won't hurt you," he said. "You'll feel a little strange when your body changes. I'll help you."

"Won't it hurt you?"

He cleared his throat. The line of blood running from the cut reached his stomach. "Quite the opposite, actually." He sounded hoarse.

"So this is like, a good thing?"

He nodded.

She licked her lips, watching the blood trace its slow way down his skin. For a moment she wanted to run, thought about running.

Then she looked in his eyes again and saw the love and desire that burned in them. For her. Only for her.

His skin leapt to her touch as she pressed her tongue to the bottom of the trickle of blood and ran it slowly up his chest. She could hear his heart beating beneath his skin, hear him gasp. His eyes never left her.

He smelled so good, that vanilla spice haunting her mind. She didn't know what she expected his blood to taste like, exactly, but it was hot and spicy sweet in her mouth, and not unpleasant.

She darted her tongue to the side, running it quickly over his nipple. He jumped, and she smiled a little as she continued, taking his blood onto her tongue, into her mouth, swallowing with an ease she hadn't expected.

With a glance at him, she found the cut with her lips and kissed it, then licked it, finally closing her mouth over it and giving a gentle suck.

He moaned. The sound made her vibrate, sending hot shivers into her pussy.

She braced herself on his chest and sucked a little harder. His head fell back, his chest heaving under her hand. His heartbeat was louder now, filling her ears, filling the room, or maybe that was her heart, or both of theirs together. She was sure the whole world could hear it.

A glance down showed her his cock, straining against the cloth of his trousers. She reached for it, but he stopped her, his hand hot and hard on her wrist.

"I'm not made of iron," he said, his voice shaking. "If you touch me now..."

She nodded and returned to his chest. The blood was flowing more freely now, into her mouth, down her throat. She thought she could feel it running through her body,

entering her own bloodstream, mixing with it and forming something different.

The taste of him filled her mouth. The smell of him filled her body. She was blind, not human, something made of pure sensation and desire that cuddled into his chest and begged him to touch her, to make her real again.

His hands shook as he stroked her back, her hair, pressing her closer to him. He lay down and pulled her with him, and she gripped him tighter, aware of a strange buzzing throughout her body. Like she was being scratched from the inside. It wasn't unpleasant, just...different.

He pulled her away. "That's enough," he said.

"I feel weird." She licked her lips and looked down at him. His eyes were pools of blackness.

He nodded. "Kiss me."

## **Chapter Sixteen**

She obeyed, diving down to meet him, capturing his tongue and caressing it with her own.

He sighed and cupped her head in his hands, pressing her face closer to his. Together they rolled sideways on the bed, their legs entwined.

Heat raced through her veins, making her heart pound. She still heard his. It was almost as if she heard it in her body, not just her ears. His heart called to hers, and hers answered.

"Can I touch you now?" she whispered.

"Only if I can touch you," he replied, his hands already roaming across her body under the white shirt she still wore. They hovered over her skin, barely touching, raising goose bumps. Heat transferred from his skin to hers, traveling across her surface like flames.

"It feels like I'm being tickled," she said, leaning her head back to look at him as his fingers found her hard nipples and stroked them. "Like I'm being tickled inside."

"Is it uncomfortable?"

"No." Her eyes closed. He was unfastening her jeans now, easing them down off her hips, his fingertips tracing patterns of fire everywhere he touched. "It's just strange."

"Stay with me," he said, kissing her neck. Her jeans were off now, the cool air of the room swirling around her bare skin. "Keep your mind focused on me."

He slipped a knowing hand between her legs, finding her clit with ease born of practice and stroking it with his thumb in light circles. She gasped. "It's not hard to stay focused when you do that."

"That's the idea," he said, leaning farther over her to nibble her earlobes, to run the tip of his tongue over the sensitive skin of her throat.

She was afraid she was going to pass out. The buzzing in her body increased. Her muscles were on fire, her skin smoking with heat. Julian's thumb on her clit sent shock waves of delight through her, her hips working of their own accord to stay with his steady rhythm.

"Oh, Julian," she moaned. "Oh God..."

Her muscles contracted as she came, the orgasm taking her by surprise and flinging her to the ceiling, through it, into the sky above. Only Julian's body kept her anchored, kept her from flying into the stars and out of the Earth's orbit.

She clung to him, sobbing her pleasure into his skin, his mouth. She was shaking

and couldn't stop. Something had taken hold of her, some fevered desire she could not name. It roared through her body like a hungry beast, and she was helpless in its power.

"Julian!"

"Look at me, baby, look at me." His hands on her face were strong and sure, urging her to open her eyes. "Cecelia, look at me."

Through a blur of tears she saw him. His gaze caught hers and held, and now she was in a different kind of thrall, the raging need in her body sublimated by something different, by the tenderness she found in him.

"It's almost over," he said. She gripped his shoulders, then, finding that unsatisfactory, reached down to his hips. There she was thwarted by fabric.

Not good enough. She fumbled with the buttons and zipper but her hands shook too badly. Before he could help her she grabbed hold of the material and pulled, tearing his pants open, freeing his cock to press against her thigh.

In a flash he finished the job, dropping the now-useless pants into a heap on the floor, grabbing her thigh and raising it over his arm.

Her body tensed. Her cunt, so hot and wet, so empty, cried with its own voice for him to enter her, to slam into her. She wanted to possess him, to be possessed by him.

She cried his name again. He answered her with a growl, positioning the tip of his cock right at her entrance. His hand twisted into the hair at the top of her head, holding her in place. Steady she could not achieve. Her body shook with a violence she had never known before.

He was shaking too, she realized, as he slowly slid into her, opening her, stretching the tender walls of her cunt to accommodate him. She screamed, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

He pulled back to kiss her. His tongue danced with hers, teasing. He caught her tongue between his teeth and bit gently, sending more shivers through her already overloaded body.

His cock slid out, then back in, slowly, steadily, building pressure in her pelvis, in her body. The hair on his thighs rubbed against her skin. His smooth chest against her swollen breasts tortured her.

All the while they kissed, feverishly, desperately. She knew he was holding himself back, trying to ease her transition. She didn't want that. Whatever beast had taken hold of her wanted more, wanted him to take her, to slam into her with enough force to send her flying into the stars again.

"Julian," she moaned. Her fingers tightened their grip. She felt blood seep out between them. It made her mouth tingle. "God, Julian, just fuck me. Just fuck me!"

He didn't need further encouragement. He'd been waiting for the words, and he gripped her hips tighter and drew back one last time to look her in the eyes.

All he needed to see was there. He saw her changing, saw the hunger that grew in

her. When she opened her mouth to cry his name again her fangs, small but there, gleamed.

He changed position, bringing her with him, so he was on his knees with his feet tucked beneath him. Her thighs gripped his waist, his cock still buried deep in the heat of her body. The walls of her cunt massaged him, surrounded him with her scorching wetness.

He clasped his hands under her ass and lifted her. Their gazes stayed locked. He couldn't look away, even if he wanted to. The memory of her mouth on his chest...the sight of her drinking from him. Every fantasy he'd ever had in life came true at that moment, when his beautiful, smart, funny Cecelia allowed him to give her his most precious gift.

He slammed her down on his cock, so hard the bed shook. He paused, waiting to see if he'd hurt her.

He hadn't. Her smile told him that, and he began fucking her in earnest, lifting her hips and slamming her back down, harder and faster, until she took over the rhythm, her thighs working as she rode him.

His head swam. He heard her heart beating, smelled her skin, her blood rushing beneath it. She was light and swift in his arms, her body welcoming him, shaking him, driving him into a place he'd never thought he would go again.

"Cecelia," he groaned. His right hand twisted in her hair, holding her head so her mouth just barely touched his. Their foreheads pressed together. With his left he found one breast and held it, stroked it, rolled the pebbled nipple between his fingers.

He could hardly breathe. Her hunger called to him, bringing his fangs out. The smell of her blood was strong. It made him dizzy. The taste of his own blood still in her mouth made him insane.

He felt the skin of his back break under her fingernails, and her triumph transmitted itself through her eyes into his. His soul begged for her to bite him, to share with him. He needed to taste her again, to know she was tasting him at the same time.

He swung her around to lie on the bed and lowered his mouth to her breast, sinking his teeth into her, reveling in the way he did not have to hide from her. Would never have to hide from her again.

She cried out and gripped his head, pressing it closer. He felt her break apart around him. Her cunt throbbed and squeezed, threatening to send him flying with her. He could not hold on much longer.

Her blood flowed into his mouth, powered by the rapid beating of her heart. He tasted the difference now, the tiny indefinable alteration that meant she had changed, become a vampire.

Still she held him inside her, screaming his name, splintering apart around him again and again. He did not know how much longer she would be able to take this. He knew he couldn't take any more.

Licking her wounds closed, he pulled back, bringing his face to hers. The wildness in the depths of her eyes called to him, begging him to join her, to help her do what she needed to do.

"Cecelia," he moaned. "Cecelia...baby...don't be afraid. Bite me. Bite me, Cecelia."

Indecision flickered in her eyes for a second. He said it again. "I love you, baby. Trust me. Do it."

He was shaking. The need to feel her teeth break through his skin...to break hers with his own and let her blood race through his body... "Please," he begged. "Please..."

The hunger in her reared up, a living thing. It took hold of her, shook her, and when Julian's throat came close to her mouth, when he presented it to her, she did it. She trusted him. She bit, and as his blood flowed into her mouth she felt his cock buck and throb deep inside her as he cried her name, as her body answered his orgasm with another one of her own.

Something flashed in her head, an image. She couldn't focus on it, it was gone so quickly and she was still so far out of her body she thought she'd never come back into it again. Everything throbbed, pulsing with a mind of its own. Her heart, her chest, her pussy, everything was in the grip of a delight too deep and strong for words.

Then more images. Herself in the magazine. Herself being attacked that first night. Her smile, her body. She saw herself through his eyes, tasted the truth of his feelings for her like nectar on her tongue, and swallowed it along with his blood as they shook together and shouted like triumphant beasts.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was still asleep when she crept out of the bed, tiptoeing across the floor to the bathroom, where she closed the door carefully behind her before turning on the light.

The face in the mirror hadn't changed. She was still Cecelia, still fairly plain in her own eyes, her reddish hair tumbled and tangled around her shoulders.

Something was different, though. She felt it. She saw it in the sparkle of her eyes, eyes that seemed somehow to hold more secrets than they had. Something in the tilt of her lips, perhaps?

It didn't matter. She might look the same, but she was not the same, would never be the same. She felt so alive, so aware. Her heart beat in a steady rhythm beneath her breasts, strong and sure. Her skin glowed. When she opened her mouth, she looked the same until she noticed her canines were a little sharper than they had been before. She wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't been looking for it.

The most important difference, though, had nothing to do with the physical change. It was emotional. Mental. She belonged to Julian. The knowledge brought color to her cheeks and a sparkle to her eyes. Everything was different, because she loved him and was loved by him.

The big tub looked awfully inviting. She was still tired, but too restless to sleep. A



bath would help her relax.

She turned the faucets on full blast, pleased by how easily she moved. Her body seemed made of liquid, flowing from one task to the next, stronger and more graceful than she'd ever been.

She would have a bath, and climb back into bed. There was more than one way to fall asleep. If the bath didn't work, there was always the man who waited for her, naked under soft sheets. *Her* man.

As if called, she heard him wake up and start moving in the bedroom. His footsteps were quiet on the thick carpet, but she still heard them. No wonder the windows here were so thoroughly soundproofed, the walls so thick. If vampire hearing was this good it would be impossible to sleep otherwise.

He opened the door and stepped into the bathroom, naked. The first tendrils of steam came from the surface of the water in the tub, floating across the floor to caress his bare legs.

She watched him walk, the muscles playing beneath his smooth skin. She would never get tired of his body, looking at it, touching it.

"Couldn't sleep?"

She shook her head. "I'm still a little buzzed, I think."

"You'll settle in after a little while. Vampires are nocturnal. Your body clock resets itself, because your body wants you to be awake at night."

"I still can't believe I'm a vampire," she said, staring into the tub. "It doesn't seem real."

He stood behind her and folded his arms around her, pressing her back against his chest. His cock stirred against her ass and she smiled.

"Regrets?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Good."

They climbed into the tub together.

"I've been thinking," he said, grabbing the soap and working it into a lather in his hands. He put them on her back, massaging her lightly. "We could set up a lab. I can fund it. You don't have to stop working if you don't want to." He cupped water in his hands and rinsed her back before lifting her arm and soaping it. "Of course, you don't have to work if you don't want to, either."

She looked back at him over her shoulder. "I've never had the option," she said.

"You've never been my wife."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"My wife. You are going to marry me, aren't you?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Good." He continued washing her like nothing had happened, but he was

grinning. "Anyway, we can set you up with a lab, whatever you want. You don't have to decide now. You have all the time in the world, you know."

She was suddenly thrilled. He was right. An eternity, years and years and years...with him. The knowledge sent a shiver of delight through her body.

"What would I do, though? I can't keep on the way I was going, it's too dangerous. Genetic cures for blood diseases isn't really an area I can touch, especially since we have to make everyone think my work was a failure."

"Darling," he said, tugging her hair to tilt her head back and pouring water over it, "you're a vampire. Your DNA has been altered, providing you with immunity to every blood disease known to man, and some that aren't. It's not like you don't have new avenues for your research."

"Really?" Funny how she hadn't thought of it before. "No blood diseases?"

"Not a one. And it'll be awfully rare for you to get a cold, either."

"This is sounding better and better."

"I hope so," he said. "Because for better or worse, you're stuck with it." He lathered her hair and turned her to look at him. "Stuck with me." His eyes told her how much he needed to hear it again.

"That's the best place I could ever be," she whispered. "I love you, Julian."

"I love you, Cecelia."

He leaned in and kissed her again, and as their bodies touched under the hot water, as his strong arms wound around her and held her, she knew without a doubt that eternity was not long enough for all the things she wanted to share with him.

It was a nice start, though.

## **About the Author**

December Quinn is a multi-published author of romance and erotic romance. She lives in England with her husband and their two little girls.

December is a fan of high heeled shoes, corsets, cocktails, French fries, and rain. She is not a fan of airplanes, Brussel sprouts, or algebra. She still believes in dragons and the divine right of Kings.

December welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

### *Tell Us What You Think*

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at [Comments@EllorasCave.com](mailto:Comments@EllorasCave.com).



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)