A movie poster for the film 'Loose Id'. The background is a dark, moody scene with a woman in the foreground and a man's face in the background. The woman has long, light-colored hair and is looking towards the camera with a serious expression. The man's face is partially obscured by shadows and has a blueish tint. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and suspenseful.

**Whose Afterlife Is This,
ANYWAY?**

ELISA ADAMS

Loose Id

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Loose Id.®

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Whose Afterlife Is This, Anyway?

Elisa Adams

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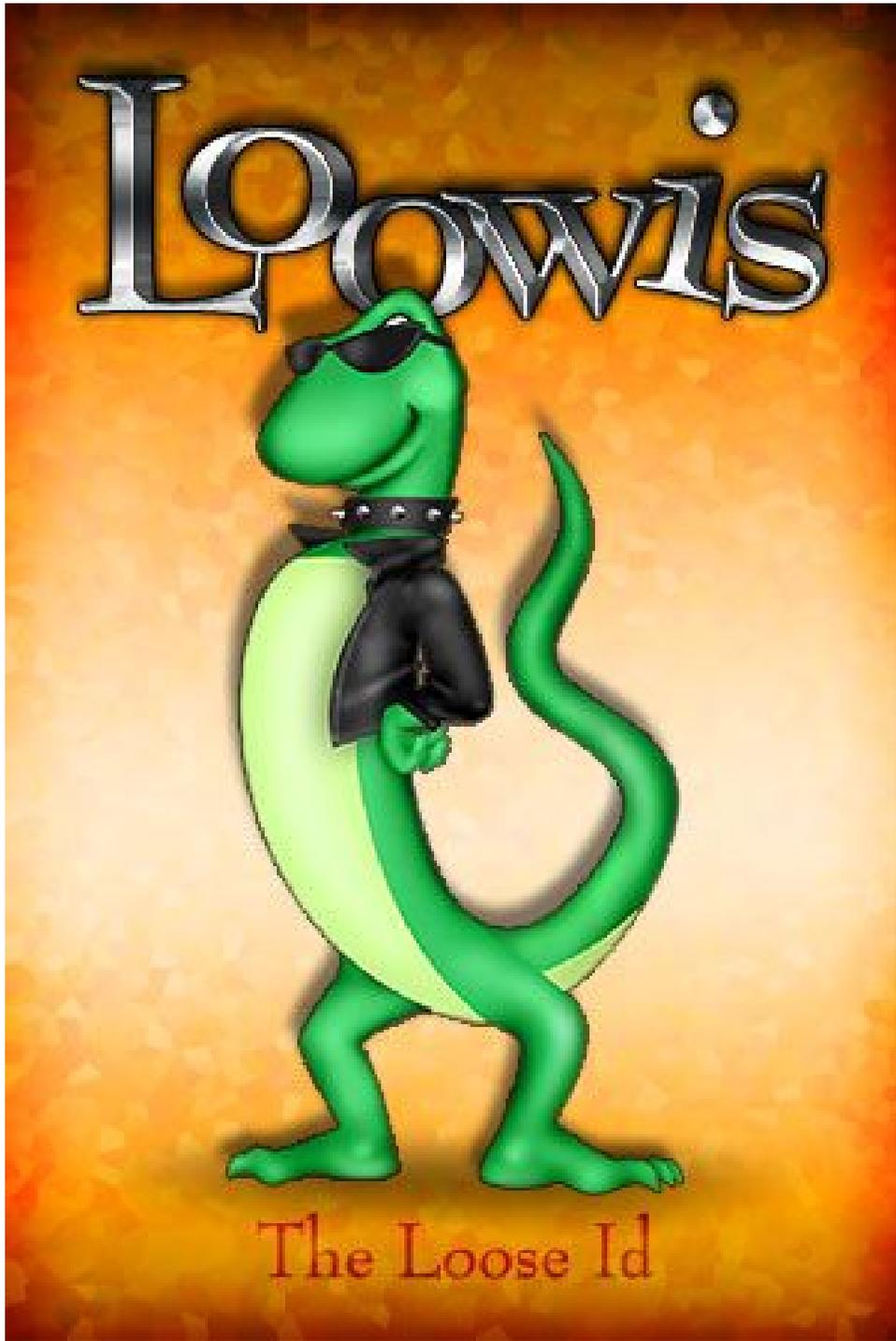
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Chapter One

Something exciting hovered on the horizon, just out of Carrie's reach. It tingled through every cell of her body and crackled in the air like electricity through the small, stuffy room. She smiled. The promise of a thrill welled in her stomach, pounded through her bloodstream. It was so close she could almost taste it. Surprisingly, it reminded her of chocolate. She smacked her lips.

Who would have figured?

Carrie wiggled in her seat, her rear end refusing to still. The old chair creaked in protest, but she didn't even try to stop her movements. She'd take her calorie burning any way she could get it. As long as it didn't involve sweat. Or spandex. Or extensive movement. No one would ever mistake her for a health nut, at least not on this planet.

Her size-fourteen jeans attested to that fact better than anything else, and she had no plans to shave a few inches off her waistline anytime soon. Despite the media's negative portrayal of anyone who weighed more than eighty-five pounds, a little bit of excess weight did *not* make Carrie an unhappy person. Her sister, who could be a body double for a broomstick, spent most of her days in a pseudo-depressed funk. What was the point of being skinny if a person couldn't be happy? Carrie would rather be on the plumper side of average and enjoy life.

Unfortunately, her life seemed to have taken a vacation.

It had been far too long since she'd had any sort of adventure past a new flavor of latte at the coffee shop across the street from the library. After leaving her life in New York to move back home to the boredom capital of New England six months ago, Carrie was past due for a change. In a *big* way. And what she felt now promised to be good. Great, even. A defining moment in her life.

This kind of thrill could be a once in a lifetime event in little Pine Tree Grove, Maine, where the highlight of most peoples' lives was the annual tractor pull at the county fair every October.

For a little while, she'd escaped the monotony of small town living and had learned that there was life beyond the many entertaining uses for farming equipment. The places inside her books really existed. Carrie longed to live in those worlds with a hunger matched only by her love of chocolate, pints of premium ice cream, and campy late night horror movies. Glamour, glitz, danger...it was all out there for the taking, and she'd been planning to grab everything. She could just about see it -- the door opening, presenting her with the perfect opportunity. Calling to her. A smile spread over her face.

A loud crash yanked her from her daydreams, tossing her back into reality so hard her teeth ground together. The nerve of some people, interrupting a girl's hopes with such behavior.

"Carrie?" Her boss's shrill voice cut through her thoughts with the force of a meat cleaver. "Mrs. Anderson still hasn't returned her overdue book. I need you to call and give her a reminder."

This was her golden opportunity? The thing she'd been waiting for all her life? Talk about anticlimactic. She blinked away the haze of things not meant to be and blew out a breath, expelling her dying hopes along with the rush of air. Her father's lectures came back to haunt her. Get your head out of the clouds, Carrie. This is your life. You only get one. Don't waste it away with thoughts of things that will never be.

Whatever.

"Stuff it, Dad," she murmured. "Maybe if you'd cared about listening to my real dreams instead of shooting them down and telling me what a silly little girl I was, I would have had the courage to actually pursue them."

Her parents meant well, she supposed, but they hadn't understood that what she wanted out of life wasn't the path they'd been hoping she would choose. They'd liked to consider themselves "supportive," when what they'd really been was nagging -- until she'd chosen a safe career over any number of more exciting ones she'd been considering.

And look how well that career choice had turned out. Her family had asked her to come home and take care of her mother after surgery, and she'd been all too happy to leave her ho-hum job behind.

"Carrie Ann, did you hear me?" Her boss, Sarah, tapped her black pump-clad foot on the dull, puke-colored library floor tile.

Are you kidding? How can I not hear you? People in China hear you. Earplugs should be a requirement for this job. Back to the ever-exciting life of a small town librarian. "Yes, I heard you. I'll make the call."

Her boss gave Carrie a short, succinct nod. With her eyes forever narrowed, her dark brown hair secured in a bun so tight she'd never need a face-lift, and her lips in permanent purse mode, the woman looked so much like the stereotypical librarian that she gave people the creeps. Heck, she gave Carrie the willies sometimes. Only Carrie and a few others knew the whole truth, though. Her boss wasn't merely creepy. The woman could bring a four-star general to tears.

She ran such a tight ship that one or two employees jumped overboard every month and swam for bluer, calmer waters. Heaven help the person who had an overdue book. They'd be better off skipping town than facing the wrath of Sarah Holiday. Or, as Carrie called her, Mom.

"Thank you," her mother answered in a clipped tone. "See that you do so sometime this century, please."

Carrie opened her mouth, a sarcastic reply ready to spring free, but bit it back at the look on her mother's face and snapped her mouth shut. No sense making her angry; Sarah would just increase the workload. A girl could only make so many collection calls to elderly women who couldn't even remember the way to the library, let alone the fact that the books they'd borrowed actually had to be *returned*.

Sarah pivoted on her heel and strode across the room, back to the shelves where she'd been stocking the new releases. Once she was out of her line of vision, Carrie slumped in her chair and sighed.

"I live for this kind of thing, you know. *Nothing* gets the adrenaline pumping like a good collection call."

Sarah poked her head out from behind the shelf and leveled Carrie with her patented shut-up-you-insolent-child-or-I'll-nail-you-to-a-wall glare. "Remember who signs your paycheck, young lady."

Would she ever escape this madhouse of monotony? "You do, Mom." *And who was it that took care of you for four months after your back surgery and then stayed at work for an extra two months just because you asked her to? Who had dropped everything and moved back home when Lauren had insisted she was too busy dealing with marital problems to help the family out? Oh, yeah. That's right. Me!*

The fact that the head librarian had given birth to her was about the only reason Carrie bothered to show up for her shift every day. If it hadn't been for family loyalty rearing its ever present and often ugly head, she might have quit ages ago like the last five assistant librarians.

Smart ladies.

"Another two months," she muttered to herself. "And then you can quit. Just give her two more months to make sure she's completely recovered. Then you're home free. Literally."

Carrie snorted. If it were only that simple. She could quit easily enough. Unfortunately, her next step would then be to proceed directly to the nearest mental institution for a nice, long stay. To think she'd actually *missed* home when she'd been away. Having worked as an assistant librarian during her high school years, she should have remembered what it was like in Pine Tree Grove. Somehow, while she'd been enjoying life in New York, Carrie had managed to convince herself that things hadn't been as crazy back here as she'd thought. She'd had a good job as a buyer for a department store, a decent social life, and a neat but tiny studio apartment right in Manhattan. She'd left it all for *this*?

She pulled Mrs. Anderson's account up on the computer, but before Carrie got a chance to pick up the phone and dial, the library doors burst open, and her sister hurried inside in a flurry of bright orange dress, platinum-blond hair, and enough makeup to put Tammy Faye Bakker to shame. *Oh, man. What's next? The clowns and miniature horses?*

"Carrie, I'm so glad I found you," Lauren breathed, doing her best Marilyn Monroe impression. It might have worked, had Lauren *looked* like Marilyn Monroe. Given the fact she could fit into a size '0' petite and didn't have enough chest to fill a training bra, the breathlessness did nothing more than make her look ridiculous. The bright colors she wore only added to the child-playing-dress-up look.

Carrie sighed. Why couldn't she have a nice, normal family like the ones on all those TV reruns?

"Where else would I be? I work here, remember?"

Lauren ignored the barb and settled her scrawny rear into the gray-upholstered office chair next to Carrie's -- the one that would probably fall apart if someone over a hundred pounds sat in it. Luckily for Lauren, she had the body of a twelve-year-old boy. She scooted toward Carrie, the chair's rusty castors squeaking in protest as they moved across the floor. "Something *terrible* has happened."

Please. In Pine Tree Grove? Not likely. "Did they cancel your favorite soap opera?"

"It's worse than that. Much worse." Lauren let out a dramatic little sigh and put the back of her hand to her forehead.

Give me a break, Scarlett O'Hara. Just spill it already. "What happened?"

Lauren glanced around the room, her gaze darting to the few patrons milling around the library on the warm spring Friday evening. Apparently satisfied they were all engaged in more important activities than listening to her so-called problems, Lauren leaned her elbows on her knees and whispered, "Brian is missing."

Is that all? Carrie blinked. "I thought you said terrible. What's the bad part?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said?" Lauren's big green eyes narrowed at Carrie's nod. Lauren tried to push her blonde bangs off her face, but with the amount of hairspray she'd used she couldn't seem to get them to budge. "This is serious," she hissed. "It is *not* a joke."

Maybe not, but Lauren's year-long marriage to their father's former right-hand man was. "Yeah, seriously wonderful. The guy is a jerk. He'd sell his own mother for the right price, and he thinks fidelity is optional in a marriage. Not only that, but he's so slick he even had Dad fooled. Nobody realized what a slimeball Brian was until you kicked him out of your house, and the real man started to show through the façade. Did you forget already? We've been through this a million times."

"I know that. But if he's missing, how am I supposed to get the divorce? The court date is only two weeks away. Remember? Don't you think that's important? I mean --"

A teenage girl walked up to the front desk with a stack of romance novels, and Lauren snapped her red-lacquered lips shut. The girl set the books on top of the desk and handed Carrie her library card, casting Lauren a quick, horrified glance before smiling at Carrie.

Carrie stood up and returned the smile. "Hi, Melinda. Good to see you again." She swiped the girl's card and scanned the bar codes on the books, then dropped the paperbacks one by one into a white plastic bag. "Enjoy the stories." *You're young, you lucky girl. You can read those and not know how they're all big, fat lies. Because romance does not really exist.* And hunks like the ones baring their chests on those beautiful covers didn't go for normal women. They wanted the thin, never-eats-anything model type. Either that or they wanted men.

"They're due back on the fifteenth." Carrie slid the bag across the counter, and Melinda scooped it up.

"Thanks, Carrie. Good luck." Melinda gestured with her chin in Lauren's direction.

Carrie fought back a giggle. *Dear little sister, everyone in town already thinks you're nuts. Why reinforce their opinions by dressing like a cross between a B movie star and a drag queen?* When the girl exited the library, Carrie turned her attention back to Lauren.

"Of course I remember the divorce. How could I forget the forthcoming greatest day of your life? He's going to turn up. Brian wouldn't just walk away." Because if he did, their father would have him hunted down and tortured. Max Holiday made it clear to every man his daughters brought home that he had zero tolerance as far as his little girls were concerned. Brian knew that, too, but he'd managed to disguise his true self under a veneer of charm, doting on Lauren and promising to love and take care of her "forever." It had taken a while for anyone in the family to see him for what he really was. Once their father had found out about Brian's...extracurricular activities, he'd canned the man and tossed him out of the company on his no-good rear. Two days later, Lauren had filed for divorce.

"He wants the divorce as much as you do, remember? It'll all work out. End of story." Carrie propped her hip on the edge of the desk. "I have to deal with this mountain of recent returns and then play collections Nazi, so you might want to get out of here before Mom comes back around."

Lauren gave a weak, out-of-character laugh and focused on her manicured nail tips. "Actually, I'm not so sure that really is the end of the story."

The hesitant tone in Lauren's voice raised the hair on the back of Carrie's neck. "Why not?"

"I...I lent him some money. I know the lawyers said neither of us could spend that kind of money until after the divorce is final and everything has been split up," she rushed on, "but I had to do it. He was in a little trouble." She scrunched her nose and brought her hand up, her thumb and forefinger an inch apart. "Just a little bit."

Oh, shit. Carrie's stomach dropped, and she closed her eyes. *Please tell me this is some kind of nightmare. When I open my eyes, I'll be back in my bed in my cozy little apartment in New York, and none of this will have ever happened.* She opened one eye, then the other. No such luck. Lauren still sat in the chair behind the counter, wringing her hands in her lap and looking a little too pale for Carrie's comfort. Carrie heaved a sigh. No sense dragging out the suspense. Might as well get it over with. "Okay. Give me the rest of the bad news. How much did he steal from you?"

Lauren's eyes widened. "He most certainly did not *steal* from me. He had some things to take care of. I think he might have had gambling debts." She shook her head, her expression bringing a snort of laughter to Carrie's lips. "I *lent* him a couple thousand."

"A couple thousand?" Carrie's jaw dropped open. "Are you *nuts*?" She would have slapped her sister upside the head for her supreme stupidity if they'd been alone. What had Lauren been thinking? All the hairspray she used on a daily basis must have fried her brain cells. "Exactly *how much* did you give him? Are we talking two thousand, or more like five?"

Lauren sucked her lower lip into her mouth and bit down. Her gaze dropped to the floor. "Don't get mad, okay? I lent him..." *cough*, "...ten thousand."

Ten *what*? Carrie's knees buckled, and she gripped the counter to keep from toppling to the ground. "Excuse me? Could you repeat that? I must need my hearing checked, because I could have sworn you said you gave your lying, cheating, scumbag, soon-to-be-ex husband, *ten thousand dollars!*"

The room shrank in size as the small group of people in the area swung their wide-eyed gazes toward the front desk, their mouths collectively gaping like a school of fish out of water.

Lauren's hands flew to her face, and she let out a little whimper. "Well, yes. That's what I said. Relax, Carrie. This is not the place for yelling." She pointed to the large white sign positioned in a prominent spot in the center of the front of the desk: "Quiet in the library."

Brushing off the sudden onslaught of bad kindergarten *déjà vu*, Carrie fixed Lauren with a stern stare. "Okay. *Fine*," she whispered. "Please explain to me why you lent him all that money." *Besides the fact that you've apparently stricken the word "no" from your vocabulary.*

Lauren expelled an impatient sigh. "I explained that already. He had to pay off his debts. He needed twenty thousand, but I told him I could only afford ten." Lauren shrugged;

her face paled even more. “Now that he’s missing, I’m wondering if I should have borrowed the money from Mom and Dad to give Brian the whole twenty thousand.”

The puzzle pieces Lauren had been dropping since she’d walked in started to slide into a very disturbing -- but not altogether unappealing -- picture. But why had Brian disappeared? Had he skipped town with Lauren’s money, or had something much worse happened to him?

And what made Lauren think she’d get her money back, even if Brian surfaced sometime in the next two weeks? “You’ve got to be kidding me. Are we on *Candid Camera* or something? And where the hell did you get ten thousand dollars?”

Lauren’s job as a receptionist for a local doctor’s office didn’t provide enough salary for that kind of savings.

“No, this isn’t a sick joke. I think something terrible has happened to him.”

If it hadn’t yet, it would soon. Carrie would see to it personally.

Chapter Two

“I get it now. You’re not worried about Brian. You’re worried about getting your ten thousand dollars back.”

Lauren stood and paced the short length of floor behind the counter. The clacking of her heels against the tile made Carrie want to scream. Or rip the ridiculously spiked heels off the ugly orange, patent-leather shoes to stop the noise. She checked her impulses and bit the inside of her cheek, waiting for Lauren to start talking.

“I’ve been saving the money for a while. Years, really. Since my marriage to Dirk the dickhead. He used to give me shopping money whenever he wanted to get me out of his hair. After a while, the shopping got boring, so I started saving the money instead.”

Ugh. Carrie had known Dirk Hallowell, her sister’s first ex-husband, was well-off, but she hadn’t realized how much he’d tried to spoil Lauren. It sounded almost like he’d been paying her off. Lauren seemed to have a talent for picking assholes destined to cheat on her. “You’ve kept the money around for eight years? I thought your bank accounts were frozen during your divorce from Brian.”

“I didn’t put the money in the *bank*. It was a secret. I kept it around the house instead. In the guest room mattresses. In plastic bags in the basement freezer.” Lauren shrugged, as if hoarding thousands of dollars was the most natural thing in the world.

A burst of disbelieving laughter broke from Carrie’s lips. People actually *did* that sort of thing? She thought that was only in the movies. “What, were you planning to run off to a tropical island with some young, hot Cuban named Juan?”

Lauren’s face flamed. “His name is Carlos, and he’s Mexican, not Cuban. But he dumped me a couple months ago. How did you know about him, anyway?”

Talk about too much information. Way too much. “I was just kidding. Geez, Lauren. And you were upset that Brian cheated on you?”

Lauren gave her a look that said Carrie should understand, when in reality every word that came out of her sister's mouth only made her more confused.

"Is that why you want your money back? So you can leave Pine Tree Grove?"

"This isn't about the money, Carrie." Lauren shook her head when Carrie rolled her eyes. "Okay, so it is. I admit it. It's all about the money. I can't afford to lose that much cash. I won't be getting any alimony from Brian, since we were only married for a year, and I was saving that money for something."

"What exactly did you plan to do with ten thousand dollars? This ought to be good," Carrie mumbled, wondering if this could possibly get any stranger. The expression on Lauren's face told Carrie it could.

"Don't tell Mom and Dad, because they won't approve, but I was saving for a breast augmentation."

Carrie snorted. Unbelievable. "Are you kidding me? Do you think they wouldn't have noticed if you showed up at their house one day suddenly busting out of your tank top?"

"I'll worry about that when the time comes. *If* it comes. Unless I can get my money back, I don't see that happening. I need you to help me find Brian before he gets himself killed, and then I'm out of luck."

Brian caused more trouble gone than he had when he'd been around. Up until this moment, she wouldn't have thought that possible. "At least if he got killed you'd get his life insurance." A morbid thought, yet the truth as she saw it.

"Um, about that..." An uneasy look crossed Lauren's face. "Brian cashed in his policy when Dad fired him. He had no job, no one to turn to. He had to pay rent on his new apartment somehow. He already had the policy when we got married and never added me as a beneficiary, anyway, so none of it would come to me if he wound up dead." Lauren lifted a delicate shoulder and tipped up a corner of her too-full-to-be-real lips. "I never expected this to happen. I thought he'd been working to get his life together. He really sounded sincere this time, and I just... I wanted the fighting to be over." Lauren threw her hands up in the air. "That's what I get for trusting someone like him. Again. I really need your help, Carrie. Please. I'd hire a *real* private investigator, if I had the money, but obviously now I don't. You've always had a knack for this sort of thing, so I guess you'll have to do."

"Gee, thanks. Glad to know I rank so highly on your list."

Lauren pulled a small, black, leather-bound book from the purse she clutched to her side. "You know what I mean. Here." She presented the book to Carrie. "This is Brian's business contact book -- what I assume contains the names of his contacts for Dad's company. I bet, though, that you'll find what you need in there. Thanks, Carrie."

Carrie waved her hand in front of the book, trying to dismiss Lauren and her problem at the same time. "Who said I would help you? I never agreed to anything."

“You always found whatever I lost when we were little, and you read so many of those detective books that something must have rubbed off. I trust you, Carrie. I know you can do it.”

Lauren gave her a small, tight smile and a pat on the shoulder. She tried to push the book into Carrie’s hands again, but Carrie shook her head. Lauren dropped the book on the counter. It hit with a smack of leather against cheap wood.

Carrie looked down at the nondescript black cover. *What secrets do you hold? Anything interesting in those pages?* Most likely.

And that was when it happened. Her interest in the situation, which she’d tried to keep buried deep under abject cynicism and a general hatred for the man who’d worked so hard to ruin her sister’s life, sprang to the forefront. Hadn’t she been expecting a big change to come her way? She’d have preferred that it not involve a scumbag like Brian Samuels, but she didn’t really have the right to be choosy.

Later she’d probably question her motives, accuse herself of impulsiveness and getting caught up in the moment, but right now she didn’t care. What kind of idiot would turn down this chance? Not her. When she’d been a child, she’d always envisioned herself as a police detective when she grew up. Instead of doing what she’d wanted to with her life, she’d done what her parents had urged and gotten a “safe” job instead. She’d just been handed a do-over, of sorts, and no way would she pass up the opportunity. “Okay,” she said, making her voice sound reluctant. “I’ll do it. But you’re paying for any expenses.”

Lauren’s smile widened. She squealed and threw her arms around Carrie, hugging her so tightly that she squeezed the breath right out. “Thank you so much. I just *knew* you would help.” Gasping and coughing, Carrie detangled herself from Lauren’s arms and ducked away.

“Okay. I get it. You’re grateful. Now, can I please get back to work before Mom docks my pay?”

“Sure. Sorry.” Lauren grabbed her purse and headed for the door, a new swing in her step now that she’d gotten what she wanted. “Call me as soon as you know anything,” Lauren, using the singsong voice that annoyed the hell out of Carrie, called as she slipped out the door.

Carrie stared at the little black book, then stuck it in her purse. As much as her fingers itched to flip open the cover and find out what was inside, she resisted. Waiting would make her findings so much sweeter when she finally got home.

* * * * *

She pulled into her driveway just as the sunset bathed the sky in brilliant pinks, oranges, and purples. Carrie put her faithful little hatchback into “Park” and switched off the

ignition, her eyes taking in the sky art around her. And then her gaze landed on another wonder. Her neighbor, Luke Nolan.

Mr. Sexier-Than-a-Greek-God stood framed by his front picture window, his gaze focused on some point in the distance. The dim light from inside his house surrounded him, giving his fair skin a golden glow. He wore nothing but a pair of well-worn jeans with the top button undone. His state of undress left practically nothing to the imagination, and Carrie's vivid imagination had no problem making up for the parts she couldn't see. The man had the most amazing chest. Toned and defined, peppered with dark hair that tapered off into a thin line down his abdomen.

She wiped her mouth, sure that drool must be pooling in the corners. If he'd just drag that zipper down an inch or two -- or all the way, even -- he'd make her a very happy woman.

Her fingers itched to run through the soft-looking, chestnut brown hair falling to his shoulders. His features were refined, his cheekbones high, and his lips full, an odd combination she might have called pretty if it had been on another man. But on Luke, the streamlined handsomeness worked.

Did it *ever*.

Every time Carrie saw him, every time he fixed her with that exotic, icy-blue gaze, her stomach bottomed out, her knees went weak, and she couldn't form a coherent sentence. She mentally reverted back to fifth grade, when she'd first realized boys were *not* icky.

Sad, Carrie. More than sad. Pathetic.

She had a hard time controlling the way her body reacted to the man. The first time his gaze had met hers, the intensity in his own had nearly knocked her on her butt. It had stolen her breath, made her legs shake, and caused the blood to pound in her ears. A completely ridiculous reaction given she didn't even *know* the guy. He could be some kind of mafia hit man or a serial killer.

Carrie let out a shaky laugh. Trusting a complete stranger could be dangerous to her health, but for a body like that, she'd be willing to make a few exceptions. Hey, nobody was perfect, right? *We all have our faults.*

What am I saying? Carrie shook her head and climbed out of the car, determined not to look in his direction again. It wasn't worth the aggravation of trying to get his attention when he lived in the other half of the duplex and had yet to notice she existed. She could stand naked in front of his window doing jumping jacks, and he probably wouldn't see her.

"No. He'd notice all right. And then he'd go blind from looking at my flab," Carrie muttered. She smoothed her hand down the slight swell of her stomach to the fullness of her hip. At five-foot-two, she didn't consider herself fat. But she wasn't skinny like Lauren or svelte like her mother. No, she was big boned. Curvy.

Hopelessly out of shape, and not willing to do anything about it. Not the kind of woman who would attract a godlike creature such as Luke Nolan, either, no matter how much she might want to.

A dog barking in the distance broke the spell. Carrie let out one final, wistful sigh before she walked up the stone pathway to her front door, stealing glances at him every few seconds. Since the driveway sat to the left of his side of the house, it gave her plenty of chances to look as she walked up the pathway toward the porch steps that led to their front doors. Once, she thought he might have looked her way, but she had to be wrong. Whatever his gaze was focused on in the horizon, it appeared his mind was elsewhere.

Give it up, girl. He's way out of your league. Way out.

The knowledge didn't stop her from raising her hand to give him a little wave as she passed next to his window. Her heart stopped, and she did a double take when she noticed his gaze was no longer focused on some far off point. He looked directly at her. Was it her imagination, or did she see what looked like a small smile?

* * * * *

Luke stood by his living room window, watching Carrie walk past him toward her door. She waved to him this time. A first. The small gesture tightened his gut into knots and made his mouth run dry. If she had any idea what he wanted to do to her, she'd go back to avoiding him as she'd done in the past.

His smile widened as she scurried away. His cock hardened at the sight of her swaying back end under the tight black skirt she wore, before she disappeared from his line of vision. She had a startling effect on him every time he saw her looking soft and curvy and feminine. Every part of his body responded in a most basic way. His teeth itched to sink into that amazing ass. She reminded him of women from years ago, before society had become obsessed with sickly thinness, bottled water, and salads with no dressing. Before scarily thin had become fashionable, when women had no problem eating in front of men.

He hadn't had much opportunity to be close to her, but the few times they had passed each other outside, her scent had etched itself into his mind. She smelled like strawberries and vanilla -- and a gentler scent he could only describe as uniquely Carrie.

Luke wanted his mouth on her. Everywhere. Would she taste sweet, like sugar? Spicy, like cinnamon? Would she sigh and whimper as he dragged his lips down her neck? Would she moan?

Get your mind out of the gutter. Thinking this way about her isn't helping matters, when you know damned well you can't have her.

But he wanted her. *So badly.* She got him hard every time he saw her -- which hadn't been often, given their opposing sleep schedules. Lately, she'd started haunting his dreams

while he slept the daylight hours away. Visions of her before him, her breasts bared to his heated gaze, kept him awake in the daytime and distracted him from his work at night.

And he was a complete idiot for letting her get to him so easily.

You're wasting your time even thinking about her. She isn't interested. Shouldn't the fact that she ignores you on a regular basis and runs away when she sees you be some kind of hint?

A man would think so. Too bad his body chose to disagree.

The shrill ring of the cell phone clipped to the waistband of his jeans pulled him from thoughts he had no business entertaining. Going after Miss Holiday would be unethical, immoral, and fraught with bad timing. Luke had a job to do, and he'd best remember that. With a frustrated sigh, he flipped open the phone and brought it to his ear.

"Nolan."

"Luke, it's Vince."

"Where the hell have you been?"

"We've got a problem."

Luke let out a low growl. "Not the answer I was hoping for."

"Brian Samuels is missing."

Well, hell.

Irritation washed over him in cold waves, slamming the door on his burgeoning arousal. His grip tightened on the phone. "How can he be missing? Didn't I tell you to keep an eye on him?"

"I did. He got past me and my men without any apparent difficulties. I think he had...help."

Help. Wouldn't that just figure? Although no one had been able to prove anything, the man was suspected of embezzlement. Of course he would be wily enough to slip away from Vince. He'd managed to elude everyone else so far. "I don't need this shit right now. Samuels has to be found and taken care of. Right away. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yeah." Vince paused and sighed before he continued. "I'll deal with the problem. I'll let you know when I find him."

"You'd better, or Samuels won't be the only one in pain." Luke disconnected the call and flopped down on his back onto the soft leather couch right behind him.

That was the last time he'd trust someone else with a project he should have done himself. Friend or not, Vince didn't know as much about the job as Luke and obviously had been ill-equipped to handle it. If they didn't locate Brian Samuels soon...well, the results wouldn't be pretty.

Not finding the man wasn't an option. Luke would have to take care of the problem himself.

Chapter Three

This has to be some kind of a joke. The next morning, Carrie sat in her small living room staring at Brian's open address book. One name in particular had practically jumped off the page screaming, "Look at me!"

Luke Nolan.

Either Lauren had pulled some kind of prank by writing in a name that didn't belong, or the name was supposed to be there, and Carrie was living next door to a potentially dangerous man.

What is your name doing here, Mr. Too-Sexy-for-Words? Lauren didn't have the mental capacity to play such a subtle, yet anxiety-inducing, prank.

Most disturbing was the fact that nothing written next to Luke's name indicated what kind of "business" he did with Brian, as she'd found next to many of the other entries. No title, no company name. Just "Luke Nolan" written in ominous, heavy black ink, a phone number next to it, and his address scrawled in tiny print below. Looking at the words sent a shiver down Carrie's spine -- and not the good kind of shiver she usually associated with Luke. This was a frisson of fear dancing down her backbone, not a jolt of lust.

Did her neighbor know something about Brian's disappearance? Did he *cause* it? Visions of that grimly set jaw and icy, piercing gaze filled her mind. She sank further into the plush cushions of her couch. Sunlight poured in through the picture window in the living room, making Carrie glad she'd waited until this morning to dig into Brian's book. If she'd found that name last night, she might have embarrassed herself by running to her mother's house and begging to spend the night. Now, in the light of the early morning, she was able to keep her fear to a bare minimum. Almost.

But even stronger than the fear was the curiosity that welled in her gut. She glanced at the wall that separated Luke's side of the house from hers. *What have you been up to, Mr. Nolan? How do you figure into Brian's disappearance?*

There was only one way to find out. Well, she could think of a few ways, but given that snooping or breaking and entering were illegal, her choices were limited. To save herself the trouble of possibly getting arrested, and having to make bail she couldn't afford, Carrie pushed herself up off the comfy couch cushions, brushed her hands down the front of her jeans, and walked out the door.

Once she stepped onto the front porch, though, her resolution started to dissolve, and she had to force herself not to turn around and run back into her house. Birds chirped, neighborhood dogs barked, the leaves of the trees rustled in the breeze -- and Carrie's blood pounded in her ears, drowning out every happy sound of the warm spring day. What was she doing? Did she really think going over to his house to question him in such a blatant manner was a *good* idea? She'd be better off leaving it alone.

Please. She gave the voice of self-doubt in her head a kick in the rear. *What are you? Two years old? Don't be such a ninny. You promised to help your sister, and that's what you're going to do. Now get your ass over there and talk to the guy. There's got to be a very reasonable explanation why his name is in Brian's book.*

Yeah, like he was a hired killer Brian had pissed off one too many times and --

Carrie pinched herself in the arm. *Stop it. This isn't difficult. Just walk over there, ring the doorbell, and wait for him to answer.*

She plodded across the porch to Luke's door, raised her finger, and rang the bell. She waited for the muffled dinging on the other side of the door and for a response. Nothing happened. She stabbed the button a few more times, but still heard no sounds from inside the house. Of course. It was just her luck. Now that she'd worked up the nerve to talk to the guy, his doorbell didn't work. With a huff, she knocked on the heavy wooden door. Nothing.

Carrie raised her fist and knocked again, this time a little harder. She waited for an endless minute, tapping her foot on the porch and blowing out short, annoyed puffs of air. His monster of an SUV was in the driveway, so he had to be home. *Why wouldn't he answer the blasted door?*

Maybe he'd worked the night before and was sleeping now. She just happened to notice -- by accidental means, of course...no spying for this girl -- that he left late most nights and got home just before sunrise. Luke was probably curled up under his covers, sleeping like the dead.

Now *there* was a visual she could have done without.

She knocked one more time, six short, hard raps that echoed dully on the other side of the door. Still nothing. With a shake of her head and a heavy sigh, she started to turn away. At the same time, the door swung open and a hand snaked out. Strong fingers wrapped

around her arm in a vise-like grip as the arm pulled back, dragging her into the pitch-black darkness of Luke's house. Someone's shrill, girly scream filled the air.

Oh, yeah. It was *hers*.

The echo of the door slamming shut made her legs wobble. If that big, strong hand had let go of its bruising grip, she might have fallen. And then the moment of anxiety passed as adrenaline took over. She dug her nails into the wrist attached to the hand. Luke rewarded her with a grunt as he yanked away. And then he flipped on the light.

He stood in front of her, one hand in the pocket of his black sweat pants, the other now propped on the wall above the light switch. His long hair hung loose and ragged around his shoulders, and his eyes -- well, he didn't look very happy.

Huge understatement, girl. He looks ready to tear you apart. She bit her lower lip, feeling the need to apologize even though he'd been the one to drag her inside and scare her half to death.

His eyes narrowed to slivers, his lips set in a tight line, and the muscles of his shoulders bunched. "What the hell are you doing, banging on my door loud enough to raise the dead?"

He seemed angry, but his actual words hadn't yet sunk in. She'd never before heard him speak more than a word or two here and there. Now she realized what she'd been missing. His voice mesmerized her with its deep timbre and the barest hint of Irish brogue, as if he'd moved to the United States years ago and had lost most of his accent. She almost slumped to the floor as her hormones ganged up on her leg muscles but caught herself at the last second. It shamed her to admit it, but just hearing him speak made her panties damp.

Funny, but men with accents had never affected her this way before. Maybe it had to do with the six-pack abs her gaze was currently glued to. Her eyes started to drift lower, to what even the baggy sweats couldn't hide, but she snapped her gaze back to his face.

Luke cleared his throat and raised an eyebrow, and she remembered he'd asked her a question. What was it again? Oh, yeah. Knocking loud enough to raise the dead. She flinched at his choice of words, so like her earlier thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I knocked that loudly."

"Well, you did. You got me out of bed, and believe me, that isn't an easy feat. I'm assuming you have a valid reason for depriving me of much-needed sleep. Now what the hell do you want?"

Geez. *Somebody* got up on the wrong side of the bed.

"I wanted to talk to you," she told him, her voice sounding miserably thin and weak. What was wrong with her? She was *so* not a weak woman. She wasn't thin, either, but she wasn't going down *that* road. She cleared her throat and tried again, doing her best to ignore his heavy stare. "It's very important. I didn't mean to wake you, but you didn't need to grab my arm like you were ready to tear it off, either."

Sure, she might have made a mistake coming here at this hour when she knew he worked the late shift, but that didn't excuse the way he'd manhandled her. A simple "come back later" would have sufficed. Besides, it wasn't *that* late in the morning. She'd hoped he hadn't even made it to bed yet.

He said nothing, but she could have sworn she caught a hint of resignation in his eyes. She resisted the urge to smile as the tired look disappeared from his handsome face. But when she saw the anger that replaced it, Carrie rethought her assessment. She gulped and took a step back.

"How about this, woman? I think you'll listen to me instead. Your reasons, whatever they are, can't be good enough to interrupt my sleep." He took a step toward her, and then another, until he had her backed up against the wall next to the door. Carrie's heart lurched into her throat as his body stopped a scant two inches from hers, so close she felt the heat radiating from him. Her body greedily sucked it in and reveled in it, despite her mind's warnings that she faced an angry and possibly dangerous man. She thought about ducking away and running out the door, but then she caught the small, amused smile on his lips, and a jolt of irritation ran through her. He was toying with her and loving every second of it.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he beat her to it. "There is only one thing I'll stay awake for during my sleeping hours, and it has nothing to do with being questioned. In fact, it really has nothing to do with talking at all. So unless you want to join me in bed for the rest of the day and indulge me in my every fantasy, I suggest you get to the point."

His voice, barely above a whisper, sent little shivers down the back of her neck -- and through a few other, more sensitive places as well. Carrie balled her hands into fists to keep from reaching out to touch him, though she had a little trouble remembering why his daring proposition should bother her.

Because he's a presumptuous man who thinks women should keep their mouths shut and obey his every word.

"If you could please back up, I'll be glad to get to your point. Um, I mean *my* point." Her face flamed at her choice of words. *What was wrong with her?* Like any rational woman, she tended to get a little flustered around a man so sexy, but never this badly. Could this get any worse? Carrie drew a deep, shuddering breath and plowed on as he stepped away. To get through this without embarrassing herself further, she needed to keep things on a professional level, or at least as close to that as she could manage. "I want to ask you about the disappearance of my sister's husband. Brian Samuels. Your name came up on his contact list, and I was hoping you might be able to shed a little light on the situation."

Luke froze, his eyes widening. The glare slid from his face, leaving only surprise in its wake. He stared at her for what felt like an eternity, his gaze boring into hers, before he let out a rough sigh and a muttered curse. "Funny. I'd planned to talk to you later this evening about the same man."

He *what?* “Excuse me? Why would you ask me...?” Her voice trailed off as a thought hit her. “Omigod! You want to kill him, don’t you? You’re looking for him so you can put a bullet through his head or a knife through his back.” She was *so* out of there before he did the same thing to her.

She spun around and pulled open the door, but in a lightning-quick movement, Luke slammed it closed and tugged her hand from the knob. His fingers gripped hers for a beat too long, sending an unwanted jolt of awareness up her arm, and then she yanked back in shock.

“Stop being ridiculous,” Luke told her. “No, I don’t want to kill him. Where would you get that idea?”

Her hands trembled -- hell, her whole body shook -- but she refused to let him see anything but cool, confident Carrie Holiday. Okay, so she’d slipped a second ago when she’d tried to bolt, but it would *not* happen again. *Be strong, girl. You can do this. If he really wanted to murder you, he’d had plenty of chances before now.* “Maybe it had something to do with you going all caveman on me and dragging me into your house and slamming the damned door.”

He took a step back and barked a laugh. He changed attitudes so fast it made her dizzy. “Oh. That. Sorry if I frightened you. I get a little grumpy when I’m woken out of a deep sleep, but I think I can make an exception for a beautiful woman.” His lips curled into a half smile that did things to her insides. He dragged his heated gaze down her body and back up again with excruciating slowness. Every nerve in her body tingled to life, and her nipples beaded. She wasn’t buying a second of this.

“What do you want from me?”

He raised his hands in front of him, palms up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. What makes you think I want something from you?”

Despite the fear still racing through her, or maybe because of it, she quirked a smile. “You’re a man. Isn’t that the way it goes?” She took his laugh as a good sign and continued, trying to lighten the tension in the room and get some answers at the same time. “You went from Neanderthal to Mr. Suave-and-Sophisticated in a matter of seconds. Either you’re trying to butter me up for something, or you have Multiple Personality Disorder.”

“I have a little problem with the sun.” His smile widened. Carrie jerked. His smile was a challenge if ever she saw one. He was baiting her, and something told her she didn’t want to know the motivation behind his actions.

“Are you allergic?”

“Yeah. Allergic.”

Liar. “What happens? Do you break out?”

He shook his head. “Not exactly. I burn. *A lot.*”

Oo-kay. What was it with this guy? Did he have some kind of Dracula complex?

Now where did that thought come from? It gave her the shivers from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Just because he said he was allergic to the sun and slept all day didn't mean he thought he was a vampire. She narrowed her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "You don't drink blood or anything, do you?"

He didn't even bother to respond, which suited her fine considering the absurdity of her question. He turned away and walked through an archway into the dim living room, flopped down on an expensive-looking, off-white leather couch, and propped his feet on the glass-topped coffee table. "If you insist on making such ridiculous accusations, we should at least be comfortable. Come and sit down, Miss Holiday."

She bristled at his oddly formal tone. *Miss Holiday? Please.* Instead of following him like she knew he expected -- that would be a little like following a hungry bear into his den -- she stayed in the entryway and looked around, taking in the décor. The walls had been painted in deep, warm burgundy, with accents of cream and sage green. Carrie ran her fingertips over a smooth, heavy cherry table propped against the wall next to the door, and looked at the matching mirror above. Antiques. How very curious. The fact-lover in her aroused, she took in the oil paintings and aged brass sconces lining the walls. She walked across the floor and stopped in the archway between the entry and the living room. Expensive antiques -- or very good reproductions -- also filled the room where Luke sat. "This is some place you've got here."

A frown marred Luke's perfect face. "Thanks."

"I hope you don't mind me asking, but what's with all the old stuff? Are you a collector?"

He glanced around the room. One muscular shoulder lifted in a shrug. "I guess I am, but not in the way you're thinking. Most of these pieces have a history attached to them. I couldn't bear to part with them."

She nodded in understanding. "Been in the family for a while, huh?"

He barked a rough laugh. "You could say that. Are you finished with your assessment of my home yet? I believe you said you had a reason for waking me..." He raised an eyebrow.

A twinge of guilt hit her, but she pushed it away. It wasn't her fault his name appeared in Brian's book. Time to get down to business. Carrie strode into the living room and settled herself in the dark red, wingback chair across from the couch. Big mistake. The chair looked elegant and regal, but she had a feeling sitting on a bed of nails would be more comfortable. When she shifted and grunted, Luke laughed. "You can sit on the couch. Come on. Sit next to me. I won't bite." He winked. "Not yet, anyway."

Chapter Four

Carrie shrank back against the chair. She gripped the arms, her knuckles going white as her nails dug into the upholstered surface. “You’re kidding, right?”

“If you say so.” He let out a heavy sigh, but the wicked gleam in his eyes didn’t fade. “Okay. Enough small talk. It’s much too late for that. I’m assuming since you’ve come to ask me about Brian, you don’t know his whereabouts?”

“If I knew where he was, I would be out there trying to bring him back rather than sitting here, having this surreal and strange conversation with you.”

His expression took a serious turn that surprised her. He cursed softly. “How about your sister? Does she know? I’d really like to talk to her, too.”

“Lauren is the one who wants to find him. Believe me, if I had a choice, I’d prefer he stayed missing. Why do *you* care if he’s missing? Does he owe you money? Because if that’s the case, you probably don’t want to think about trying to get it from Lauren. She doesn’t have it, and the woman has enough problems without adding something else to the list.”

“Money isn’t the issue here. It’s a complicated story, sweetheart.”

Carrie leaned forward and propped her elbows on her knees. “Complicated, huh? You were planning to talk to me, as well as my sister about it. I’d really appreciate some sort of explanation besides the patronizing brush-off you offered.”

“If you don’t already know why I need to find Brian, then there’s a good reason for it.” She watched Luke push some hair away from his face. He pursed his lips and became thoughtful. When he continued, his voice took on a business-like tone. “Suffice it to say that I don’t want to hurt him, but I have a huge stake in getting him back here before he does something stupid, like gets himself killed.”

A knot formed in her stomach at both his words and his tone of voice. “That’s exactly what my sister said,” she mumbled. Why did everyone value Brian’s life so much? It didn’t

add up. She'd met the man. Had more than a few conversations with him over the years. Been hit on by him at least seven times, occasionally in full view of her sister, who'd assured Carrie that Brian's intentions had been a "friendly joke." Sometimes the world made no sense. "But at least she gave me a valid reason as to why he might be missing."

"Since you don't know where he is, I guess you can go home now, and let me get back to sleep." He yawned and stretched his arms over his head, exposing the hard line of muscles along his sides and making her mouth feel like she'd been snacking on cotton balls. All the moisture in her body made its way south. *Be strong, Carrie. Don't let the sight of a couple of muscles sway you. You promised Lauren, don't forget, and this man knows something about Brian and his disappearance.*

"Maybe we can help each other find him."

"Not likely. I've got it under control, sweetheart. Just stay out of the way and let me do my job."

Okay, now he'd done it. If she heard him call her sweetheart one more time, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. "Excuse me? I don't appreciate your condescending attitude."

Luke leaned forward, putting his face mere inches from hers, and grinned. The dark smile coupled with the heated, dangerous stare should have sent her running into his arms -- or in the other direction just as fast. But Carrie held her ground.

"As I said before, I think you and I can help each other."

"What do you do for a living, Miss Holiday?"

"I'm a librarian."

His eyebrow rose, and a snort of laughter escaped his lips. "A librarian?"

He said the word like a five-year-old would say "broccoli." "Yes, I'm a librarian. Please don't tell me you take issue with books?"

"A librarian. Oh, yeah. That'll help. I know you mean well, honey, but you really should leave this job to the professionals." He watched her a few minutes. "Tell me, what exactly does your job have to do with finding your missing brother-in-law?"

She snorted. "If you call me 'honey' or 'sweetheart' again, you can forget talking to either me or my sister about Brian. And I'm probably more of a professional in this situation than you are. I have read a large number of nonfiction books on crimes and how they're solved, giving me a decent working knowledge of how to proceed in this situation. What exactly do you do, Mr. Nolan?"

He laughed. "I'm a private investigator."

Oh.

Her face flamed. Carrie darted her tongue out and wet her suddenly Sahara-dry lips, praying like heck she'd spontaneously combust or dissolve into the fabric of the chair. *A private investigator?* She gulped.

“Speechless, huh? I like that in a woman.” He chuckled as if he’d told the world’s funniest joke, and Carrie wished *he’d* spontaneously combust. She wasn’t that lucky. “So I’ll repeat, Miss Holiday, why don’t you go back home, sit on your couch, read a book, and leave the job to the professionals.”

“Meaning you.”

“Ah. You’re finally getting the picture.”

Oh, yeah. Like *that* would happen. His patronizing attitude smacked of challenge. Now she was more determined than ever to find Brian. She’d locate him before Mr. I’m-Superior-Because-I’m-a-P.I., and then she’d rub it in his sexy face. *Who’ll be laughing then, Hot Shot?* “Did Brian hire you for something?”

“No.” Luke gave her a guilty look that told her he knew a lot more than he was saying. She needed to stay close to him. Eventually he’d either lead her to Brian or to someone who knew where the miserable jerk was hiding.

“Will you at least tell me why your name is in his address book?”

That eyebrow rose again. “I don’t think so.”

To think she used to find him sexy. “Keep in mind that, if you’re up to no good, your name will get dragged through the mud right along with Brian’s” She may not like Luke very much at the moment, but she knew a good source of information when she ran across one. “Unless you want to pool our resources and work together.”

“What resources could you possibly have that I don’t?”

“Family ties to the area.” She smiled. “My family has been in town for generations, and family business for almost as long. Most of the buildings in town were built by Holiday Construction. The Holiday name has a good reputation. Around here, in a place like this where everyone knows everybody else, that’s a big deal. I’m a lot more accepted than an outsider like you would be.” Another hit or two and his resistance would crumble away. He’d be putty in her hands, giving her whatever information she needed without any argument.

Yeah, and she was first in line to become the next president of the United States.

Still, she’d told him the truth. Given that her father owned one of the only construction companies in the area, and he’d built a solid reputation over the years, her father’s name had a lot of pull with people in Pine Tree Grove. Whether that would help or not in this particular situation remained to be seen, but it never hurt to do a little name dropping if the need arose.

Luke stood and paced the room, his hands in the pockets of his sweats and his hair hanging in his face. Her fingers, obviously not getting the message that the guy was bad news, itched to run through the strands. Was it fair that the man had better hair than she did? She refused to look at the sculpted muscles of his bare back because, with the way the morning was going, the sight would probably render her temporarily insane.

When he stopped pacing he perched on the arm of the couch, his arms crossed over his chest. He pinned her with a wary gaze. "I'm only suggesting this because I haven't had nearly enough sleep, so I'm sure I'll change my mind once I think it through, but you might be onto something here."

"Really?" Somehow, Carrie had expected more of a fight. She raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. What was he up to?

Luke seemed to choke on his response. "Yes, really. But here's the deal. We only work at night, after the sun goes down." He dropped his chin, his gaze locking with hers as if daring her to demand different.

"Because you're allergic to the sun."

"Right."

Sure you are, you big fat liar. He was either hung over or delusional. From what she'd seen so far, she leaned toward the latter.

"That means you have to go home now, so I can get to sleep. I worked all night, and if I don't get any rest I'll be useless come sunset." He stood and held his hand out to her. She ignored the gesture and pushed herself out of the chair -- and instantly wished she hadn't since it put her body so close to his that if she didn't move soon she'd need mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

She sucked in a sharp breath -- his spicy, masculine scent made the butterflies in her stomach go crazy -- and ducked away. "I'll go. As long as you're around later."

"I will be." He lowered his chin, his expression grave. "When I give my word, I keep it. Always. Meet me back here after sunset, and we'll go over that list you have."

The list. Is that what it all came back to? "You're just using me for my list."

He shrugged a shoulder in an elegantly callous manner. "Maybe, maybe not. You won't know until you show up here tonight. Do you want my help or not?"

Not willing to shoot herself in the foot over a little clash in personalities, she relented. "Okay. Fine. After sunset. Your place." A little thrill ran through her at the thought. *This is not some clandestine affair, you sex-starved idiot. Keep it professional. Don't get involved with the guy.* Unless it was his idea. Then it wouldn't be wrong to say yes, right?

She took in Luke's flat gaze, pursed lips, and raised eyebrow. It wouldn't be his idea. Ever. *Give it up, honey. You'll never get a man like him to notice you sexually. This is about Brian, and that's all.*

"Are you going to mentally debate this all day? Because if you are, I'm going to forget my manners and let you see yourself to the door," he said. "If you want me functioning on even the most basic level tonight, I need to rejuvenate."

Carrie marched toward the door. "Okay. As I said before, I'm sorry I disrupted your beauty sleep."

Her comment coaxed a deep, rumbling laugh from him that turned her legs to mush. She took the last few steps to the door and gripped the knob to steady herself. He caught up with her before she swung the door open. His hand dropped to her shoulder, where his warmth seeped into her skin. She gasped and shrugged him away. Touching was out. *Way out*. When he put his hands on her, she wanted to melt into a puddle at his feet. That would destroy her credibility in a heartbeat. If she'd ever really had any in the first place.

She started to open the door, but he put his hand on it and pushed it shut. "I hope you don't mind if I don't see you to your door."

Oh, yeah. "Allergic" to the sun. "No problem."

He walked back into the living room, out of sight. "Until later," he said softly, sending a chill down her spine. Why did his words sound so ominous now? She yanked the door open and stepped out into the bright light of the morning, a stark contrast to the gloomy, dark feeling inside Luke's place.

Carrie wrinkled her nose, unable to figure out what it was about him that had red flags going up all over the place in her mind. He just seemed so...unusual. He'd set her at ease or made her nervous -- and even turned her on -- with just a glance. And a few times she swore he could read her mind. But that was crazy, right? He might be a total hottie and a complete chauvinist, but he was just a man. *Right?*

Of course he was. There was nothing different about Luke. *Nothing*. He was just like other men, who, as a species, were a strange lot to begin with.

Whom are you trying to convince? He acted like a...vampire. She might have even thought he was one, if she didn't know vampires were fiction. A myth. Still, she wondered. Was it possible?

No. Not even remotely. She gave her inner cynic a mental kick in the shins, sending it scurrying into a dark corner of her mind to nurse its well-deserved wounds. *I don't need your worthless opinions right now*, she thought as she let herself back into her house. *He's just a man, though one with an apparent overload of testosterone. Get over it already.*

* * * * *

Luke flipped onto his back and pried his eyes open, his gaze falling on the digital clock on the bedside table. Seven p.m. The sun would set in about fifteen minutes. He groaned. He had precious few minutes of quiet time left before he had to deal with the little detective wannabe next door. And here he'd slept the whole day away.

He heaved a sigh and dragged himself out of bed. At least he'd gotten a good day's rest. He was going to need all the energy he could muster tonight, just to answer her endless string of inane questions.

Why had he offered to let her trail him while he worked, knowing full well she'd be more of a hindrance than a help? The answer snuck up on him and sucked the air from his

lungs. Because she aroused him. It had been too long since a woman turned him on the way Carrie did, and the guise of working together seemed like the most logical path to take, since it would eventually end in his bed. Luke didn't need her family connections. He'd be willing to bet that he probably had quite a few of the same ones, given his ties to her father.

He did need something else from her. He had no doubt he'd get it, too, but he had to move slowly. Carrie Holiday was not a woman to rush into anything, and he'd have to proceed accordingly. Finding Brian Samuels would be child's play. Getting Carrie right where he wanted her would take a heavy dose of finesse and charm, and more than a little luck. The finesse and charm he could manage. It was the luck that worried him.

Luke grabbed a pair of black jeans, a matching T-shirt, and a pair of boxers out of his dresser as he headed for the bathroom. If he kept his shower under five minutes, he'd still have a few minutes to eat before she knocked on his door. He hoped. He couldn't risk skipping his dinner. If he did, his control could slip at any time, and his blood-starved brain would start to think of her as his next meal. That was a chance he wasn't willing to take. Although he enjoyed the good, hard romp that usually accompanied a feeding, he only pursued sex if it was a mutual desire. It would take a lot more than a night to get Carrie to the place where she'd accept his advances, especially since she'd caught him at the worst possible time and probably thought of him as a complete ass. Could he really be faulted for his behavior, since she was the one who'd woken him up?

Of course he could. Being a human, and most likely a sheltered one, she would have no clue what kind of nasty attitude a tired vampire would have. The woman was angry with him. He could smell the emotion all over her. Knowing that, however, didn't stop the hunger from rising in him, swift and sharp. He climbed into the shower, battling the need swelling in him, which grew stronger by the second. The fierce, hot fire low in his gut made washing nearly intolerable. The hot water sluiced over his chest and down lower, brushing his cock with a warm caress.

He let out a soft groan. The shower certainly didn't help him get Carrie off his mind. Instead, it brought back memories of earlier in the day, of having had her in his lair, so close. *Too* close. He'd wanted so badly to touch her, kiss her...and so much more. She'd felt the pull, too. He'd seen it in her eyes, even as she pretended to ignore it and cover her attraction. Luke grunted. She had no idea how hot that had made him.

He needed something to take the edge off if he planned to make it through the night around her -- inhaling her sweet scent, looking at her lush body -- without taking a bite out of her. Not relishing the thought of losing a body part as she'd threatened, he washed quickly, dried off, and dressed, then made his way down the hallway to the kitchen.

Before he could enjoy his meal, though, someone knocked on the door. His shoulders slumped. Carrie, no doubt. No one else would dare show up at this ungodly hour. *Damn it.* How had he known this would happen? The sun hadn't even quite set yet, and here she was, pounding her fist against the only thing that separated him from third-degree burns.

Couldn't the woman ever follow directions? She'd have to be taught, or he might lose his temper. She wouldn't want to see that. It would give her nightmares for years.

Chapter Five

The butterflies in Carrie's stomach had taken a decidedly violent turn, twisting her gut into painful knots. She raised her hand to knock on Luke's door again, but her fingers shook so much she couldn't clench them into a fist.

You are so sad, Carrie. He's just a man. A man who doesn't care whether you show up or not. He might not be happy about working together, but he isn't dangerous. There's nothing to be afraid of.

She snorted. She could pretend all she wanted that the anxiety came from fear, but it didn't. At least not all of it. A good portion came from the same emotion that had caused her to spend an hour on her hair and makeup and to try on everything in her closet before settling on a black, V-neck T-shirt and a pair of denim capris. White canvas mules and a light, zip-up sweatshirt completed the look, though why her *look* mattered, she hadn't a clue. She wasn't looking to impress anyone.

Carrie has a crush, a little voice in her head taunted, sounding suspiciously like her sister's.

"Do not." She didn't suffer from any silly, juvenile crush. No way, not her. She suffered from full-blown, *very* adult lust. And if he showed up at the door without a shirt on again, she couldn't be held responsible for her actions. Or Luke's safety.

The setting sun glinted in the front windows of the house, making her eyes water. The tan vinyl siding took on watercolor hues as daylight started to fade. Their usually quiet street seemed deserted tonight, reinforcing the feeling of nervousness welling inside her.

Please. What did she have to be anxious about? Either they found Brian, or they didn't. Would it really be so terrible if the ass stayed missing?

She breathed a sigh when she heard the heavy click of the deadbolt lock. The door opened a crack, revealing a sliver of the darkness inside, but swung inward no further. She frowned, and her heart skipped a beat. Or ten. “Luke?”

“You’re early, but you might as well come in,” he answered from somewhere beyond the door.

Majorly creepy. She shivered. The situation brought to mind the classic horror novels she’d been addicted to as a teenager. *Don’t step inside. You’ll be eaten alive!* “No, I think I’m okay right here.”

“Oh, for hell’s sake. Don’t be ridiculous. Just come in,” Luke grumbled, shattering the dangerous image she’d formed in her mind. He wasn’t a monster bent on destroying her life. He was just a crab of a man with no manners and a complete lack of social skills. She pushed the door open, gave a weak laugh, and stepped inside. The soft hiss and click of the door closing behind her sent a jolt of residual anxiety shimmying down her spine. She brushed it off.

“Nice to see you, too. You might want to try being...”

Her voice trailed away as her eyes adjusted to the semi-darkness blanketing the entryway. Luke stood ten feet to the right of the front door in the open space of the kitchen. He had his hip propped against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest, and his legs at the ankles. His expression was completely blank. His deceptively casual pose did nothing to ease the spike of worry knifing through her gut. His hard, dark gaze pinned her to the floor.

Uh, oh. Somebody didn’t get his beauty sleep. Again. Either that, or his personality left a whole lot to be desired. If he thought that gave him license to continue the caveman behavior, however, he had another think coming.

“You do realize what *sunset* means, don’t you?” he asked, his brows dropping into a deep scowl.

“Of course I do.”

“I specifically told you when to come. I do not appreciate being disobeyed --”

Who does this guy think he is? If she let him continue to talk to her this way, he’d walk all over her. Carrie held up a hand to stop his tirade. “If I were you, I wouldn’t even bother to finish that sentence. You *cannot* command obedience from me, because we don’t live in the Middle Ages. If you don’t have anything nice to say, I suggest you keep your trap shut. We agreed to work toward a common goal, but I’ll take my handy little list and run along home if you can’t play nice. So why don’t we try to get along, okay? Can we get to work now?”

Carrie stalked past him, trying not to laugh at his shocked-into-silence expression as she made her way to the kitchen. She dropped the photocopies she’d made of the list onto the shiny cherry surface of a long, oval table, frowning at her reflection. The table looked like it belonged in a five-star restaurant, or a mansion in the Hamptons. Where did he get off

having such nice things? Didn't he realize when one lived in a middle-class dwelling, one should possess inexpensive, middle-class objects? He set the whole balance of society on its ear. "Another family heirloom?"

"Pretty much." His voice sounded like he stood right behind her. The hair on the back of her neck prickled -- though it wasn't possible, right? She would have heard him move across the floor. No one could possibly be *that* quiet. Still...

She pivoted slowly on her heels and found herself nearly chest to chest with the guy. She squealed and jumped back, bumping her butt against the table. "Ouch! How did you do that?"

"Do what?" He looked over her shoulder and at her butt and laughed. "Want me to kiss where it hurts and make it better?"

The idea held a little too much appeal. "Um, no. I think I'll pass."

He laughed again. His eyes lit with humor, and with something else. A heat that hit her low in the gut, making her nipples bead. The look in his eyes told her he noticed her reaction. "Are you sure? It could lead to a very...interesting evening."

"Jerk." She meant the word as an insult, but the quiet, breathy tone of her voice made it sound like a compliment. She pursed her lips. "*Jerk.*" *Nope. Not any better.* She still sounded hopelessly in lust. Not smart. She'd just met the guy.

Instead of being offended, Luke smiled. "I'm a man, sweet -- *Carrie*. Did you expect any different?"

"You were going to call me sweetheart."

"Yep." His smile widened, and he took a step back. He propped his foot on a chair, his knee bent at a ninety-degree angle, and leaned his arms on his thigh.

Her gaze followed the line of muscle that ran from his knee all the way up to his... *Cut it out, Carrie! You're hopeless. Absolutely hopeless.* "But you didn't say it."

"I wouldn't want to annoy you."

His words combined with the daring look in his eyes drew Carrie's gaze right back to where she least -- and most -- wanted it. Even under the tight jeans, the bulge was unmistakable.

She swallowed hard and dragged her gaze back up to his face. The knowing glint in his eyes made her face flame. She had to force herself to remember that she didn't even like him. He wasn't attracted to her, anyway. This behavior of his had to be some kind of a ploy to get information out of her.

"If you think you're going to seduce the list away from me, think again, buster. It isn't going to work."

A humorous -- and somewhat naughty -- grin lit his face as he leaned forward, entirely too close for her brain to continue functioning. When he spoke, his tone was low and husky.

“If I planned to seduce you, it wouldn’t be for information. It would be for the sheer physical pleasure of the act. And believe me, it would be *very* pleasurable.”

She would have walked away to put some space between them, but the intimate timbre of his voice nailed her feet to the floor. She couldn’t get them to budge. Her lips parted on what was almost a sigh before she caught herself. *Calm, cool, and collected, Carrie. Not hot, wanton, and melting into a puddle of hormones at his feet.* “Nice try. I don’t jump into bed with every man I meet, no matter how sexy he is. Now, I really think we need to get to work.”

“Sexy, huh?” He laughed softly. He shook his head and slumped into the chair. “We’ll talk more about that later. Definitely. I believe we have some business to take care of first.”

She bristled at his comment, so close on the heels of his lewd suggestion. “The business of finding Brian.”

“Of course. What did you think I meant?”

Men. Were they all so impossible, or was she just lucky with this one?

She sat down across from him and pulled the photocopied pages toward her. When she took a pen and highlighter out of her sweatshirt pocket, Luke cleared his throat.

“What’s with the photocopies?” he asked, his eyebrow raised in that sexy way that turned her insides to mush and made her want to swoon. *Don’t you dare,* she chided. *Strong women kick ass. They don’t faint.* She’d never fainted in her life. Why did it feel like she might do so now, over a man of all things? The heat inside his place must be messing with her mind.

She dropped her gaze to the papers in front of her. “I don’t want to mark up the original.”

“Good thinking.”

Why was he so damned agreeable all of a sudden? Was he making fun of her? “Thanks. I think. Okay, we’ll go through the ‘A’ names first.”

“Works for me.” Luke scooted his chair closer to hers, his arm coming to rest an inch from her hand. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch him, to find out if all that muscle was as hard and sculpted as it looked. Her mouth watered. *Down, girl.*

This was going to be a *long* night.

* * * * *

After what seemed like an eternity to Carrie’s sleepy brain, but which had really only been a little over an hour, they reached the last page of the list. Luke might be used to staying up all night, but she, the queen of zero social life since moving back home to help her family, usually curled up under the covers with a good book around eight. Her eyelids drooped, and she slumped further down in the seat, unable to hold back a yawn. And she’d thought working in a library could be monotonous? It had nothing on scouring addresses and

phone numbers to determine what business the owners of said entries had with her brother-in-law. According to Luke, who had a questionably high amount of knowledge of Brian's contacts and dealings, most of the names were legitimate.

Carrie glanced down at the last page of her packet -- letters X, Y, and Z. *Oh, yeah. This page is going to be a veritable font of information.* A single entry under the 'Z' glared up at her in small, bold scrawl. She pushed the paper closer to Luke.

"This is a strange one. It says 'Zyra.' No last name, no address. Only a phone number."

Luke's gaze snapped to hers. "Zyra? Let me see that." He snatched the paper up from the table and brought it closer to his face. With a muttered curse, he lifted his cell phone from his waistband and flipped it open. "Why didn't I see this coming?"

She blinked. "See what? Who, or what, is Zyra?"

He dialed the phone, ignoring her questions and brushing off her attempts to get the paper back. After a few seconds, he snapped the phone shut and set it on the table with a *thunk*. "Disconnected. Zyra wouldn't be stupid enough to keep the line going once she found out about..." He shot her a wary look and closed his mouth.

"What's going on?"

"The less you know, the better off you are. Believe me. I don't want to put you in any more danger than necessary." He pushed a hand through his hair, his eyes darkening as he spoke. "Suffice it to say, Brian is in a lot more trouble than I first thought. *If* this name means what I think it does."

Was speaking in riddles part of the P.I. training course? Carrie wrinkled her nose. She really should check the library for an English-to-Alpha Male dictionary. "Is he dead?"

Luke let out a harsh bark of laughter. "That's highly unlikely. No, I think he's very much alive. Let's go. The quicker we deal with this little issue, the better off we'll all be." He pushed away from the table and got to his feet so quickly his chair teetered on the back two legs. Luke caught it and set it right in a movement so fast it made her head spin. Carrie was still blinking at his almost feline grace when he grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet.

She crossed her arms over her chest and backed away. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to go talk to some people on this list. We'll start with Steven Albert."

"That name sounds familiar."

"He used to work for your father. Now let's go before you fall asleep, and I have to leave you behind."

Not liking the hopeful glint in his eyes, she followed him out of the house and to the driveway. He climbed behind the wheel of his navy blue SUV. Carrie, five-foot-two and not blessed with the height and long legs of her companion, didn't have such an easy time. After three false starts, and nearly falling on her rear end on the pavement, she managed to wiggle herself into the seat. She gave Luke credit for not laughing, given that she probably looked like an overgrown inchworm trying to scale the Empire State Building.

She waited until he started the SUV and backed out of the driveway before she assaulted him with her questions -- and after his last comment, she had many. "How do you know he used to work for my father? Where do you get your information? Do you know Steven Albert? Do you know my father?"

He didn't take his eyes off the road, and he didn't speak. In fact, he didn't acknowledge her questions at all.

"Luke?"

"I heard you."

"Are you going to answer me?" She snuck a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. Though he appeared to focus all his concentration on the road -- which seemed a nerve-racking twenty feet below them from this height -- a hint of a smile played around the corners of his lips. If he wasn't so damned sexy...

"Can I plead the fifth?"

His question gave her the answer she needed. So he knew her father. She frowned, wondering in what capacity he may have come into contact with Max Holiday. What did this mean to his investigation into Brian's disappearance? What did it mean to *her*? "Should I be worried?"

He didn't take his gaze off the road as he answered, but she caught the hint of mischief in the air. "What do you think?"

You might not be as bad as you want me to think you are. You know my father, and he didn't tell me to stay away from you, so he must trust you, at least a little. I think I'm starting to like you, Mr. Nolan.

That might be a problem.

Chapter Six

They stepped out of the dark stairwell into an even darker hallway. The putrid scent of stale cigarette smoke, decay, and despair made Luke gag. He looked at the yellowed walls, the paint cracked and peeling. The apartment doors, painted a flat, dirty brown, looked old and as paper-thin as the walls. The faded orange carpet below their feet had seen better days. Probably in 1962.

“This is horrendous,” Carrie whispered, drawing closer to his side.

Huge understatement, that. He’d lived in a similar manner once, but that had been in another lifetime. So many years had passed he barely remembered the squalor he’d been born into. He’d seen other places like this -- even been to this specific building a number of times -- but somehow, having Carrie with him dredged up memories he’d rather forget. He brushed them aside, determined to concentrate on the task ahead of them rather than on things best kept in the distant past.

He glanced down at Carrie, taking in her wrinkled nose and the grimace on her lips. “Are you okay?”

Her gaze flickered up to him. “Oh, yeah. Just *dandy*.”

Not for the first time during their little excursion, he questioned his judgment in bringing her along. She looked so out of place in the dingy hall that he found it laughable. If her father knew that his precious little girl ran around playing commando in her spare time, he’d have her head. Luke’s, too. However, that was the least of his worries. If Max found out what Luke really wanted to do to Carrie, Luke would be dead before morning. Max didn’t take kindly to people upsetting his daughters. He certainly wouldn’t appreciate the fact that Luke wanted to take her to bed and spend a good three or four hours inside her.

Luke took Carrie's arm and pulled her to a stop in front of the second to last door on the left. Apartment 210. The home of one Steven Albert, a known "business" associate of Brian Samuels. And a man a woman like Carrie wouldn't want to meet alone in a dark alley.

He fought the absurd urge to chuckle. Hell, Steven Albert was a man *he* wouldn't want meeting Carrie in the middle of the day in a crowded supermarket. The man was trouble. Yet, as far as Brian's disappearance went, Luke and Carrie had barely scratched the surface. Brian's contact list had contained more than a few nasty surprises. And Luke would need to go through every one of them.

There had been one name he hadn't expected to find there, though, and it worried him. What business would Brian have with Zyra? Or rather, what business would a vampire like Zyra have with Brian? In her self-important world, Brian was a nobody. Hell, maybe that was the appeal. Brian might have been exactly what she was looking for. A puppet easily swayed by a pretty face and a promise of money. Zyra had killer looks and had been slowly amassing a fortune for centuries. She also tended to develop obsessions with the men in her company. Most of the time when they tried to leave her, they ended up dead. By the time they realized what she had planned, it was too late.

Lord knew, before Luke had figured out what she really was, he'd been drawn in by her magnetism. It was her charisma that he'd first noticed about her, and its strength had been enticing. It had sucked him in and had prodded him to pursue her. He hadn't realized then that her magnetism masked something darker. The change sometimes affected more than a person's humanity. It had driven Zyra mad. It had taken him almost a century to shake her, and even now she made a point to occasionally contact him, to let him know she wasn't finished with him yet. She seemed to take great pleasure in telling him about the death of her latest conquest.

He was well past done with her. He'd gotten out alive and planned to keep it that way. Brian Samuels was a human, and he might not be as lucky.

They had to find him fast. Luke looked at Carrie before he knocked on the door. "Let me do the talking, okay?"

She frowned at him, her big eyes guileless, and he let out a resigned breath. Frankly, he was surprised she'd kept her mouth shut this long. It was probably the shock of seeing how Albert lived that had done it.

"I'm serious, Carrie. I need you to try your hardest to let me handle this. We don't need any trouble. That isn't going to help us find Brian before something happens to him. I know what I'm doing, and you're going to have to trust me to follow through. I'll let you know when I need backup, okay?" *And that will be never.*

She glared at him for a few seconds before her expression softened, and she nodded. "Okay. I'll try."

Ha! He'd believe it when he saw it.

Luke raised his hand and knocked on the door. After a minute or so of dead silence, the doorknob turned, and the door opened a crack. The familiar, pasty-white, stubble-scruffed face of Steven Albert greeted them. His watery green eyes widened when he saw Luke, and his jaw dropped, revealing discolored, crooked teeth.

Luke grinned. "Hey, Steven. How have you been? Unlatch the chain and open the door all the way. We need to have a little chat."

The slimy little toad looked ready to croak. How fitting. He ran his hand down his grease-stained T-shirt. The door slammed shut. For a second, Luke thought the other man would ignore his request, but then the door swung open, the rusty hinges screaming in agony.

"Luke. Good to see you. What can I do for you?" Steven's worried gaze turned into a leer as it dropped to Carrie. "New girlfriend? She looks familiar. Cute, too."

Carrie shook her head. "No. Definitely not his girlfriend. Not even close."

Luke stepped in front of her, hoping to avoid the scuffle sure to follow if Steven kept up with his comments. Knowing how physically weak Albert was and that even someone like Carrie would probably put the man in the hospital, he'd have to be the voice of reason, something that didn't come easily to him. "We're looking for someone. I was hoping you could help me find him."

Steven looked over his shoulder into the tiny apartment. The TV blared in the background and lit the apartment with a flickering blue light. When Steven looked back at Luke, he shrugged. "That depends. What's it worth to you?"

The man should know him better than to play games with him. Luke shook his head. "Steven, Steven, Steven. Here I thought we'd come to an...understanding the last time we spoke." He fixed the other man with a stare that had Steven backing a few steps into the apartment and stepping halfway behind the door.

"Who are you looking for?" Steven asked, his voice an octave higher than before.

Luke opened his mouth to speak, to try to make him feel at ease again before he moved in for the proverbial kill, when Carrie popped out from behind him. "We're looking for Brian Samuels."

Slam! They found themselves face-to-face with Steven's ugly brown door.

"Damn it." Luke tried the knob, but Steven had already thrown the lock. A second later, he heard the click of the deadbolt sliding into place. Luke could break in easily enough, but it would create unwanted noise and alert the neighbors, most of who had no qualms about calling the police. Police involvement being the last thing he wanted, Luke turned his annoyance on the one who deserved it. Carrie.

"What were you thinking? You need a lesson in tact."

She snorted. "At least I *asked* about Brian instead of making small talk with the creepy little guy."

He growled in frustration, and she took a step back. He raised his fist to pound on the door again, but Steven's neighbor poked her head out of her apartment door.

"You again," the old woman shrilled in a thick Italian accent. Her eyes were wild, and her finger wagged in their direction. "I remember you. Always with the noise and the yelling. Go away. No more trouble here. I'll call 9-1-1."

Luke let out a harsh breath and fixed Carrie with another fierce look. He'd have to catch up with good old Steven later, or hope one of their other leads panned out better than this one.

"Let's go." He grabbed Carrie's elbow and hurried her down the hall to the grimy staircase, risking a couple peeks over his shoulder to make sure the old psychopath hadn't hurled anything in their direction. The last time he'd dealt with her, he'd ended up with a teakettle mark branded on his forehead for days. Thank heaven she'd missed when she'd tossed the toaster at him.

"You're going to give up? Just like that?" Carrie tried to pull him to a stop.

"Trust me on this one. We don't want to get arrested. Or assaulted with kitchen appliances." She had no idea how terrible an arrest would be to his health. Or the health of those around him if they kept him behind bars long enough. "We'll talk to someone else later, okay?"

"Sure. Whatever you say." She started down the stairs ahead of him. With barely-controlled annoyance guiding him, Luke followed her down and out onto the cracked walkway leading to the parking lot where he'd left his SUV.

When they were halfway there, a window two floors above them opened. Luke glanced up and saw Steven's neighbor, the old woman, push up the screen. He tried to move Carrie away, but the old lady was too quick for him. She held a cooking pot out and dumped the contents over their heads.

Luke grunted. At least it was just water. So far. He grabbed Carrie's arm and tugged her off the walkway onto the grass of the building's weedy lawn just as the heavy pot hit the sidewalk with a clatter. He glared up at the window in time to see the woman make the sign of a cross with her fingers.

"Demon! Leave here before I throw garlic and holy water! Stay away! We do not welcome your kind here." She moved back inside and slammed the window so hard Luke worried that it would break and shower them with cheap glass.

"What the heck?" Carrie brushed her soaked hair out of her eyes. "What was that all about?"

"Steven's next-door neighbor is a little crazy." He bit back the sudden, out-of-place urge to run his fingertip down the glistening line of her jaw. He blinked, taken aback. What was wrong with him? They needed to get out of there before things got worse, and all he could think about was touching Carrie -- the woman who'd caused the trouble in the first

place. He'd start with her jaw before moving his fingertip to her lips, demanding entrance. And then he'd...

"A little?" Carrie cleared her throat, breaking him out of his fixation. Almost. "Why didn't you warn me? And why did she threaten you with garlic and holy water?"

Sweetheart, you really don't want me to answer that question. "The woman is a menace to society." He blew out a breath. "Come on. Let's go home and change. We can hit the next name on the list after that."

Carrie threw her hands up in the air, grumbled, and stomped toward his SUV. He smiled. She had no idea how sexy she looked when she got angry. And seeing her soaked and flushed brought to mind thoughts he had no business thinking in the middle of an investigation.

But wasn't that why he'd agreed to let her tag along in the first place? Because she appealed to him so much? It certainly hadn't been for her stellar investigating skills.

You're going soft, old man. Maybe it's time to retire, since your heart isn't really in the job anymore.

His interests, at the moment, lay elsewhere. Namely on the woman who insisted on tagging along and making his life hell in more ways than he could count. But then his mind flashed to his employer, a man who wouldn't appreciate his growing interest in Carrie. A man who knew secrets about Luke that, if leaked, would create some serious trouble. Luke swallowed the lump in his throat. *Work. All work, all the time. No little blondes -- at least not a certain one in particular.*

He hurried after her and grabbed her arm as she reached the SUV passenger side. "We need to talk about what happened in there."

She wrinkled her nose, her eyes sparking with annoyance. "So talk."

"You should have kept quiet. He might have helped us, had you --"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Kept my big trap shut. I'm sorry. The place made me nervous. Steven Albert and his extreme creepiness didn't help. When I get nervous, I get talkative. And then I have a hard time shutting myself up."

"Like now?"

She let out a small laugh. "Yeah, like now. Am I that obvious?"

"Just a little."

She smiled at him, and he nearly lost it right there. Something about her sweet, sincere grin hit him right where it counted. Just like that, his lower body tightened, and his teeth started to ache. When her expression turned into something more heated, Luke gritted his teeth. He'd been holding back since she'd woken him that morning. His body had been strung tight as a bow, and now it all came crashing down. He felt ready to snap.

Luke nearly growled as the sudden need to taste her filled him. He didn't often lose control, but her showing up fifteen minutes early had kept him from taking the edge off his

hunger with a quick feeding. Now it reared up full force, taking away any semblance of the gentleman he possessed. His breaths came heavy and ragged as the hunger rushed through his body. He could almost feel the blood pounding in her veins, and he licked his lips. She'd be so soft, so sweet, so...

Her eyes wide, she backed toward the SUV. "Luke? Are you okay?"

Shit. He'd scared her. Her words had an oddly calming effect on the beast raging inside him. His control returned, little by little, until he had almost half of it back. It wasn't much to work with, but it would have to do. If she hadn't spoken... Strange that a human woman would be able to accomplish something he hadn't been able to do on his own. He looked down at her, helpless to hide his awe.

"Do you know how sexy you look in moonlight?" he asked softly. Truthfully. The pale, blue glow of the nearly full moon bathed her hair in washed silver hues and made her skin glisten. Her eyes sparkled, and though he knew it was a trick of the light, her gaze seemed to beckon him closer. Her lips parted, her tongue briefly touching the bottom one. Luke's stomach turned inside out. Torn between wanting to protect her and wanting to possess her, he reached for a lock of her hair and wrapped it around his finger.

She gulped, her eyes widening even more, and he smiled. He tugged on the hair and pulled her closer, reveling in the scent of warm vanilla and strawberries. He felt his incisors fully elongate into fangs, wanting to bury them in that delectable neck, and he shuddered.

The sane, decent part of him made a final plea for sanity. *She's the wrong one. Leave her alone. Wanting her could be trouble.*

He knew it, too. He didn't bother to ignore it. But he also wouldn't deny the lust curling in his gut. Something nagged at him from the back of his mind. A warning. That if he took this too far, there would be no turning back.

What is that all about? It's just one touch. One kiss. Nobody said a thing about forever.

Long-term didn't even enter into the equation. Luke wanted to fuck the woman, not marry her. Needing to prove to himself that he could touch her and walk away, he leaned down and kissed her.

Big mistake. It hit him the second his lips touched hers. The feeling started low in his gut, but spread to his limbs and went straight to the top of his head. He couldn't describe what it was exactly, only that he'd never known it with another woman. She tasted right, felt right. *But she wasn't right.* She couldn't be.

He should *not* have touched her. *Ever.* She could be a serious threat to his lifestyle, as well as his sanity. Horrified as he was, since he'd already committed the faux pas, he couldn't have stopped himself from touching her again, even if he tried.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back, and Luke gave in to every lustful thought and emotion he'd had since the first time he'd gotten a whiff of her sweet scent.

Their tongues tangled, teeth nipped, lips caressed until he thought about pulling her into the backseat of his SUV and having his way with her. Right there in the parking lot. Being a man who very much enjoyed the comforts of a big, soft bed, the thought surprised him.

That, along with her soft moan, proved to be the catalyst forcing him to break the kiss. With a muttered curse Luke turned away and willed his teeth to slide back into a more normal form. Well, to her perception, at least. Her warm palm settling on the back of his shoulder didn't help.

“Are you okay?”

He nodded. He would be. In about a thousand years.

When he'd first pegged Carrie Holiday as trouble, he hadn't had any idea how true his assessment was. He barely knew the woman, yet he understood that on some primal level she had the ability to turn the world as he knew it upside down. She had no idea of the hold she had over him. Nor would she ever find out. To give a woman that kind of power could mean certain death and destruction. And then Luke turned and caught sight of her glazed, lust-filled expression and pouty pink lips.

Hell. What was a little death and destruction?

Damn. What a way to go.

Chapter Seven

Carrie's fingers flew to her mouth. She sucked in deep, panicky breaths and forced herself to relax. *One. Two. Eight. Four. Six... Oh, this is no use.* She threw her hands in the air and stalked away from Luke, desperate to break herself from the spell of his warm, soft lips. What was wrong with her? One measly little kiss and she was ready to tear all his clothes off, right there in the parking lot? He wasn't *that* good. Was he?

She glanced back at him over her shoulder, and her heart fluttered all over again.

Oh, yeah. He was *that* good.

And she had it bad.

Sad. She'd barely spoken two words to him until recently, though she'd been attracted to him since she'd first seen him. Carrie brushed her wet bangs away from her face. Her stomach twisted in a painful knot. Why had he kissed her? Why him? Why *her*? A man like Luke would never be attracted to a mousy librarian. Not in this lifetime. He had to have an ulterior motive. Maybe he'd kissed her to shut her up. Maybe he was a playboy who wanted to make another notch on his bedpost, and she looked like an easy target. Did men do that anymore? *He* probably did. Everything else about the guy screamed "hopelessly outdated." The way he spoke, even the words he used sometimes seemed a little strange.

Carrie yanked open the SUV door before she turned to face him, her hands on her hips. "I want to go home and change now." Even as she said them, the words made her wince. *Nothing like acting like a spoiled five-year-old, doofus.*

He walked closer -- was he swaggering, or did she just imagine it? -- and stopped a few feet from her. He said nothing, made no attempt to get into the SUV. He just stared, his icy gaze too intent, searching, and she squirmed under the scrutiny. Her nipples pebbled, and she groaned.

"Luke, I said I want to go home. I'm freezing."

His knowing gaze dropped to her chest, and a smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "I can tell." His voice sounded husky, sexy.

Oh, for God's sake, get over it. He's nothing special. He's just another caveman who thinks he can take what he wants, whenever he wants.

Yep. And in the state she was in, she might just let him. To avoid making a complete fool out of herself, or, at least, any more than she already had, Carrie climbed into the SUV and slammed the door. She fastened her seatbelt and crossed her arms over her chest. Who did he think he was, being so sexy and hot and kissing her like he wanted her? Didn't he know it wasn't fair to toy with a girl's emotions? Carrie felt like crying. She felt like screaming. She wanted to pull Luke up against her and...oh, that was *so* not going to happen.

Luke opened the driver's door and climbed behind the wheel. He started the SUV, and the big engine roared to life, almost as loud as the pounding of her heart. He made a gruff grunting noise as he turned to her. "No need to go around slamming doors. Just because you're upset with me doesn't give you the right to take it out on my SUV."

His *SUV*? Was that all he cared about? She glared at him. "Who says I'm upset?"

He chuckled. "You don't need to say it, sweetheart. It's written all over your face."

"Is not." She focused on the building as Luke backed the SUV out of the parking space and sped out of the lot. "Listen, Luke, what happened was --"

"Unexpected."

"Well, I suppose that's one way of putting it." She might have described it as earth shattering. Axis-tilting. The best thing that had ever happened to her. But unexpected? Somehow, it didn't seem like enough. Not even close. "But I was going to say --"

"Don't analyze this to death, Carrie. We kissed. It isn't a big deal. Really. It happened. Why don't we just move past it and get on with this investigation, okay?"

Um, okay. She frowned. Why did he seem so completely unaffected by the kiss? Did it mean so little to him that he could just brush it off like it was nothing, while she sat in the seat next to him feeling like her whole world had caved in?

Can the drama, Carrie. She felt like she was channeling Lauren. If he could put the whole incident behind him with such ease, she could do the same thing. Or she could at least pretend. She sucked in a deep breath for courage, wishing the interior of the SUV didn't smell so much like him. Forgetting he'd kissed her would have been easier if she didn't have to inhale his scent with every breath. "Yeah, you're right. Forget the kiss. It never happened."

"I didn't say that, did I?"

Her gaze snapped to him. He looked straight ahead as he drove, his expression flat and emotionless. What had he said? He didn't want to *forget* the kiss. He wanted to *move past* it. Now what the hell was that supposed to mean? She hoped he didn't feel guilty for taking advantage of her -- last time she checked, it wasn't possible to take advantage of the willing.

Still, she had a feeling that was the route he'd be taking. She clenched her hands into fists and waited for him to apologize. He didn't, which, for some crazy reason, only got her more irritated.

"So you're not even going to apologize for what happened?"

"For kissing you?" He snorted a laugh. "Not likely. Do you think you can change your wet clothes in five minutes, or are you going to need longer?"

Oo-kay. Did that mean he'd *wanted* it to happen? Or was remorse so far below him that he never uttered the words? Or...she really had no idea what was going through his mind, and she'd be better off not trying to figure it out. And they said women were complicated. Women had nothing on this guy.

Luke stopped at a red light. He turned to her, his gaze simmering with annoyance. "Again, Carrie, relax and stop with the analysis. You're going to give yourself a headache. Just let it be, okay?" The light turned green, and he focused his attention back on the road. He mumbled something that sounded like "Ridiculous humans."

The hair on the back of her neck rose, and a ball of dread settled in her stomach. He hadn't said that. He couldn't have. He was human, too, because anything else would be beyond impossible. *Way* beyond. Carrie swallowed against the lump of ice forming in her throat and tried, but failed, to draw a full breath. The interior of the SUV seemed to shrink to the size of a thimble.

"Sure. Okay. Sounds great." *Sounds like I just dropped into The Twilight Zone.* The theme song blared in her head, and she saw stars, but that could be from the sudden lack of oxygen. His comment seemed to have sucked all the air out of the SUV's interior.

"Um, okay. I'll try."

"Good girl."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, searching for anything to hint that he was something other than the man who lived next door. She frowned. He looked, well...normal. Like any other guy. Then why did she suddenly have the feeling he was anything but?

* * * * *

Luke sat on the porch steps, tapping his fingers on the railing as he waited for Carrie to come outside. He checked his watch for the seventh time in the past ten minutes. When she'd told him five minutes would be plenty of time to change, he'd been stupid enough to believe her. Five minutes? Ha! She was a woman, after all, and they were born with a compulsion to take an absurd amount of time primping and preening to make even a simple trip to the post office. Why had he thought she might be the one exception to what seemed like a ridiculous rule?

Because she was different from most women he'd known. Here he was, dealing with looking for Brian Samuels, and all he could think about was how Carrie's mouth had tasted. Sweet, warm, soft...Luke groaned.

He shouldn't let her get to him that way. At his age, he should know better. He *did* know better, but she'd managed to sneak past his defenses. All of them, in record time. He couldn't stop himself from baiting her any more than he could stop himself from wanting to touch her. With most women, he would have moved on the second they gave him the attitude she doled out left and right, but with Carrie, everything had changed.

And not in a good way.

"Hey."

He heard her voice and looked up. She'd changed into tight black pants, a matching T-shirt, and a pair of black boots with a small heel. This time, she had her hair down. It flowed around her shoulders in enticing waves and reached just past her perfect breasts. He salivated at the sight. Something about women with long hair did him in every time.

"Why do you always wear your hair tied back?" he blurted. *Stupid, Luke*. So much for moving past the kiss.

She blinked at him a few seconds before she shook her head. "I don't. It gets in the way at work, and the only times you really ever see me is when I'm coming home."

"I like it down. It's pretty." *Oh, wonderful*. Now he sounded like a lovesick teenager. He needed to get a grip. This was work, not a date.

"Um, thanks. Are you ready to go?" She tucked a lock of that honey-blond hair behind her ear. His gaze followed the entrancing movement.

"I'm ready." He dragged his gaze away from her hair to check the time. Almost twenty minutes had passed since they'd arrived back home. He'd been all set to yell at her about punctuality, and then she'd shown up looking like a cross between a badass and a beauty queen. All thoughts of reprimand had flown out of his head. To say her beauty had blinded him would be cliché and more than a little ridiculous, but it had. She'd stupefied him. The woman made him need, and he hadn't *needed* a woman in too many years to remember. He should be annoyed that she could evoke such strong reactions, but he couldn't quite muster the emotion.

Luke pushed himself up from the steps, dusted off his pants, and followed her down the walkway back to the SUV. Once he got behind the wheel, he started the engine and snuck a glance at her. Though he had a feeling she'd hate the word, she really did look cute all dressed in black.

His mind drifted back to the unexpected -- but definitely *not* unwanted -- kiss. It hadn't helped the little arousal problem, to say the least. He still wanted her, more than before. So much for concentration. He wouldn't have any tonight. Not with her sitting next to him looking the way she did.

“Where are we going now?” she asked, breaking some of the tension.

Time to think about work. He cleared his throat and moved on to a safer subject. “Scott Tremaine.”

“Tremaine? That begins with a ‘T.’”

“Wow, you’re observant. Have you thought of making a career out of your highly evolved observational skills?”

A blush stained her cheeks, and her eyes sparked that fire he liked so much. He smiled to himself as she bit out her reply. “Knock it off. I thought you said we were going in alphabetical order. Maybe you need to go back to preschool and learn the alphabet.”

He let out a laugh. This was going to be a very interesting night.

From the beginning of this...partnership, she’d never been boring. Would she be useful, though? He had his doubts that she’d be of any real value to the actual investigation, but just having her near would provide fodder for his fantasies for years to come. He hadn’t come across a woman like her since his teenage years. Much too long, in his opinion.

Luke stole a look at her, a smile lighting his face when he saw the same tension he felt all over her face. She focused her gaze out the window, her lips pursed. He wanted to smooth his fingertips down the line of her jaw, but held back. With the way she went from aroused to angry in six seconds flat, he didn’t want to lose a finger.

“Are you all right?” he asked, keeping his tone light despite the tension running rampant through his bloodstream.

She jumped a little on the seat and swung her gaze to his. “Fine. I was just thinking.”

“About what?”

She shrugged. “Nothing important. I’m curious about where we’re headed now. Who is this guy we’re going to see? Do you think he’s going to be another dead end? Is he as much of a loser as Steven Albert?”

“No.” That wouldn’t be the correct word. The reason he’d decided to skip ahead on the list had nothing to do with getting the man out of the way. Tremaine had been Brian’s business partner, in a manner of speaking, in a past project Brian had gotten himself tangled in. Luke hoped there might be a chance that Brian had contacted his former partner in his latest scheme. This sort of thing, with Zyra involved, would be right up Tremaine’s alley.

“Does he have crazy neighbors who try to kill people with kitchen items?”

Luke laughed. “I have no idea. I haven’t met any of his neighbors.”

“But you have met *him*?”

He nodded. He’d like to say it had been a pleasure, but that would be a lie. Luke was having doubts about bringing Carrie along for this little meet-and-greet, but what could he do? If he told her to stay home, she would just follow him anyway. Tremaine wasn’t one of the good guys, but as far as Luke knew, he wasn’t dangerous...until someone crossed him.

Carrie had never even met the guy, so there was no way she could have managed to piss him off. She'd be fine -- if he could convince her to keep her mouth shut.

Shouldn't be too hard. All he had to do was threaten to kiss her again, and she wouldn't say anything for weeks. He turned to Carrie. "It's almost an hour ride. If you want to take a nap, I'll understand."

She snorted. "If I fell asleep, you'd probably leave me in the SUV."

She had him there. He shrugged. "What can I say? I don't want you getting hurt."

"What do you care? You have no personal stake in whether I live or die." She stifled a yawn. "Not that it will come to that. Right?"

He caught the fear that flitted through her gaze. His heart clenched. She was so young, so innocent. She shouldn't have to worry about losing her life. And he did care, whether she believed it or not. Innocent people shouldn't have to die because of other people's mistakes. "No."

"Are you always this monosyllabic, or is it just with me?"

"If you don't shut up, I might have to kiss you again."

His words had the desired effect. Eyes wide, she snapped her mouth closed and settled back into the seat. It seemed like an eternity before she spoke, and when she did, her voice sounded unsteady. "Why would you want to do that?"

Did she really expect him to list the reasons? There were so many, he didn't even know where to begin, but it all came down to one thing. He wanted her. In his bed. Under him. Screaming his name, digging her nails into his back while he rode her.

His cock hardened against his zipper. "Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

She chuckled. "Oh, yeah. I have. Believe me, I'm nothing special. I'm thinking I should refer you to a good eye doctor."

His eyes, along with every other part of his body, would always be in tip-top condition. "There is nothing wrong with my vision."

"Then there's something wrong with your mind. Maybe I should introduce you to my sister. She looks like me, but is about half my weight. You'd be better off with someone like her."

He'd seen a picture of her sister on their father's desk and shuddered at the thought of being with Lauren. There was nothing worse than a bony woman under him in bed. Women should be soft and curvy. Just like Carrie. "No, thank you. I'm perfectly happy with the sister I have."

"You don't have me," she answered in a small voice.

I think I do. If he didn't already have her hooked, he would soon. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes." She nodded once to punctuate her point, but her answer lacked conviction.

She could lie about it all she wanted, but they both knew the truth. It was only a matter of time before Luke had her where he really wanted her. In his bed. Or hers. Or even her damned kitchen table, for all he cared. He just wanted to get to know her a lot better, without the impediment of cumbersome clothing.

And if he didn't get his mind back on his driving, he was going to run them off the road.

"We can discuss this later," Luke said, his gaze focused again on the dark road ahead of them. "When we aren't in the middle of something important, I'll show you just how beautiful you are. All night long."

He glanced at her and tried to gauge her reaction, hoping to see another spark of passion in her eyes. He saw nothing. Her eyelids had fallen closed, and she snored softly in the seat.

Luke let out a rough breath and gripped the wheel tighter. He was going to have to find a way to end his misery soon, or he might explode.

* * * * *

Carrie's head hit something hard, and she opened her eyes. Her forehead rested on the center console. *Oh, God.* She'd done what she'd told him she wouldn't do. She'd fallen asleep. The SUV had stopped moving. She tried to lift her head, but her sleep-fogged brain wouldn't issue the command for her body to move. How utterly mortifying. She groaned.

"I take it you're awake?" Luke's voice broke through the haze in her mind like a beacon on a dark night...she probably had drool running down her chin. Could this night get any worse? *What's wrong with you, Carrie? What kind of an investigator are you?* It was bad enough she drooled over the guy when she was awake. Now she had to do it when she was sleeping, too?

"Yes, I'm awake." Her hands muffled her answer.

"Good. Let's go."

The humor in his tone prodded her to sit up. She took a moment to make sure she could move before she opened the passenger door and slid down to the hard pavement. Her feet hit with a thump she felt all the way to her hipbones. She winced. And then she got her first look at the house in front of them. A startled gasp escaped her lips. A far cry from Steven Albert's rundown apartment, the looming white Victorian looked like it could fit the town of Pine Tree Grove inside, and still have room for more. She balled her hands into fists.

"Um, Luke? Where is here, exactly?"

"The Tremaine residence."

"And you think this guy is going to know where Brian might be? What is he, an old college buddy or something?"

"Or something."

She didn't like the way his eyes glinted in the moonlight when he said the words. A shiver ran through her. Was he expecting some kind of danger? What was this guy, a mafia boss? "Is this safe?"

Luke glanced at her before returning his gaze to the house. "Sure."

Yeah, right. How could he be this wide awake, and look this good, at -- she checked her watch -- a little past eleven? Was that all it was? Carrie checked her watch again. How was it possible that she couldn't manage to stay up until even midnight anymore? She was twenty-eight, not eighty-eight.

Luke started up the flagstone walkway, and she hurried after him, her gaze on his sculpted butt. It would fit perfectly, right in her palms. In fact, she wanted to cup it in her hands. He'd probably strangle her if she so much as touched him. This *so* was not the time to be fondling the sexy next-door neighbor. They were working, not playing. She had to fight to keep her hands at her sides, though she didn't quite understand her sudden draw to him. She'd been attracted to him before, but now she couldn't seem to get her mind on anything else when she was around him.

She caught up with him and touched his arm. "Isn't it a little late to be visiting? Doesn't this guy have a wife and kids you'll wake up?"

"Yes, it's late, and no, he has no wife and kids. At least not here. He's divorced. Lives alone. And I don't care if it's three in the morning. I do what I can with the hours I'm able to work. Now shut it before you wake the whole neighborhood." He shot her a look that dared her to defy him, and something deep inside her reared up, prepared to accept the unspoken challenge.

Hadn't he learned by now not to challenge her? She narrowed her eyes. "Isn't he going to be mad that we're here? I mean, living in a place like this, he's got to be a respectable guy, right?" She hoped. If not, he probably had enough money to buy an arsenal of interesting and deadly weapons. She gulped at the thought and, despite her bravado, slid behind Luke.

"Smart girl," he murmured, as the door swung open before they reached it. A tall, youngish guy with light blond hair stood glaring at them. The lights in the house behind him accentuated the broadness of his shoulders under the burgundy robe he wore. His expression hardened even more when his gaze fell on Luke.

"Oh, it's *you*." He spoke the last word like it poisoned his mouth. *Interesting.* Luke seemed to have a knack for pissing people off.

"Yes, it's me. Thought you'd never see me again, huh?" Luke moved closer, until he stood not five inches from the guy. "I need something from you, Tremaine."

"And what would that be, asshole?"

Okay, that seemed a little harsh. Carrie started to speak up, but thought better of it and moved even further behind Luke. Something about this guy made her nervous. She couldn't pinpoint quite what it was, but it made her want to run back to the SUV and hide. She

wasn't a wimp. No sirree. It was just that the negative vibes coming off this guy were really bad.

“Are you working with Brian Samuels again?” Luke asked, his voice deeper and gruffer than Tremaine's. Carrie would have found the exchange between the two alpha males a fascinating case study, but she was too busy staring at the gun Tremaine pulled out of the pocket of his robe.

Chapter Eight

Tremaine stepped to the side, pointing the very lethal-looking weapon in Carrie's direction. "Get out of here, or I'll kill you both." His expression had turned wild, his voice unsteady, and the hand holding the gun shook.

Carrie couldn't breathe. The edges of her vision grayed, and she gripped the back of Luke's shirt. As soon as they got away from this maniac -- *if* they got away from him -- she was going to kill Luke. *Safe, my ass.*

Luke didn't falter as he shoved her further behind him. "Don't be an idiot, Tremaine. Put the gun away."

Carrie, shaking and starting to feel faint, peeked around Luke to see what was going on. Though she knew she should stay behind him, or run if Tremaine was distracted enough, she had to look. Had to see what would happen next. It was a compulsion brought on by fear rather than curiosity.

Tremaine shook his head. "Don't risk your girlfriend's life by being stupid, Nolan. Leave, and don't come back. I'm not joking. I'll shoot her right now if you don't get out of here."

"This is important," Luke persisted, edging forward as Tremaine swung the gun toward Luke's stomach. "I need to know if you've been in contact with Brian Samuels."

"And what if I have?" Tremaine barked a short, maniacal laugh that made the hair on the back of Carrie's arms prickle. The life of a private investigator seemed a little less alluring in the face of this. In her sheltered life, she'd never even seen a real gun, let alone had one pointed at her.

Tremaine took another unsteady step toward her. "Maybe we can make a trade, Nolan." He leered at Carrie, displaying a row of perfect white teeth she wanted to kick out of his head. "How bad do you want the information?"

Luke pushed Carrie behind him again when she made to dart around him toward the SUV. "That depends. What kind of trade are you proposing?"

"My information for your woman."

Luke snorted. "Not in this lifetime."

"Suit yourself." Tremaine raised the gun to Luke's face.

Why wasn't Luke panicking? Why wasn't he shaking in his boots? Didn't he know guns kill?

In the end, Carrie did enough panicking for the both of them. As Tremaine's hand grew even more unsteady and his eyes even more wild, she did the only thing she could think of. She stepped out from behind Luke and kicked Tremaine's hand.

The move didn't have the desired effect. In the movies, the hero kicked the hand holding the gun, and the gun went sliding across the floor, enabling the hero to save the day. Real life, apparently, didn't follow the same script.

Tremaine's arm wavered, and at the same time he cursed and pulled the trigger. Luke pushed her out of the way just as a bullet slammed into the porch railing right behind where they'd been standing.

Carrie's eyes widened. "Oh, my God."

Luke shot her a scathing look before he lunged at Tremaine and, in one feline-like movement, tore the gun from his hand and conked him over the head with it. Tremaine slid to the porch in a moaning heap of burgundy terry cloth.

Luke spun on her, his eyes impossibly dark, his jaw set. "The SUV. Now. Go!"

Not wanting to argue with a man with a gun in his hand, even if the man was supposedly on her side, Carrie scurried down the walkway and jumped into the SUV, huddling in the seat. Her breaths were nothing more than pants, and her heart threatened to beat out of her chest. What the hell had happened back there? Had she really attacked a man who'd been going to shoot her with a real, live gun?

Yes. She had. For some reason, the thought made her giddy, now that her initial fright was over. She'd stood up to someone trying to do her serious physical harm. And she'd won. Well, technically Luke had, but she wasn't in the mood to be technical. Carrie peeked out the window, but she didn't see him. She thought about going to find him, but nixed the idea pretty quick. He was bound to be mad enough at her little display of heroism -- which he would no doubt see as stupidity -- and she didn't want to give him any more reason for the lecture that would ensue as soon as he got back in the SUV.

Her father would kill her if he'd seen her tonight. So much for her nice, safe life. He'd lock her in a tower and throw the key into the ocean. She could just hear him now. *Carrie Ann, what is wrong with you? I didn't raise my girls to act like men. Why can't you be more like your sister?*

Easy answer. Because Lauren was a complete nutcase who wouldn't be able to survive more than a week in this cruel, cruel world if her favorite hair salon went out of business.

After what seemed like an eternity later, Luke opened the door and slid into his seat. He didn't say a word, didn't even look at her as he backed the SUV out of the driveway and sped down the street. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands, his mouth drawn so tight wrinkles appeared at the corner of his lips. Almost a half hour passed before he spoke.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his tone hard with anger.

She narrowed her eyes. What was *he* angry at her for? She's just been trying to help. Sure, she'd almost gotten them killed, but so had he simply by showing up at Tremaine's door. They were both still alive. Didn't that count for anything? "Oh, yeah. I'm fine. This kind of thing happens to me every day."

"Yeah, sure."

"It does. I'm. Just. Fine." Maybe. He was lucky she could form a coherent sentence. "I have an amazing capacity to block anything I don't like from my mind within seconds of it happening. What took you so long back there?"

"I had to take care of something."

A terrible thought streaked through her mind, making her want to scream. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

He heaved a sigh, gracing her with a very annoyed glare. "No, silly, I didn't kill him. He deserved it, but I let the cretin live. Are you happy now?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and turned toward the window, determined not to show him the relief flooding her. "Whatever."

Luke pulled the SUV into the parking lot of a little diner. A flashing red neon sign advertised all-night service. He shut the engine down and opened his door. "Come on. I'll buy you something to help keep you awake. I have one more place I'd like to check out."

One more? She'd had a pot come five inches from hitting her head at the first house and had nearly been shot at the second. What would happen at the third? Would somebody bomb his SUV? And here she'd thought playing detective would be fun. She just wanted to go home, sink into a hot bubble bath, and pretend the whole night had been a stress-induced nightmare. "Are you sure it can't wait until morning?"

"Sweetheart, I don't have until morning. When the sun rises, I need to have my ass in bed."

Right. Allergic to the sun. Maybe she was just overtired, but the conclusions she'd been drawing -- and trying to ignore -- made her stomach roll. When he'd kissed her, she could have sworn his teeth had felt sharper than average incisors, more like...

She was *so* not going to go there. Not tonight, not ever. She'd spent too much time ensconced in her fantasy world of fiction if she was even thinking the thoughts running

through her head now. *Vampires did not exist*. First thing Monday morning, she was going to book a nice, long vacation.

Someplace hot and sunny.

* * * * *

Carrie faced Luke across the chipped yellow Formica tabletop. She shifted on the bench seat, the red vinyl crackling as she moved. The more Luke stared at her with those icy blue eyes, the more she wriggled. The more she wriggled, the louder the crackling got. All the noise was giving her a headache.

The diner smelled of coffee and grease. Oldies music blared through tinny speakers, and the clatter of plates and flatware filled the small, yellow-walled room. Luke's gaze scanned the tiny dining room, and he shook his head, his brow dipping into a frown. Having been inside his museum of a house, it came as no surprise to her that he didn't care for their current surroundings.

The waitress, a middle-aged bottle-blonde with a uniform at least two sizes too small, stopped by the table. Her nametag read "Lola." Carrie wouldn't be surprised if the straining buttons holding the front of the uniform together snapped. "What can I get for you?"

"I'll have a cup of coffee and a side order of french fries." Carrie handed the woman the single sheet of sticky, plastic-coated paper that passed for a menu.

"No problem." She turned to Luke. "What about you?"

"Ice water."

Lola raised a pencil-thin eyebrow. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you." Luke handed her his menu before pulling a napkin from the dispenser on the table and wiping his fingertips.

"Don't you need caffeine to help you stay awake all night?" Carrie asked him after the waitress had walked away.

He shook his head. "I very rarely drink coffee, or any other caffeinated beverage."

"Well, why not?"

"I don't need it. I stay awake fine all on my own."

She cocked her head to the side. "And you're not hungry at all?"

"No, at least not for anything they offer here."

Well, excuse me. "Do french fries and cheeseburgers offend you?"

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose for a few seconds. When he dropped his hand and opened his eyes, he met her gaze with his humored one. "No. It's complicated."

"Let me guess. You're allergic."

He shrugged. "Something like that."

"They make medication for that, you know."

He raised an eyebrow. "For what? My allergies?"

"No. Your psychosis."

He opened his mouth to answer, but the waitress stepped up to the table with their food -- the fries looking petrified, like they'd spent most of the night under a heat lamp -- saving Carrie from the scathing retort she knew had been coming. *Thank you, Blondie.*

After the waitress left the check and walked away from the table, Carrie grabbed the bottle of ketchup from next to the napkin dispenser and poured a small pool onto her plate. She slathered a few fries into the red liquid, hoping to make them at least edible, and shoved them into her mouth. The excitement of the evening had made her famished.

Until she looked up and saw Luke staring at her, an unreadable expression in his eyes.

Oh, man. She pushed her plate away. He sat there with his water and his high-and-mighty attitude while she chowed like a piglet on a plateful of greasy fried potatoes. Her face flamed, and she wished she could melt into a puddle and slither away. "Do you want some?" she asked, swiping at her mouth with a thin napkin.

"I'm fine. But by all means, keep eating. I'm enjoying watching you."

"You like to watch me eat?" She dumped half the small pitcher of cream into her coffee and took a long sip. "Now I know you're crazy. Men don't generally enjoy watching women pig out."

He lifted his glass to his lips and sipped his water. "And you're such an expert on what men enjoy?"

She blinked. "Well, no, but..." Her voice trailed off on a sigh. He could tell her he liked watching her until he was blue in the face, and she still wouldn't buy it. No sane man would get off on watching a chubby woman eat. Though, with all his supposed "allergies," she had to wonder how sane the guy really was.

She gulped when his gaze heated up a notch. He looked at her in a way that turned her stomach inside out and had arousal curling in her belly in seconds flat. Carrie shivered and took a huge gulp of her coffee.

"Are you cold?" he asked, his tone low and intimate.

"No."

"Scared?"

"Well, yes." And aroused. Very, *very* aroused. Too aroused for a woman who wasn't sure what he even was.

The thought hit her out of nowhere and stole her breath. She shook off the strange sensations flooding her. Of course she knew what he was. He was a man. What else would he be?

She really didn't want to know the answer to that question. She didn't need or want to go there.

Luke reached out and grasped her wrist with his long fingers, tracing small circles on her palm with the pad of his thumb. Her shivers turned into full-blown shakes, and she tried to pull away. He held tight.

"Is there a problem?" he asked, his silky voice making her stomach turn over. She opened her mouth to say no, but no words came out. She nodded.

"You don't like it when I touch you?"

Could he get any more direct? Her already red face must have turned purple. "Yes, I like it. That's why I think you should stop."

"Don't trust yourself to stay out of my bed?"

There was that. Only, she didn't think she wanted to stay out of his bed. She'd finally gotten him to notice she was alive, and she didn't want to miss the chance to get him right where she'd wanted him since the first time she'd seen him. She wanted him inside her -- even though it was probably a dumb idea, it was another once-in-a-lifetime opportunity she didn't have the strength to pass up. "No. That won't be a problem."

"Because you think you'll be able to stay away from me?"

She took a deep breath for courage, but felt her bravado drain from her body as she expelled the air. *It's now or never, Carrie. Tell him what you want.* "Because I don't know if I want to."

Chapter Nine

His expression changed. His clear blue eyes grew stormy. He gave her a small, sensual smile that did funny things to her insides. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that."

She was about to say more -- probably something embarrassing like "Take me now, right here, Stud Man" -- when the waitress came over, her gaze on the unpaid check sitting on the table.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asked Carrie, apparently having given up on Luke.

"I'm all set, thanks." She struggled to get her fingers into the hip pocket of her jeans for her money. The jeans had seemed like a good idea in theory, and even she had to admit that they looked kind of sexy, but they weren't made for any activity that involved movement. The designer should have saved material and left the pockets off. Once the jeans were zipped, she couldn't get into the tight spaces anyway.

Luke beat her to the check, taking his wallet out and putting a five on the table. "Are you ready to go?"

She grunted, still struggling to get her cash out of her pocket. "Just a second. Let me get my money out and then --"

He stilled her with his hand on her arm. "Don't worry about it. I've got it."

She froze, her fingers half in and half out of the skinny pocket. "That would make this like a date."

Luke laughed. "No, it would be like me getting some caffeine into you so you don't end up getting us killed."

"Very funny."

As she gulped the rest of her coffee, Luke didn't take his eyes off her. By the time she set the mug on the table with a *thunk*, she felt like a huge ball of nerves. She didn't want to try to get information from anyone else. Going home and taking Luke to bed sounded like a much more interesting way to spend the night. A lot less deadly, too. She sighed. This didn't bode well for later.

She stretched her arms over her head, stifled a yawn, and hoped Luke didn't notice.

She should have known by now not to hope.

"You're exhausted." He frowned at her, his eyes narrowing as his gaze traveled over her body. "I think we're going to skip the rest of the night. You need to get some sleep. I wouldn't want you to get sick."

"I'm fine, really," she told him, just before another yawn snuck up on her. "We can do whatever you had planned."

"No. That can wait until tomorrow night. Just make sure you take a good, long nap before we head out." He slid off the bench and helped her to her feet. "Your getting some sleep is much more important right now than chasing down someone who'll still be there tomorrow."

She frowned up at him, hands on her hips, as he grabbed her elbow and tried to steer her across the room. "You wouldn't be trying to get rid of me, would you? You promised I could help. Remember?"

He chuckled. "How could I forget? Trust me, Carrie, I don't want to get rid of you. Now move your feet before I pick you up and toss you over my shoulder."

As appealing as the idea was, in a strange, archaic way, his words got her feet moving. Carrie beat him to the door and stepped out into the cool night breeze.

* * * * *

Luke kept silent on the drive home. Carrie dozed off and on, stealing little glimpses at him whenever she could keep her eyes open long enough. She'd never met a man so sensual, so...she really had no words to describe him. He was like walking liquid sex, and she wanted to pull him inside her house and have her wicked way with him. Though, she had a feeling, his way would be a lot more wicked than hers.

Luke pulled into the driveway almost forty-five minutes later and switched off the ignition. They sat in silence, staring at each other for what seemed like forever before he finally cleared his throat.

"Well, here we are."

"Yep. Home, sweet home." *Please say you want to come inside with me.*

He didn't. He said nothing as he let himself out of the SUV and started up the walkway without her. She jumped out and raced after him, not wanting to let go just yet, but not having the courage to ask him for what she wanted.

When they reached her door, she expected him to leave her and head back toward his house. Not wanting to turn around and watch him walk away, Carrie grabbed her keys out of her pocket -- a task made much easier now that she was standing up -- and unlocked her door. Luke's arm came around her hip and rested on her stomach. She gasped and jumped back. The top of her head connected with his chin.

Oh, man. What had she done now?

He grunted and released her. She spun, her eyes wide, to find him rubbing his chin. "I am so sorry, Luke."

"It's no problem. Really."

It was a problem. A huge one. She was constantly embarrassing herself in front of the sexiest guy she'd ever met. Might as well cut her losses now, before she made even more of a laughing stock of herself.

She tried to escape into the darkness of her house, ready to hide her embarrassment in the package of double chocolate cookies she had in the cabinet, but he grabbed her arm and spun her around, pulling her to him. Her breasts squashed against his chest, and she drew a deep, unsteady breath. "Luke? What are you doing?"

He said nothing, just focused that icy gaze on her, his expression stoic. And then his mouth broke into a smile. She shivered right down to the tips of her toes. It killed her that he found the situation funny. He didn't seem at all affected by the tension arcing between them. It crackled in the air. Carrie swore she could see the little white sparks, but Luke remained immune. If it hadn't been for his flirting, she might have thought Luke didn't even know she existed. Man, the guy was sending so many mixed signals she didn't know which end was up anymore.

She wanted to scream at him, but what good would that do? It would just be showing him another weakness, and he'd already seen enough of those to last a lifetime. She pulled her arm out of his grasp.

"Well, I'd like to say thanks for a fun evening. But since I don't consider getting nearly drowned and almost shot a heck of a lot of fun...thanks for, um...trying to get me killed."

He laughed. "Hey, I didn't make you come along. Need I remind you that working together was *your* idea?"

"True." She leaned back against the doorframe and stuck her thumbs in her front pockets. "But you should have at least warned me that things could get dangerous."

"You have to admit it was an interesting evening."

That was like saying the sun was bright. "Yes, it was that." She started to back into her house, but Luke shook his head.

"Hold on a second."

She frowned. "What?"

“Nothing. I just...” His voice trailed off. He leaned in and brushed his lips over hers. The spark the touch created traveled all the way from her lips to her toes, stopping at all the crucial places in between. Her knees threatened to buckle, and her mind begged for more, but he pulled back. “You have to work in the morning.”

She sighed. Leave it to a man to ruin the mood. She checked her watch. “Yeah, I do. In a couple of hours, actually.” She wanted to invite him in, but she had to admit that the guy was right. Her mother would be brutal if she sensed weakness in the form of exhaustion. No matter how scary Luke was, Carrie could guarantee her mother was a hundred times worse. “I’ll see you tonight after sunset?”

A smile graced Luke’s mouth. “Most definitely. Wear your hair down again, okay?”

“Why? It just gets in the way.”

“Because you look so incredibly sexy I’m having trouble keeping my hands off you.”

By all means, don’t. “Oh. Okay. I’ll think about it, then.” *Mental note to self. Throw out all forms of hair elastics and clips.*

Despite having to be up and ready for work in a few hours, one more kiss didn’t seem like a bad idea. She tilted her chin, hoping he’d take the hint and kiss her again. More deeply. Better. When he didn’t, she decided to take matters into her own hands. Carrie wrapped a hand around his neck and pulled him down.

She expected him to freeze against her, maybe back away, but he didn’t. He surprised her by pressing her into the wall next to her door and deepening the kiss. His knee came up between her legs, his hard muscled leg right against her pussy, and she gasped. He felt so good. So right. She’d never met anyone like him, and feared once he was gone she never would again. And he *would* leave. All the good ones did. Or was that the bad ones? She would definitely classify Luke as bad, but in a very good way.

Luke’s mouth left hers and trailed hot, moist kisses down the side of her neck. Carrie nearly passed out right there from the sheer pleasure of it all. His leg continued to press against the apex of her thighs, moving slowly against her and driving her insane. Everything inside her clenched.

She tangled her fingers in his silky hair. His teeth brushed her throat, sending a rippling wave of electricity through her core. Carrie felt a quick, sharp sting that made her cry out. Did he just bite her? Before she could question it, he started suckling her neck, and it turned pleasurable again. So much so that she felt the need to tear off all their clothes, right on the front porch.

She’d never been this close to coming from just one kiss. It shouldn’t be a big deal, yet it became everything. Her very reason for breathing. Her whole life suddenly revolved around Luke, and the magic he could work with that incredible mouth. If he stopped, she’d die. It didn’t get any more basic than that.

He suckled her gently, drawing her skin into his mouth, rolling it between his teeth. Her body got tighter and tighter, his lips and tongue bringing her higher and higher until she thought she'd burst. And then it happened. The impossible. She came.

Her climax swept over her in a sure, strong wave, dragging her helplessly along, her soul shattering into a thousand pieces. She flew above the clouds, her mind hazy as her body milked his touch. As her last spasms faded away and she drifted back to earth, Carrie realized his mouth had left her skin, but he still had his face buried in the side of her neck.

"Holy shit," she muttered. The man could *kiss*.

"I'm in absolute agreement with you." His laughter vibrated against her throat and wrung another shudder from her. "Are you okay to stand on your own?"

She nodded. "I'm fine. I think. I hope." But when he gave her one last, chaste kiss on the lips and pulled away, she lost her balance. He caught her and helped her through the door. Her face flamed at her intense reaction to an act that shouldn't have caused anything so strong. "Sorry. It's been a while."

He laughed. "Nothing to apologize for."

Yeah, right. She'd just made a complete fool of herself, right on her front porch. Outside. In public. And she had *nothing* to be sorry about? Not likely.

He leaned in and kissed her again, an all-too-brief brush of lips that had her body humming. She thought she caught a glimpse of something wild and primal in his eyes. Something that set her nerves on edge. Carrie backed further into the house, putting the door between them. A bit of fear danced around the edges of her euphoria.

"Nervous?" he asked, his tone amused and more than a little tense. His eyes darkened to a stormy gray-blue, and she licked her lips.

"What do I have to be nervous about?"

"A lot."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged, but his eyes darkened even more as he stepped away. He opened his mouth, but then shook his head. "Maybe someday I'll bore you with my stories. For tonight, though, you need to get some sleep. What time do you have to be at work?"

"At nine. The library opens at noon on Sundays, but the library Nazi insists all her employees show up hours beforehand to get things ready."

"The library Nazi?"

"Sarah Holiday, the head librarian."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Any relation?"

"My mother."

Luke leaned in and brushed another kiss on her forehead. "Get some sleep, Carrie. I'll talk to you later."

He left her standing at her front door, her fingers on her lips for the second time that night, her heart running a race, her breath soughing in and out of her lungs. What had just happened here?

And why hadn't he told her what time they'd meet for their next information-gathering-slash-near-death session?

Typical man. Carrie narrowed her eyes. Did he think he could ply her with kisses and orgasms, and she'd just forget about it? He had another think coming if he thought he'd take off without her. She had one thing on her side -- it would still be daylight when she got out of work. Mr. I'm-Allergic-to-the-Sun wouldn't even be out of bed.

"Luke Nolan, you aren't even going to know what hit you." She smiled to herself as she watched him disappear inside his house. He wouldn't get the chance to leave her behind, because she'd be ready and waiting. "I hope you're prepared, because you aren't going anywhere without me."

Chapter Ten

“Carrie *Ann!*” Her mother’s voice beat against Carrie’s head, even in the middle of her dreams. She rolled over and tried to block out the noise. And fell smack on her rear on the cold tile floor of the library. Talk about a jarring wake-up.

She rubbed her eyes and squinted up into the fluorescent lights to find her mother standing over her. “What is wrong with you today, young lady?”

Besides the fact that I embarrassed myself during the best kiss of my life, and now the guy is going to try to blow me off? Not a single thing. She pushed herself off the floor, intending to stand but only managing to slide her butt into the chair she’d just fallen from. “I’m a little tired. I didn’t sleep well last night.” *Try not at all.* She’d gone to bed but had done nothing but toss and turn for what little time had remained of the night. Luke and his incredible mouth were to blame. She intended to pay him back, too. Now she just had to stay awake long enough to meet him at his house before he left. Her eyes started to drift closed again, and she realized that might be a problem.

“Are you feeling well?” her mother asked, her tone concerned. “You look pale today.”

“I’m fine. I just had a little insomnia last night.” Induced by kissing an amazing man and nearly melting into a puddle of worship at his feet. “I’m sure it’ll pass.”

It had better. Good thing she had Mondays off, because if she managed to catch up with Luke in time it would probably be another long, sleepless night.

Her mother nodded. “Well, get to work, then. You have returns to put away and new releases to catalog and...” Her mother’s voice trailed off as Carrie’s head hit the desk. And then Luke was there, gleaming, bare-chested, and smiling. Those big, pale blue eyes were -- wait a second. What was Luke doing in the library without his shirt? And why did everything look all white and misty? *Oh, shit.* She snapped her head up and forced her eyes open to find her mother glaring at her.

“Sorry. I must have drifted off for a second there.”

Her mother said nothing. She didn’t need to speak a word. Her disappointed nod was enough to tell Carrie exactly how she felt. Carrie shook her head and pushed out of her chair, stretching her arms over her head and yawning before she walked to where she’d left the return cart earlier that morning.

She took the cart into the quiet, dark corner where the romance novels were shelved and slumped down against the wall. She just needed five minutes, maybe ten, and she’d be as good as new. She closed her eyes and had just started to drift off when she heard someone whisper her name.

Her eyes flew open. “Sorry, Mom. I was putting books on the lower shelf and -- you’re not Mom,” she said to Lauren, who crouched in front of her with a worried expression on her face.

“God, I hope not.” Lauren settled on to the floor next to Carrie. “You look like shit.”

“Gee, don’t sugarcoat it or anything.” Carrie pushed a hand through her hair and wondered why she’d bothered to leave the locks down today. Oh, yeah. Because *Luke* thought it looked sexy. What had she been thinking, letting him cloud her judgment like that? Had she turned stupid overnight? And what gave him that kind of power over her, anyway? *As if*. She’d wear her hair in the tightest bun she could manage if she felt like it, and there was nothing the big jerk could do about it.

She grabbed an elastic out of her pocket and pulled her hair into a messy knot. *Take that, Mr. Bossy*. “I’m assuming you need something, since you’ve come to find me.”

“Well, yes.” Lauren smoothed down her no-doubt designer-label skirt. She clicked her tongue a few times and let out a sigh. “Have you learned anything about Brian’s disappearance yet?”

“Not so much,” Carrie answered on a yawn.

“Not so much? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I haven’t really learned much. Yet. But I’m hopeful.” She stole a peek past the shelves toward the main part of the library. No Mother yet. They were still in good shape. She figured they had at least four minutes left before she came by to make sure Carrie wasn’t sleeping on the job. “I did go through the list and narrow it down, though. With the help of my neighbor.”

Lauren’s black-lined eyes widened, and she smiled. “Really? Luke the hottie?”

Carrie nodded. “Did you know his name was on that list?”

Lauren frowned. “No. I didn’t make it past the first page. It got too boring. So tell me, what have you come up with?”

“Luke and I went to talk to two of the men last night.”

“Wow! Look at you, Miss Super Spy. I’m jealous.”

“Don’t be. The first guy’s neighbor dropped water on our heads and then tried to hit us with a huge cooking pot. The second guy had a gun, and he threatened to kill me.”

Lauren laughed. “That is *so* cool.”

Yeah, if it had happened in a movie. Having lived through it, Carrie couldn’t agree with her sister’s sentiment. “What are you, nuts? These people tried to kill us!”

“And what about Luke? Is he good in bed?”

Lauren’s words hit Carrie like ice water tossed in her face. “*What?*”

“Well, I’ve always wondered if he’s as good as he looks.”

He is. And then some. And she hadn’t even slept with the guy yet. All she’d done was kiss him. “How did you come to the conclusion that I slept with him from me telling you I almost got killed twice?”

“I’ve heard all about the adrenaline rush. I *know*.” Lauren nodded her head like she was some kind of expert on the subject, when the only adrenaline rush she’d ever experienced was when she’d had to run to get the last table in the massage room at the spa. “So, was he?”

Carrie felt her face flame and was powerless to stop it. “I have no idea.” *And even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.* Her sister hadn’t earned the superlative Most-Likely-to-Write-a-Gossip-Column for nothing.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I didn’t sleep with him.”

“You didn’t?” Lauren’s expression turned confused, like she couldn’t fathom not sleeping with any available man in sight. “Well, why ever not?”

Because he got me all worked up, then walked away. “Because I don’t jump into bed with every man I meet.”

Lauren blinked, a vacant expression in her eyes. “But Luke is so…” Her words trailed off, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “Can I have him if you don’t want him?”

“No!” She couldn’t believe the possessive instincts the thought of Lauren with Luke stirred in her. What was that all about?

“You like him,” Lauren taunted, her gaze knowing. “Fine. Don’t tell me everything. But at least give me this. He’s got the sexiest mouth. Is he a good kisser?”

Carrie’s face heated so much she was surprised her skin didn’t melt away. Kissing was too weak a word to describe what had happened between them. “Okay. Yes, he is. Are you happy now?”

Lauren’s smug smile was answer enough. She shook her head and patted Carrie’s knee. “It’s about time you went out and had a little fun.”

“Shut up. That’s all you’re going to get, so don’t push me for anything else. Now, we need to get down to business. I have a question.”

“Ask away.”

“Does the name Zyra mean anything to you?”

Lauren’s face went ash gray. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and darted furtive looks around the room before she answered. “Why do you ask?”

Not quite the reaction Carrie had expected. “The name turned up in Brian’s book, and Luke had pretty much the same reaction to it as you did. Do you want to explain to me why it got you so upset?”

Lauren shrugged, her expression anything but casual. “Zyra is the woman who broke up my marriage.”

“What?” Carrie hadn’t heard any of this before. “What are you talking about? I thought Juan or Julio or whatever his name was brought about the divorce.”

“Well, that wasn’t exactly true. Brian had been seeing Zyra on the side for longer than I’d been seeing anyone.”

“I had no idea. Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you tell Dad? He would have taken care of it.”

“Because I didn’t want anyone to think I couldn’t satisfy my husband.”

“But you were having an affair, too.”

“Yes. Carlos.” Lauren waved her hand in the air in front of her. “But that’s different. Brian was horrible in bed. I had a very good reason for finding some extracurricular activity.”

And you’re so wonderful that he had absolutely no reason? “Sure. Yeah. Makes perfect sense. Anyway, about Zyra...did you ever see her?”

“Once. Honestly, I don’t know what the appeal is. She’s too thin.”

Look who’s talking.

“She’s model-thin, with this super-long black hair and black eyes, and her skin is so pale it’s almost see-through. She was dressed up in leather with these high-heeled boots, like a dominatrix or something. She’s beautiful, but scary. I don’t know what he saw in her.”

Carrie shook her head. The woman probably had a mansion in the Hamptons and a huge bank account. Or else Brian had a few needs he’d never shared with his wife. “She doesn’t sound like Brian’s type. Are you sure they were having an affair?”

Lauren nodded. “He told me so, one night when he had too much wine at a dinner party.”

Interesting. So, why did Luke have a fit when he saw the name? Carrie’d assumed it was because the woman was dangerous. Was it for another reason? Had Luke been involved with Zyra? She didn’t sound like Luke’s type, either, but what did she really know about the guy? “Do you know where she lives?”

Lauren shook her head. “No. But I know she owns a club called Venus in downtown Concord. It’s a weekend thing, only open on Friday and Saturday nights. All night, until about an hour before dawn.”

Carrie’s eyebrows shot up and any thought of sleep vanished. Lauren, in a strangely lucid moment, may have given her the first real piece of information into Brian’s disappearance. “How do you know all this?”

“Because I spied, okay? I think I deserve to know whatever I want about the women my husband is sleeping with.”

“Sure. Why not.” Carrie tried to seem passive, but it was hard to stay calm with excitement bubbling inside her.

Sarah walked around the corner of the shelves, her hands fisted on her hips. “Well, hello, ladies.”

“Hi, Mom.” Lauren stood up, smart girl that she seemed to be today, and brushed her hands down her skirt -- which was totally wasted on the residents of Pine Tree Grove, who knew nothing about designer anything beyond quilted toilet paper -- and smiled. “I was just on my way out. Nice to see you, Carrie. You look like you’re coming down with something. Maybe you should go home and get some sleep.”

Carrie would kill her. The next time she saw her sister, she’d wring her scrawny little neck. Sarah would just give Carrie more to do if she thought she wasn’t up to the regular tasks, and Lauren knew it. They’d grown up with it, and being a minor in her care wasn’t all that different from working for the woman.

Sarah’s nod surprised Carrie. “I have to agree. You’re useless to me now, anyway, dear. Why don’t you run along home and get some sleep. I’ll see you on Wednesday for your regular shift.”

She didn’t have to tell her twice. Carrie grabbed her things, punched out, and rushed into the bright sunshine to her car. She’d go home, have plenty of time for a little nap, and head over to wait for Luke at his door just before sunset. It was perfect. Nothing could go wrong. She smiled to herself as she drove out of the parking lot.

* * * * *

Luke checked out his window. The sun had set nearly ten minutes ago, and Carrie had yet to show up on his doorstep. He’d expected to find her waiting for him when he’d opened the door. In fact, he’d woken up looking forward to seeing her. Tonight, he wanted another kiss. And so much more. Her mouth had been hot and wanting, and having her climax from his feeding had been incredible. The fevered taste of her blood at that moment had almost made him embarrass himself by coming in his jeans. Almost. Walking away from her afterward had been more than difficult. He’d tossed and turned most of the night.

Feeding from her had been an impulse. One he should regret, but he refused to let himself worry about it. He'd needed it. He'd done it. She hadn't known. So where was the problem?

He let out a harsh breath and ran a hand through his hair. The problem was simple, yet very unexpected. He felt the effects of her in his system. A man could get used to having a woman like that around. A bitter laugh escaped him. *He* could get used to having *Carrie* around. *That* was the problem.

Luke had a feeling having her around full time might be dangerous to his health. He didn't need her. He wouldn't let himself get attached. An affair would be fine. He'd had plenty of those in his lifetime, but he wasn't the kind of man to build lasting relationships, and she wouldn't expect anything less. In his world, "lasting" took on a whole new meaning. It would involve so much more than she'd be willing to give. Much more than he dared ask of any woman, let alone one who affected him as strongly as Carrie did.

Involvement with her on any level would be risking his job, but he had no problems taking such a chance. The job had become increasingly tedious as time passed, and it was well past time to retire. He'd been careful with his money over the years, so taking some time off to relax wouldn't hurt his finances.

A sharp knock on the front door pulled him from his thoughts. Carrie. It was about damned time. He strode to the entryway and swung the door open, expecting to see the short, curvy blonde smiling up at him. Instead, the blond that faced him was of the tall, muscular, male variety, with spiked hair and familiar green eyes.

"Vince," Luke muttered. His stomach clenched into a knot. Where was Carrie? He'd promised to wait for her. She could have at least bothered to show up.

"Nice to see you, too." Vince, Luke's longtime friend and sometimes business associate, shook his head. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"Actually, yes." Luke stepped aside, and Vince walked in.

"By your tight-lipped expression, I'm assuming it's a woman." Vince's chuckle filled the room and set Luke's nerves on edge.

"You're assuming correctly," Luke confirmed. "But it isn't personal. She's helping me with the Samuels case. She'll be here any minute, so feel free to say what you need to and leave."

Vince's eyebrows shot up, and a smile spread over his face. "You're kidding. You? *You* are actually letting a woman help you? She must be something. You don't even let me help half the time, and we've known each other for centuries."

Luke slumped against the wall by the door. "It isn't what you're thinking. She's the sister-in-law. She had some information that would have been hard to come by using any other means, at least legal ones. She wanted to help. What was I supposed to say?"

“Well, ‘no’ has always worked for you in the past. Sometimes a little too well.” Vince wandered into the living room and flopped down onto the couch, propping his feet on the couch arm and crossing his legs at the ankle. “Let’s talk.”

Luke winced at the way Vince made himself at home so easily. “Do you have any news?”

Vince gave Luke his best Cheshire Cat grin. “I’ve been trying to find Zyra, and I think we actually have a location for her.”

“Where?”

“Concord. Some of my contacts there have seen a woman fitting her description around town.”

Luke nodded. “That’s good to know. I’ll need you to check it out.”

Vince laughed. “Whatever you say, boss. I’ll do the work while you get the woman. It’ll be nice to be on the other side for a change.”

Luke couldn’t help but laugh at Vince’s words. Vince, a serial womanizer, didn’t relish the thought of work. In the years Luke had known him, the man had become like a brother. Now, he was the only family Luke had left.

“I *am* working.”

“Sure you are.” Vince waggled his brows. “Working on getting some pretty little thing into your bed, I’ll bet. Tell me about her. What does she look like? Does she have big --”

“Stop right there. She’s a nice woman who wants to help us, okay?”

The thought of telling Vince about Carrie turned Luke’s stomach. He wanted to keep her all to himself. And if she saw Vince, with his all-American good looks, his easy-going nature, and more charm in his pinky than Luke had in his whole body...well, he wouldn’t even think about the outcome. Not at all. Vince loved women. All women. Over the years, he’d made it a sort of game to see how many he could get into his bed.

“Sure she does.” Vince shook his head. “It’s okay to stop being so stuffy once in a while. Lighten up, and have some fun.”

Luke bit back a laugh. Vince would be surprised. His friend had no idea how much *fun* Luke had been having.

Luke walked into the room and sat in the chair across from the couch, the one that had made Carrie so uncomfortable that first day. “Okay. Enough chit chat. What do we have on Samuels so far?”

Vince cleared his throat, but made no move to sit up. “It seems Max Holiday was right about Samuels skimming money from his company. His bank records show a lot of strange deposits and then some pretty big withdrawals.”

“Hmm.”

“Yeah, my thoughts exactly. You want to break the news to Max?”

“Not really.” He’d be in the doghouse enough as it was, once Max found out about Luke involving his daughter. “I’ll leave that up to you.”

“Gee, thanks. You know, he already doesn’t like us much as it is. This is only going to make it worse.”

Luke shrugged. “Nothing I can do about that. Let’s concentrate on finding Samuels.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll head out to Concord tonight and see what I can dig up.”

“Good. I’m going to make a drive to Pier Point to see if I can find Maurice Little. I think he might be able to provide me with some information. Is he still running that bar over on Elm Street?”

Vince nodded. “Be careful, though. You know how he gets.”

Luke shrugged. “It’ll be fine. I’m always careful.” Though he’d slipped a little, if the previous night’s events with Carrie were any indication.

“Okay. That’s done. I’ll get to work.” Vince pushed up from the couch, stretched his arms over his head, and walked toward the door. Luke followed, and Vince turned to him before he stepped outside. “Be careful with the woman, too. I’d hate to see you get your nuts chopped off by an irate father with a lot of clout around here.”

“Yeah. Tell me about it. That’s why I’m not going to get involved.”

“Did you feed from her?”

Luke let out a breath as a ball of anxiety settled in his stomach. He didn’t like where Vince was going with this, but he couldn’t deny it. “Yes.”

“Then you’re already involved. I know you. This means trouble. I think you might be in over your head.”

“Yeah, right. I know what I’m doing.”

“I hope like hell you do. See ya around, buddy.” Vince gave him a little salute before he slipped out into the night.

* * * * *

Luke was still grumbling when he let himself into Carrie’s house a few minutes later. Picking her lock had been no trouble at all. He’d have to install a deadbolt and a decent security system for her. Pine Tree Grove might be like living in the middle of nowhere, but it never hurt to be cautious.

He smiled to himself as he walked through the darkened rooms, taking in every detail. Everything in her house looked secondhand. Well worn. Her family had money, but her house showed him she preferred to take care of herself. It was a stark contrast from his own *collection*, as she put it. He laughed as he moved from her kitchen to the living room. She had no idea that he’d *collected* all of his items himself.

He found her asleep on the couch with the TV remote in her hand, her mouth open, soft snores escaping. He knelt down next to her and brushed a kiss across her forehead. She looked so peaceful in sleep, so angelic and beautiful that his heart clenched.

Seeing her this way brought out his protective instincts. He wanted to take her home, tuck her into his bed, and care for her for the rest of her life. She was so small, so fragile, so in need of his protection. He leaned in and kissed her again, this time on the corner of her warm mouth.

And then she snapped awake, her eyes wide and wild, and swung the remote. The hunk of plastic connected with the side of his head, and stars exploded behind his eyes.

Chapter Eleven

Carrie's eyes adjusted to the dark at the sound of the familiar voice cursing her from here to eternity. Her stomach turned over, and she sucked in a breath. *Oh, shit.* She'd just hit Luke with the remote. And he'd been so close. Too close for it to not have hurt him. She gulped.

"I am so sorry."

He grunted. "What were you trying to do? Take off the top of my head?"

"No. But you scared me, sneaking in here like that and kissing me." Not that she objected to the kissing, but it would have been common courtesy for him to at least wake her, and let her know he was there so she didn't think some perverted stranger had broken into her house.

She scooted into a sitting position and squinted through the darkness, trying to see how much damage she'd caused. It couldn't have been too bad, right? She was a librarian, for God's sake. She wasn't *that* strong. "Come here, and let me see."

Luke pushed himself off the floor and settled on the couch next to her. "You got me with the corner of that thing. Damned hard, too. You're lucky you didn't knock me out." He leaned back against the cushions and groaned, one hand clutching his head and the other clutching his stomach. *Talk about dramatic.*

"Oh, stop being such a wimp. It can't be that bad." No way could she have caused him any serious damage. Sure, it probably hurt like hell, but he'd get over it. Once he stopped whining, he'd realize how silly he sounded, complaining and moaning over what couldn't be more than a little bruise. It was a remote control, for God's sake, not a sledgehammer. She reached over to the end table and flipped on the lamp.

Blood welled in a wound way too close to his temple, and a red rivulet trickled down the side of his face. Her heart screeched to a stop. *Uh-oh*. He was going to *kill* her. “Oh, man. I really am sorry. Let me get you an ice pack so it doesn’t swell.”

He shook his head. “It won’t.”

“Yeah, right. Be a tough guy. Hold still for a second. I’ll be right back.” She pushed up from the couch and scurried into the kitchen, flipping on the overhead light on her way into the room. She pulled out one of the chairs from under the round table and flopped into it, dropping her head to the table’s scarred surface. What had she been thinking? She’d tried to take Luke out with a remote control. Granted, she hadn’t been in her right mind, waking up from sleep to find a dark shadow hovering over her, kissing her, but guilt still welled in her gut. She could have done some serious damage to his head.

“Carrie, what are you doing?” Luke called from the living room.

Beating myself up over the fact that you snuck up on me and nearly scared the life out of me. “I’m searching for the ice pack. I’ll be back in two seconds to take care of you.”

Her words washed over her guilt like a bucket of cold water. Take care of him? He needed a caretaker about as much as she needed a caveman dragging her around like she didn’t have a mind of her own.

When had this become her fault, anyway? She snorted as she jumped up from the table and pulled the blue gel ice pack out of the freezer. This was *so* not her fault. She hadn’t done anything but try to protect herself from an idiot who thought he owned the world and everyone else just rented space. If anyone should feel guilty, it should be Luke for damn near giving her a heart attack. She stormed back into the living room, grabbing the dish towel from the stove handle on her way by, and dropped the ice pack and towel into his lap. “Here.”

He frowned as he turned the cold pack over and over in his hands. “What the hell do you want me to do with this?”

“Duh. You wrap it in the towel and put it on your head where I hit you. It will keep the swelling down.”

“Yeah, I kinda get that part. I just don’t understand why you feel I need it.”

“I slammed you in the head. I saw the blood.” A thought struck her, and she winced. “You don’t think you’re going to need stitches, do you?”

He narrowed his eyes as she took the ice pack from him and wrapped it in the towel. “I never need stitches.”

“Of course not. That would be a terrible insult to your manhood.” She pressed the ice pack to his head, ignoring the urge to push it against him much harder than necessary. “Hold this here for twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes?” He grabbed the ice pack from her hands and tossed it onto the coffee table. “Are you nuts? We’re wasting valuable time here.”

“Poor baby. I’d rather waste a few minutes now than have you pass out from a head injury later.” She grabbed the ice pack and thrust it back into his hands. “Put this on your head, or I’m going to do it for you.”

Luke grumbled, but he did as told. “Yes, *Mom*.”

“Don’t you get that attitude with me, mister.” She clamped her mouth shut. She sounded just like the library Nazi. A shudder ran through her at the thought. “You know what, do whatever you want. I know you’re going to anyway. Just don’t come running to me when your head throbs and you get a bruise the size of Texas.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t. What were you thinking, attacking me like that? Did you honestly think I was going to hurt you?”

“It was self preservation. In case you hadn’t noticed, it was completely dark in here, and I couldn’t see your face. I thought you were someone who’d broken into my house.”

His dark expression softened a little. “I’m sorry I snuck up on you. You didn’t come over tonight, and then you didn’t answer your door. I got worried. I just wanted to check and make sure you were okay.”

She snorted. “And that makes it all right to break into my house in the middle of the night?”

Luke brushed his fingers down the line of her jaw. She shuddered and moved her head back. He dropped his hand. “With all that’s been happening, I got worried that someone had hurt you. Forgive me for caring.”

“The only person who’s ever broken in here is you. I fell asleep. You wore me out last night.” Her face flamed when she thought back to what had happened. “I mean, with all the investigating. I certainly wasn’t talking about anything else that had happened.”

“You didn’t like the kiss?”

Her stomach bottomed out, and her heart thudded against her ribcage. *Like* it? He’d given her the best orgasm she’d ever had. Considering he’d barely touched her, that didn’t say much for her sex life. “Well, yes, I did, but that’s not the point. I came home from work early and fell asleep on the couch. Honestly, I’m surprised you came looking for me at all. I thought you’d leave without me. I wanted to chase you down tonight, and I would have if I’d been able to keep my eyes open.”

He dropped the ice pack onto the couch and turned to face her. “I told you; when I give my word, I don’t break it. I said I would let you help, and I will. But we’re wasting moonlight here talking when we should be out looking.”

She frowned. “Wasting moonlight? That’s a new expression.”

“Welcome to my world.”

A sliver of unease snaked through her, setting her nerves on edge. His world? Did he have some kind of god complex? Last time she checked, they both inhabited the same planet. “Sure. I must have really clocked you, for you to be speaking in riddles.” *Either that, or I’m*

dating a vampire. Her common sense fought against what her subconscious had been trying to get her to accept since day one. Staying away from him probably would have been the smartest thing to do, but the thing was, she couldn't make herself tell him to go. There was something about him. She couldn't explain it, but she couldn't stay away. She needed to spend time with him, to get to know him better.

She touched the towel covering the ice pack, twirling the corner between her fingers as she tried to push away the disturbing thoughts. If she ignored them, maybe they'd go away, and she could keep pretending everything was normal. "Okay, we'll go do whatever you have planned tonight, but let me look at that cut first just to make sure you're okay."

"No. I'm fine." He shifted away from her when she tried to push back his hair to take a peek. "No need to check on anything. It's just a scratch."

"Don't be stupid. I'm not going to hurt you again. Just let me see."

"No need. Seriously, Carrie, it isn't as bad as you think."

Did he think she was crazy or something? Of course it was as bad -- if not worse. "Let me see, Luke. Stop the stubborn alpha male act. I promise I won't hurt you again."

Luke sighed, but tucked his hair behind his ear and let her look her fill. The bleeding had already stopped, and the wound was no more than a centimeter across. Okay, so maybe he was right. It wasn't the gash she'd expected, but still, it couldn't go untreated. She patted his thigh. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going this time?"

"For first aid." His answering curse made her smile.

She rushed into the bathroom and dug through the linen closet for bandages and antiseptic. She had plenty of bandages -- in all sizes and shapes -- but antiseptic seemed to be in short supply. She grabbed a bottle of peroxide instead, along with a bag of cotton balls, and hurried back to the living room, where she dumped her makeshift first aid kit onto the coffee table and dropped back to the couch.

Luke shifted his gaze from her to the pile and back again, an uncertain look in his eyes. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No joke. This is totally serious. If you don't take proper care of the wound, it'll leave a scar or get infected." She opened the peroxide and soaked a cotton ball with the clear, pungent liquid. "Hold still."

"Wait a second --" Luke's voice trailed off in a hiss when she touched the cotton ball to the wound. He grabbed her wrist and yanked her hand away so hard the cotton ball slipped from her fingers and sailed across the room, landing with a wet smack against the TV. "What do you think you're doing? Are you trying to *kill* me?"

"Oh, please. It isn't that bad. My mother used to put peroxide on my cuts all the time."

Luke barked a laugh. "And I can see you inherited her sadistic streak."

“Funny. Real funny.” She pulled a bandage from the small white box and started to peel the wrapper apart.

“There’s no way I’m walking around with that stuck to the side of my head all night.” He pushed up from the couch and paced to the window. “The bleeding has stopped. I’m fine. You’re overreacting. No offense, but you aren’t strong enough to inflict any real damage.”

She narrowed her eyes, fighting the temptation to show him how much damage she could really cause to parts of his anatomy he considered very important. “Fine. I just don’t want to hear it when it starts to bleed again later.”

“It won’t.” He ran a big hand through his hair. “I’m going to wash my face. Can you be ready to go in ten minutes?”

Did he think she was some kind of beauty queen who spent hours primping in front of the mirror? “I can be ready in five.”

“Your version of minutes, or mine?” he asked, as he stalked down the hall toward the bathroom.

Now what was that supposed to mean? She should be offended by his words, but the way his jeans hugged his incredible butt made her brain shut down and her body kick into overdrive. Her mouth watered, and her hands itched to cup those cheeks in her palms.

Carrie slapped a palm to her forehead and flopped back against the couch cushions. Maybe she *was* losing her mind. The lack of sleep must have affected her more than she’d expected, if her thoughts could veer into dangerous territory with no warning. She shouldn’t be thinking about Luke like that. It would only further his caveman-like thinking that women could only excel in the bedroom. Though Carrie wouldn’t mind being thought of as a sex goddess, she didn’t want to be classified as a wimp in other areas of her life.

What was the name of that psychiatrist Lauren saw? Dr. Marlow. Carrie really needed to call and schedule an appointment. She could already envision the conversation. *See, doctor, I’m dating a chauvinistic vampire.* She grimaced. There was that word again, the one she kept trying not to think about.

“Are you okay?”

The sound of Luke’s voice made her jump. She stood up so fast she smacked her knee on the coffee table. Stars sailed through her line of vision, and she slumped back onto the couch, rubbing her knee. “What is it with you tonight? Do you find it fun to sneak up on people?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’d still be so jumpy.”

“I think I have a right to be jumpy, considering what’s happened.” She stood up, careful this time to avoid whacking body parts on the sharp corners of the coffee table, and brushed past him down the hall toward her bedroom. “I’ll be out in a few.”

“You have three minutes left,” he called after her, his tone laced with humor.

She growled as she slammed the bedroom door. Did he really think this was funny? She failed to see the humor in the situation. "You have three minutes left," she mimicked. "My ass. I'll take as much time as I want, thank you very much."

She stomped to the closet and threw the door open. Enough was enough. She'd tolerated his attitude about as long as she could. "*Men*. What gives him the right to boss me around? We're wasting a lot more time waiting for sunset because of his ridiculous phobia of the daytime."

She stripped out of her clothes and tossed them into a pile on the closet floor. After she changed, she was going to give Mr. Holier-Than-Everything a piece of her mind. Who did he think he was, timing her? If he kept it up, he'd have three *seconds* left to *live*.

She grabbed a pair of khakis and a navy blue T-shirt off hangers and folded them over her arm. "Unless he's planning to pay me for this investigation, there isn't anything that gives him the right to go all high and mighty on me."

"Do you always talk to yourself, or is this a new development?"

She let out a squeal at the sound of Luke's voice. Her heart jumped into her throat, and her stomach dropped to her knees, throwing off her whole center of gravity. She spun around, her hands on her hips, her clothes hanging from one forearm. He stood in the bedroom doorway. "Okay, that just does it. I've put up with your crap for long enough. I think you owe me an apology for sneaking up on me for the third time tonight."

She walked toward him, pointing one index finger at him with every step. "And for another thing --"

His laughter stopped her tirade. "You do realize you're wearing nothing but your underwear, right?"

She froze. Every inch of skin heated. She pulled her clothes in front of her and narrowed her eyes. "Of course I know that. Do you think I care?"

His smile turned sensual. He walked further into the room and propped a hip against the footboard of her bed. She gulped, suddenly more than aware of how close they were -- in her bedroom -- and how bare she really was. "Um, Luke?"

"Yeah?" His voice sounded thick, his breathing ragged. One glance at the front of his jeans told her she affected him as much as he did her. She would have smiled, but her brain seemed to be on sleep mode again.

"Do you want to leave so I can change?" She meant the words as a command, but they came out sounding more like an invitation. She hugged her clothes tighter against her chest.

"Not really." He reached his hand out and grabbed her arm, tugging her closer until she stood a few inches from him. His finger touched her jaw before snagging a strand of her hair. "Do you want me to go?"

Now that was a loaded question. "I..."

“I know you don’t, Carrie.” Luke leaned in and brushed his lips across the skin under her ear. “You want me to stay, don’t you?”

She did, but she’d be damned if she’d admit that to him. She opened her mouth to tell him where to shove his presumptions. “Yes.”

Now where did *that* come from? “I mean no. *Heck* no. Are you nuts? I want you to get out of here before I’m forced to throw you out. You wouldn’t want me to hurt you again like I did when you broke into my place, would you?”

He only chuckled. “Nice try. I see in your eyes what you really want. I can admit that I want you, Carrie. Why can’t you admit that you want me, too?”

Because you don’t deserve that kind of power. “Do not.”

He laughed again, the sound strained this time. “Yes, you do.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Prove it.”

“Gladly.” Without giving her a chance to react, he wrapped his arms around her and crushed her lips with his.

She dropped the clothes on the floor and put her hands on his chest, giving him a hard shove. He stumbled back a few steps, his brows knit together. “What’s the matter?”

“What do you think you’re doing? Why do you feel the constant need to take charge and control everything?”

Luke laughed. “Control? Sweetheart, I’m so far out of control now it isn’t funny. And as for taking charge, we both know that fate did that a long time ago.”

“I know no such thing.”

“Yes, you do. Don’t bother fighting it. There’s one thing I’ve learned in life; you can’t fight your destiny. If something’s supposed to happen, it’ll happen whether you try to stop it or not.”

His words, though probably just one big, cheesy pickup line, made sense. “I’m still angry with you for sneaking up on me.”

“Maybe we should channel that anger into something more productive.” He gave her that smile that made her melt all over again. “And pleasurable.”

Her stomach fluttered. “What do you suggest?”

He gestured behind him to her king-sized, four-poster bed. “Why don’t we find a way to put this to good use?”

Chapter Twelve

Luke leaned in closer, his breath brushing her cheek. Carrie shivered.

“Luke?”

“Huh?”

She would have laughed at his dazed tone had the same mind-numbing arousal not been racing through her bloodstream. Her gaze flew to the bed, back to the man, flickered to the floor. “I need to get dressed.”

He wound his fingers around a strand of her hair. “What are you so nervous about?”

“Nervous? *Please*. If I was nervous, I’d be shaking.” Carrie clasped her trembling hands behind her back and locked her knees to keep from melting to the ground in a giant heap of Luke-induced lust. It had been so long since she’d been drawn to a man the way she was to him. From the first time he’d touched her, she’d felt a connection. A chemistry between them. She’d dated enough men over the course of her life to know such a thing was rare. “I’d be babbling, like I do every time I get nervous or anxious, and --”

Luke leaned in and kissed her, his lips nothing more than a brief touch against hers, but it was enough to stop her runaway thought train before it did any real damage. He pulled back and smiled.

Huh. “What was that for?”

“You were babbling.” He dragged her hands out from behind her back and clasped them in his. “And trembling.”

“Was not.”

“Um, yeah, you were.”

This was a mistake. *You are so out of your league here, kiddo*. “Of course I was. There I go, acting like an idiot again. I mean, you would think this is the first time I ever...” She shot

him a quick glance through widened eyes. "It's not. I mean, I've done this before. But it's been a while, and I guess I'm out of practice."

"Stop babbling, Carrie." He brushed a kiss over her temple as his fingers worked to free her hair from its loose knot. When he'd finally worked the elastic free, her hair tumbled down her back. He brushed it over one shoulder, exposing her neck. "Have I mentioned that I love the way you smell?"

A shiver rushed from her head to her toes. How did he manage to get her panties damp with just words? It didn't seem fair that he should be so in control of himself when she could barely remember her own name. She turned around, crossed her arms over her chest, and realized he wasn't as composed as she'd thought. The look in his eyes mirrored the need she felt inside. "Um, no. I can't recall you saying that before."

"It's the truth." He buried his mouth against the side of her neck. His tongue flicked out, brushed her earlobe. A riot incited in her nerves, sending all her blood south.

The truth. Yeah, right. She'd heard that one before. He just wanted to get her into bed. But one question kept popping its ugly head into her mind.

Why her?

A man who looked as godlike as Luke could have any woman he wanted. Why would he settle for a small town librarian with a little extra padding around the middle when he could have a supermodel? She shook her head. Because of convenience. There couldn't be any other explanation. She wriggled, tried to break out of his grasp. This *so* wasn't going to happen tonight. If he wanted convenient, he could go home and take care of himself.

"Carrie, don't." Those two words, whispered against the ultra-sensitive spot just below her ear, had her mind threatening to shut down. And then he sucked her earlobe into his mouth, and any thoughts of running away fled into the night. He really did want her, and she knew better than to question the whys of it.

The feel of his warm, damp skin made her nerve endings sigh in pleasure and her stomach perform formerly impossible gymnastics moves. She leaned into him, the cut on his head and her sudden onset of psychosis forgotten as he touched her.

"If you keep doing that, right there, I might have to attack you," she warned.

"Attack away. I'm more than ready."

She froze at his words. Heat rose like a furnace inside her, and she had to fight to keep her hands to herself. In the back of her mind, a little voice screamed that this was a bad, bad thing, but she couldn't seem to make herself push him away. "I thought you said we had to work tonight."

"Work can wait a little while. Suddenly, other things are becoming much more important."

"What other things?" she asked slowly, carefully, making sure she read him right before she turned around and ripped his T-shirt off.

“I want you, Carrie.”

Hallelujah! The words she'd been waiting to hear. “You do?”

“Yes.” His breath brushed her ear again. “I have since the first time I saw you.”

Yeah. *Right.* Hadn't he figured out by now that she was a sure thing? “Gee, you've shown it so well.”

“I thought you weren't interested.”

She snorted. *Please.* Uninterested? More like unappealing. “I know when I'm out of my league.”

She groaned. Had she really just said that out loud?

His hands came around her middle, anchoring her to his strong chest. “What are you talking about? I've never met a sexier, more beautiful woman.”

“That's laying it on a little thick, don't you think?” She struggled away from him and hurried across the room, stopping by the window and peering out into the night. Her heart rate slowed, and her arousal dissipated. Thank God sanity had returned before she'd done something stupid like jump the guy. The bump on his head must have affected him more than she'd thought. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass. “You had me at ‘I want you.’ Trust me. You don't have to lie to me to get what you want.”

“I wasn't lying.”

She narrowed her eyes, spun to tell him what she thought about his obvious exaggerations, and smacked right into the hard wall of his chest. A strangled gasp flew from her throat. Yet again, he'd managed to sneak up on her. He wasn't a small man. She should have heard him moving across the carpet.

A sudden case of cold feet hit her hard. What was she doing? She gulped.

“I won't hurt you, Carrie. Not ever,” he whispered, as if reading her mind.

Had he? “You can't read my thoughts or anything, can you?”

Luke chuckled.

“No. You just look anxious.” He leaned down until his face was mere inches from hers. “You really have no idea how beautiful you are.”

“I'm chubby.”

He laughed. “Not even close.”

“Compared with the rest of my family, I am.”

“I don't like bony women. Women are meant to be soft, curvy. Sexy. That's what I want. I won't settle for less.”

His words hit something inside her and made her smile. He sounded so sincere, but she'd known plenty of liars in her life. Did he really find her that attractive?

One look in those pale eyes and she was lost. Yes, he did. He meant every word he said. “Were you drinking before you came over here? Because, you know, that might explain a lot.”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he chuckled and leaned down to kiss her. His mouth was hot against hers, soft yet demanding at the same time. Her lips parted on a sigh, and he snaked his tongue into her mouth. He felt so good, tasted so right, she couldn’t keep herself from wrapping her arms around his neck and holding on -- a good thing, considering her legs had chosen that moment to stop supporting her weight.

Her breasts were crushed against his chest, her bra and his shirt the only things separating their flesh. Her body sucked in his heat in a desperate effort to get closer. Arousal curled low in her belly, twisting and turning until it had her insides in knots. Her fingers tangled in his hair. He let out a small grunt and broke the kiss, trailing his lips down the side of her neck. When he reached her collarbone, he stopped and lifted his head.

“If you don’t want this to go any further, tell me to stop now. This can’t go on for another second if you’re just going to send me away.”

Did she want him to continue? Her body screamed yes, but at the same time her mind warned her to be careful. What did he really want from her? Would he regret it in the morning? Would he push her away, ignore her?

Did it even matter? She couldn’t remember the last time she’d done something just because she wanted to. Maybe it was time to change that. No matter what he was, he’d proven to her that she could trust him.

Her hand settled on his rock-hard chest. Her brain shut down, and her body made the impulsive decision. “I don’t want you to stop.”

“Good.” A look of abject relief washed over his face. He backed her to the bed so that her legs bumped against the mattress, and let go. She fell back, landing with a whoosh on the soft satin comforter. She blinked up at him, shaking her head. “What are you doing?”

A rakish smile lifted the corners of his lips. He tugged his shirt out of the waistband of his pants and pulled it over his head. “What do you think?”

“Am I on *Candid Camera*?” At least that explanation would make more sense than the one he was trying to feed her. He was undressing. In her bedroom. With the lights on.

Did you really expect him not to undress, after you’ve given him permission to do pretty much whatever he wants to you? She hadn’t known what to expect, but it hadn’t been this. Leaving the lights on seemed a little risky from where she was lying. No matter how many times he tried to tell her he liked her body, she wouldn’t really believe it until he’d seen it.

“No. This isn’t a TV show.” His fingers went to work unbuttoning and unzipping his jeans.

He pushed his jeans, along with his briefs, down his hips and slid them to the floor. She could only gape as he stepped out of them and walked over to the bed. The other men she'd been with didn't even come close. She gulped, suddenly very aware of his size -- and hers -- and the fact that it had been a while since she'd been with anyone. "Luke?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you really think this is a good idea?"

He laughed again, gesturing to his erection. "What do you think?"

Not much at the moment, as any coherent thoughts she might have possessed had flown out the window the moment she saw his cock. Her fingers itched to reach out and touch him, to stroke the long, hot length of him, but she held back. It couldn't be this simple. There had to be a catch.

"What are you up to?"

He smiled. "I'm not ashamed of my body. Why do you feel the need to be ashamed of yours?"

As if he could compare her fatally flawed one to his perfect body. Plus there was all that body image crap the media started stuffing down women's throats by the time they hit middle school. Didn't he know skinny was the new rich? "Hello? There's a little thing called body fat. You have zero. I more than make up for what you lack."

He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jesus, woman, I wouldn't be this hard if I didn't find you so impossibly sexy."

He didn't give her a chance to respond to his arousing comments. He climbed onto the bed next to her, pulled her close, and kissed her -- a long, lingering, hot kiss that left no doubts in her mind about his true intentions. His tongue played across the seam of her lips, and she opened for him, welcoming him inside. With one hand on her hip he drew her even nearer, until no space remained between them.

His chest pressed against hers, his erection nudged her hip, erasing the remainder of her doubts. She needed this man. Everything within Carrie screamed for her to take what he offered, and not look back. If she was going to do this, she was going to do it all the way. Carrie broke the kiss and shoved him away. He rolled onto his back and blinked up at her.

"Carrie?"

"No talking. I need the rest of my clothes off. Now."

He laughed, helped her out of her bra and panties.

His hands roamed her body, cupping her breasts, his thumbs playing across her peaked nipples.

He took so much time touching her, kissing her everywhere. Carrie was surprised at how gentle he was, almost reverent. She'd expected rough. Either way, she didn't care. She wanted him no matter how he took her.

And he *would* take her. She'd make sure of it.

He bent his head to take a nipple in his mouth. The warm, wet sensation almost made her come out of her skin. Carrie arched her back, thrusting her breasts toward him, silently begging for more. Luke's answering chuckle against her skin had her pussy fluttering. Once she was writhing beneath him, he moved on to the other nipple and afforded it the same treatment. By the time he pulled his mouth away to trail slow, open-mouth kisses down her stomach, she couldn't make her body hold still. In her experience, sex had never been like this. Usually it had been over by now. The thought made her snort.

Luke raised his head. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I was just... No one's ever really taken this much time to touch me before."

A sexy smile curled one side of his mouth. "I want to know every inch of you."

Oh, boy. Every inch. Well, there certainly were a lot of those for him to get to know.

Stop it. She narrowed her eyes, trying to silence the voice in her head. Now, when she had a beautiful man wanting to do all kinds of lewd things to her, was not the time for self-doubt. Now was the time to have fun. Any lingering hesitations she might have, well, she could think about them later. Now she just wanted him to move his mouth lower.

And then, as if reading her mind, he did. He spread her legs further apart and brushed a soft kiss across her lower lips.

Carrie shuddered. *Yes.* That was exactly where she needed him.

Luke used his thumbs to spread her lips and ran his tongue up the length of her slit. She shuddered, tangled her fingers in his hair to hold him close. Her hips arched toward him, and she let her head drop back, a moan escaping from her lips. The man had such a talented mouth. How had she lived without this up until now? She couldn't even remember.

Luke swirled his warm, wet tongue over her clit, pressing against the little ball of nerves. Carrie's whole body bowed, and light seemed to explode behind her eyes. She was more than ready for him, and as much as she was enjoying his mouth on her, she wanted to come with his cock buried deep in her pussy.

"Luke, now. *Please.*"

With a low chuckle, he climbed up her body, kissing his way to her lips. When he finally pushed his cock inside her, all traces of gentleness had left. He was rough, almost harsh in his urgency. She loved every second of it. He pounded into her, his rhythm erratic, and each hard stroke drove her higher and higher. He felt so good inside her that she knew no other man would ever do the things to her Luke could do. He made her feel things she hadn't felt in so long. Maybe ever. It was the most incredible feeling in the world.

The orgasm built low in her belly, spreading out to her limbs and making all her nerves sing. She came hard, screaming his name and clawing her nails into his back. It wasn't long before Luke followed her into release, his fingers digging into her hips, her name a hoarse

cry from his lips. He collapsed on top of her, and she welcomed the weight of his sweat-soaked body over hers.

It seemed like forever before either of them moved. When Luke finally did, he didn't go far. He pulled out and shifted to his side, next to her on the mattress. His hand stroked her stomach, and he pressed soft kisses on her cheek.

Something deep inside Carrie fluttered. Something emotional and uncomfortable. She needed to put some distance between them -- now -- before she ended up doing something stupid like falling in love with the guy. She barely knew him. Instead of cuddling with him like she really wanted to, she went into the bathroom to wash up. Once finished, she made her way into the bedroom again and started pulling her clothes back on.

Luke rolled to his back and watched her dress. "You are so beautiful."

She laughed as she buttoned her size fourteen khakis -- which were a little too tight. "Yeah, sure." But he actually made her start to believe it.

And that was the most dangerous thing of all.

"Come back to bed, Carrie," he said with a smile, beckoning her with one long, crooked finger. "Just for a little while."

The smart thing to do would have been to say no, but lately, no one had accused her of being smart. Without so much as an argument, she relented, stripping her clothes off again and joining Luke on the mattress.

Chapter Thirteen

“How are you doing?” Luke took her hand and brought it to his lips, brushing a soft, shiver-inspiring kiss across her knuckles.

He kissed like heaven, had touched her in all the right places, made her come so many times that she still couldn’t think straight several hours after they’d gotten out of bed and taken a shower -- together, to save water -- and he wanted to know how she was doing? He had to be kidding.

She swallowed hard. “I’m fine.” *Just ready to jump you again, and this is so the wrong place for wild monkey sex.*

“Because if you aren’t...” His voice faded into silence, the rest of his sentence left hanging between them.

She waited for him to continue, speaking only when he didn’t. “If I am, what, Luke? Is there something you can do to take back what happened?”

“No, of course not.” He laughed, a strained, rusty sound that didn’t ease her roiling stomach.

“Then don’t worry about it, okay?” Why did he insist on making such a big deal out of it? Did he think it was a mistake?

Oh, God. What if he did? Her stomach dropped to her knees, and her heart took up residence in her belly. “Luke?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you regretting what happened?”

“Hell, no, Carrie. I’d never regret it. It was incredible. I just want to make sure *you’re* not sorry.” The low, guilty tone of his voice made her look at him sharply.

“Let me get this straight. You spend hours touching and kissing me, only to start over again when we’re both...um...satisfied, you have me screaming your name and clawing at your back, and you want me to be *sorry*? What kind of twisted logic is that?”

He laughed again, this time the sound warm and genuine. Her heart and stomach finally returned to where they belonged, but the flutter of her inner muscles didn’t help matters.

Carrie looked at him, licked her lips, and considered asking him to pull over so she could tackle him and have her wicked way with him -- but had second thoughts when he pulled the SUV in front of a creepy, dilapidated office building and switched off the ignition.

The dark stone façade seemed ready to cave in on itself. Several of the windows had cracked or missing panes, revealing the rusted metal screens behind the glass. Tufts of scraggly weeds grew in the cracks on the brick steps. Carrie darted a glance around the lot, half expecting bats to fly out from behind the building or a werewolf to come loping out of the small outcropping of trees in the next lot.

“Where is this?”

“I’m hoping to find Ronny Silverman here. He will more than likely have information on Brian’s disappearance.”

“Do you think he really will?” She narrowed her eyes at the decrepit building. If anyone was in there, he had about a fifty-percent chance of the whole thing falling down on him. “It doesn’t look safe. Do you really think anyone is inside that hovel?”

Luke looked at her out of the corner of his eye, his gaze intense, his lips set in a thin, tight line. “With the way things have been going for us, I’d say the odds are not in our favor.”

“Ya think?” She got out of the SUV and slid down to the sidewalk, praising herself that she didn’t fall flat on her face. Why did he feel the need for such a monster truck? Didn’t men only buy vehicles like this when they needed to compensate for something they were...ah...lacking?

She’d seen every one of Luke’s parts in intimate detail. The man was *not* lacking.

Anywhere.

Luke got out and came around to her side of the SUV. “It doesn’t look like anyone’s here.”

“Gee, what gave that away? The lack of lights and movement, or the tumbleweeds blowing across the driveway?”

“Very funny.” He leaned in and kissed her, hard and fast, before he turned away and strode toward the door. Carrie had to hurry to catch up before he left her behind in the darkness.

“Excuse me, Mr. Excellent-Night-Vision, you want to wait for those of us mere mortals not blessed with such amazing powers?”

He stopped and turned to her with a frown on his face. "Sorry. I forgot."

"Forgot what? That you aren't out here by yourself tonight?"

"No. I forgot that you...I'm...you can't..." He threw his hands in the air and shook his head. "Forget it. I'll slow down."

He started up the crumbling walkway again, but she grabbed his arm and yanked. "What is your problem?"

Darkness flashed across his eyes, glittering in the light of the nearly-full moon. A chill swept the length of her body, and she dropped her hand.

"You wouldn't understand." He grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips, brushing a kiss over her knuckles and sending a whole different kind of shiver through her. "Trust me. You wouldn't *want* to understand."

She shot a look at the building. "Believe me, I do trust you. I wouldn't be here if I didn't. Though I do have to admit I'm starting to question my sanity."

He smiled. "You wanted excitement. You wanted to play private investigator. This is what I do. It isn't fun and games, and oftentimes it's very dangerous. Are you sure you want to come with me? You can always wait in the SUV if you're nervous."

She'd rather be standing next to a big, strong, relatively scary guy like Luke than face the unknown all alone in his truck. She grabbed his arm. "I'm coming with you. You aren't getting rid of me that easily."

"I was afraid you'd say that. All right. Come on. Let's get moving before we scare him away."

"Him, who? How do you even know if there's anyone in there?"

"Call it a sixth sense, or something like that. I've been doing this job long enough to know what I'm doing."

He pulled her up the walkway toward the front steps.

The roar of an engine coming to life reached them just as Luke settled his foot on the first step. "Well, damn. Didn't I tell you to be quiet? Now you've chased him away."

"Me?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why is this my fault? You're the one with the monster truck with the jet engine that's *so* not quiet. Why is it my fault?"

Headlights illuminated the walkway behind her, bathing everything in bright yellow. She turned to find a huge van coming straight for them, across the lot, and not slowing down. At all.

Luke pulled her against him, turned her, and slammed her into the side of the building hard enough to knock the wind out of her. While she was gasping and choking for breath the van switched directions and swung around toward the street.

No, not the street.

Luke's truck.

The old, ratty black van slammed hard into Luke's SUV with a crunch of metal against metal. Luke pushed away from her with a curse and chased after the van, yelling and waving his fist in the air, but the driver sped off down the street.

Carrie slumped against the building, still fighting to catch her breath. Luke rushed back and pulled her into his arms. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. This was turning into something she wasn't sure she liked. *Girl, you are in so far over your head you'll be lucky if you don't drown. In him.*

"Can we catch him?"

"Not likely." He looked at his watch. "It's getting late. I'll have to deal with him later. We have some place to be."

"Aren't you going to report this to the police?"

"I'll deal with it. I have someone who can take care of this, no problem."

She didn't like the sound of that.

"Get in the SUV," he told her. "He hit the driver's side, so you shouldn't have any problem getting the passenger door open."

Instead of doing as he suggested, she walked around the SUV to check out the damage. Oh, that didn't look good. "Um, Luke? I don't think you will even be able to get in."

He didn't look happy as he reached for the handle and tried to pry open the door. It opened all right -- it fell right off and crashed to the ground. Luke clenched his hands into fists and let out a breath before he spoke. "Go around and get in the passenger side. We're going to be waiting a little longer than I first thought."

Since this wasn't a good time to piss him off, at least not any more than he already was, Carrie rushed around to the other side of the SUV and climbed onto the seat. Luke stood at the front of the vehicle, his cell phone pressed to his ear.

After what felt like hours, another SUV, this one a little smaller and dove gray in color, pulled up next to them. A dark-haired man wearing a leather coat got out from behind the wheel and started walking toward them.

"A friend of yours?" Carrie asked Luke.

"Troy. He's a business associate. Come on. Let's go."

She followed him over to where the other man stood. Luke made a brief introduction, and Troy nodded at Carrie. He handed Luke a set of keys. "I'll get this one towed to the garage. Should be done in a week or so, maybe a little longer."

"Thanks," Luke said as he took the keys. He slid the key to his own SUV off his key ring and handed it to Troy.

"Go ahead and get in," Luke said to Carrie. "I'll be there in a second."

She walked away, but not before hearing Troy ask him how much trouble he'd gotten himself into this time. This time? Like this was an everyday occurrence for him?

Once Luke slid behind the wheel, she shot him a glare. If she got killed, Carrie was going to come back from the dead and make the rest of his life a living hell. "Is there always someone trying to kill you?"

He laughed. "I have my fair share of enemies."

"Yeah, and you got someone else's share, too."

"I'll keep you safe, Carrie."

"I'm not worried."

But she was, and they both knew it.

She had a feeling their night was about to get a lot worse.

* * * * *

Luke stopped the borrowed SUV down the street from the bar where Maurice Little worked and turned off the ignition. One look at Carrie and his blood started to hum all over again. She'd been incredible. He wanted nothing more than to take her home and have his way with her again. All night long.

Maybe letting her come with him hadn't been his brightest idea, after all. She was proving to be a little too much of a distraction.

"Are you ready?"

She nodded, and they hopped out of the car. He walked around the front of the vehicle and met her on the sidewalk, all the while wondering if there was a way to send her home without pissing her off. Coming up empty, he shrugged and took her hand, leading her toward the bar's entrance.

She turned to him when they got to the door. "Are you stressed, Luke? Need a drink already?" she chided.

As if a simple drink would solve all the problems he suddenly had. He should be so lucky. "Maurice Little runs this bar for his brother. He also runs a side business as a bookie. I think Brian knows him well."

She shivered. Luke felt bad, but what could he do? She'd wanted to be involved in this, and it was too late to take her home now.

They stepped inside the dark, smoky interior of the bar, and he led her to a table in the back, where he could watch the entire room and scan for Maurice, but not be seen or singled out.

The waitress -- a woman he'd seen in here often but whose name escaped him at the moment -- sauntered over to the table and flashed him a seductive grin he chose to ignore. She wasn't his type. Too skinny. Too plastic. Carrie was all the woman he needed.

"What can I get for you?" the waitress asked in a husky voice.

Luke ordered a whiskey he had no intention of drinking, and Carrie got a diet soda.

She couldn't look more out of place in the seedy little bar if she tried. But she *was* helping, in her own way, and he appreciated her for it. She wanted to find Brian as much as he did. He smiled. For a librarian, she wasn't too bad.

"I have some news on that Zyra woman we found in Brian's book," Carrie said.

Damn it. He didn't need Carrie to start investigating Zyra. The woman was dangerous to humans, and though she hadn't threatened Carrie's life yet, it didn't mean she wouldn't.

"She was last seen in Concord."

Her expression fell a little flat. "You know, for once I'd like to be the one to give you the information. How did you find out about Venus?"

"Who is Venus?"

A surprised smile spread across her lips. "Not *who*. What. I thought you knew this already. Venus is the club that Zyra owns in Concord."

What? "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"You kinda distracted me."

He grinned sheepishly at her. "Yeah, I guess I did. Who did you get this information from?"

"Lauren. My sister. She said Brian was sleeping with Zyra."

Exactly what he'd suspected. "It wouldn't surprise me." *What next, Zyra? Whose life do you want to ruin now?*

He made a mental note to have Vince check out Venus. It might be the first true lead they had. Over the years, Zyra had learned to cover her tracks well. She wasn't an easy woman to find, and that was why she was still alive. If he'd been able to get his hands on her, Luke would have taken her out a long time ago. What other choice did he have? The woman was a killer, and not one mortal police could stop.

Luke hadn't realized, when he'd first met Zyra, what she was really like. She'd charmed him with stories of eternal life, but he'd soon come to see her for what she really was. He hadn't been able to do anything about it then. He'd been too new. Too weak. Now things had changed.

He wouldn't let her slip away. She would have to be destroyed. A human might not understand it, but it was the way of the vampire world. No jails could hold a creature with preternatural strength, and someone as far gone as Zyra was beyond saving, anyway.

The waitress came and set their drinks on the table in front of them. "Can I get you anything else?"

Luke picked up Carrie's hand and kissed her palm. "No, thanks. I've got everything I need right here."

When she walked away, Carrie yanked her hand back. "Why do I get the feeling you know her?"

Luke shrugged. "I've been in here before."

"You've slept with her, haven't you?"

Luke blinked, taken aback. Did she really think he was that hard up for company? "No reason to be jealous. She's offered, but I've never taken her up on it."

She stared at him over the rim of her glass. "Yeah, right."

He sighed, even though her sudden streak of possessiveness excited him. He grabbed her hand again and smiled as he ran his tongue across the pulse in her wrist.

Big mistake. A wave of hunger slammed through him, fierce and strong, and he had to take deep breaths and close his eyes to fight it off.

Luke felt her fingers on his palm, and it didn't help. "Are you okay?" she asked, her voice concerned.

He finally found the strength to look at her again. "Yeah, fine."

"You don't look fine."

"I'm fine, really." He instantly regretted snapping when her eyes darkened.

But she laughed it off. "Sure. Go back to being a jerk. Fine. But remember who just gave you some pretty good...information. And if you want any more of that *information*, you might want to lighten up."

She had no idea what she was asking. He didn't want to scare her so soon with his secret, but he was having a very hard time keeping it from her. She had to already suspect, anyway. She'd come right out and asked him one time if he was a vampire. Had she really expected him to say yes? He'd never had other women ask such a bold question, but then he'd made a point to keep sex separate from the rest of his life. Carrie, though -- he'd broken all his usual rules with her.

Was it any wonder, really? She'd affected him so strongly from the first, Luke hadn't been able to control himself. He'd promised himself that one time with her would have to be enough, but now he knew he couldn't keep that promise.

"Are you threatening me with information, or with sex?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light and teasing.

"Yes to both questions." She sipped her drink before offering him a sexy smile that got him hard all over again. He nearly groaned, but bit it back at the last second.

"So you'll favor me with your attentions again?"

"If you're a very good boy."

Heat rose in him so fast he almost lost control. "I think you like me better when I'm not."

She nodded. "I'll admit that has some appeal."

He leaned across the skinny table and pulled her in for a kiss.

She was ready for him, sucking his tongue into her mouth and kissing him harder. At the same time, she slipped off her shoe and started running her toes up the inside of his leg. When she reached his cock, he didn't try to stop her.

She massaged his cock through the material of his jeans, bringing him to a fevered pitch in seconds. He nearly growled at the feel of her warm toes against him. When she pressed down harder he had to fight not to come. He refused to humiliate himself like a randy teenager, but what she did felt so good. Luke couldn't wait to get her home and into bed. And this time, he'd like to have her for most of the day.

She curled her toes around his erection as he deepened the kiss. If she wasn't careful, he might bite her tongue. That was how close he was to the edge. The hunger did that to him. Weakened his control. If she kept this up, he'd embarrass them both.

He broke the kiss when he felt his fangs start to elongate. "We can continue this later," he promised her. "Right now, we're here to work."

"Sorry. You're right." With one last taunting squeeze she slipped her foot away.

He took a few gulps of his whiskey, grimacing as the burning liquid slid down his throat, and scanned the area around the bar. Every once in a while he tried to fit in, to appear human. He couldn't eat the foods humans enjoyed, but small amounts of beverages wouldn't kill him -- though if he drank too much, he sometimes wished they would.

It seemed to take forever for his erection to go away. Good thing it eventually did because he saw Maurice Little standing behind the bar. Maurice met his eyes and shook his head slightly.

Luke turned to Carrie, already scooting off his seat. "Let's go."

"Where? Are we leaving already?"

"The man we've been waiting for is behind the bar. We need to go talk to him."

He gestured with his chin to where Maurice stood. Anything but little, the black man towered over everyone in the place and looked like the football linebacker he had been. Maurice had played for the Patriots until he'd messed up his knee.

Luke walked over to the bar with Carrie in tow. Maurice led them into a small back room. The Spartan office held a metal desk and a couple of folding chairs. He eyed them both with amusement. "By all means, have a seat."

Carrie slumped into a chair, looking more than a little nervous. Luke wanted to tell her she had nothing to worry about, but he needed to concentrate on Maurice at the moment. He smiled at the man.

"I'm looking for Brian Samuels. Have you heard from him lately?"

Maurice snorted and sank into one of the other chairs. "I'm willing to make a deal with you, Nolan. I might have something for you. For the right price."

Of course, it all came down to money. Brian had probably paid Maurice to keep his mouth shut.

Luke had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but the man knew something, and he needed the information. As much as he hated to reveal himself, it was time to bring out the big guns. He let his fangs elongate and smiled. "I think you'll tell me whatever I want to know, and you'll tell me now."

Maurice's eyes widened, and he scooted his chair back. It screeched across the cement floor. "What the hell are you? What's wrong with your teeth?"

Luke stood up and slammed his palms on the metal desk. "What's it going to be, Maurice? Are you going to tell me about Samuels, or am I going to make you a late-night snack? Think fast. I'm hungry."

Maurice hiccupped. "He's been holed up on Concord with some skinny, dark-haired woman. She owns a club over there. That's all I know."

Luke growled, and Maurice Little passed out in a dead faint. Luke chuckled to himself and turned.

Carrie looked at him, her eyes widening with fear and confusion. Shit. He'd wanted to ease her into the idea. But now it was too late.

* * * * *

Carrie stole little glances at Luke all the way back to their building. Her hands shook, and she had yet to draw a full breath. She could no longer deny what she'd been ignoring all this time. A few minutes ago it had been right in front of her, staring her in the face. Luke's...condition couldn't get any more obvious.

A little part of her had always believed in ghost stories and all the other various spooks she'd read about in childhood. She herself had even dressed up as a vampire for Halloween as a kid. She knew costume shops carried vampire teeth, but Luke's didn't look plastic. They looked dangerous. He'd proven to her time and again that she could trust him, but anxiety still had settled into her stomach at the sight of those fangs.

When he'd turned to face her with that glazed look in his sexy eyes, she'd been worried for all of two seconds. But then he'd told her it was time to go, and his teeth had been back to normal, and she'd followed him, and --

Fangs. They'd been long and sharp and white and gleaming. She gulped. And *of course* they'd come from some Hollywood costume shop, because real men didn't have fangs.

Right?

She shivered. Luke's jaw was set in a grim line, and he focused on the road. She reached out and put her hand on his thigh, needing the connection. She expected him to brush her off or ignore her, but he settled his hand over hers and gave a light squeeze.

She smiled. He wasn't a bad guy.

That's what everyone had assumed of Ted Bundy.

She thought back to a nightmare she'd had when she'd been three. She'd woken up screaming, and had only quieted when her mother had assured her vampires didn't exist.

Apparently, someone had forgotten to fill Luke in on that little detail.

"Where did you learn that trick?" she asked him, as he pulled the borrowed SUV into their driveway. She knew it was stupid to pretend she hadn't seen what she had, but a small part of her still wanted to deny the truth. It was too fantastical to be real.

"What trick?"

"You can tell me. I promise I won't give away your secret."

He got out without a word, and she followed him up the pathway. When they reached the porch steps, he turned to her. "Why don't you come inside for a little while? I think we need to have a talk."

"Sure. Why not." Her hands still trembled, but she warned herself to calm down. If nothing else, he owed her an explanation. If he planned to hurt her, he'd had plenty of chances already. Instead, he'd protected her. Many times.

Once inside, Luke walked into the kitchen and flipped on the light. "I'm going to wash up a little, get some of this dirt off my face. Make yourself comfortable."

She smiled as he walked out of the room, but once he was out of her line of vision, the smile faded. What had she gotten herself into?

She was thirsty. Chasing bad guys and running for your life tended to do that to a gal. Carrie walked to the fridge and opened it. Maybe he had some diet soda.

Her eyes widened. She gulped. No diet soda. Not even any bottles of water. In fact, there was nothing in his fridge at all but a couple of bags.

Blood bags.

Carrie gulped again and nearly passed out. The truth slammed into her full force, every shred of denial evaporating in light of recent evidence. Her heart pounded so hard against her chest she was afraid it might burst through her ribs.

Luke had fangs. He drank blood.

She'd thought it before, but she'd been half-joking then. Now, she couldn't brush it off as her imagination.

She really *was* sleeping with a vampire.

Chapter Fourteen

Luke came around the corner into the kitchen and found Carrie's delectable ass hanging out of his fridge. He thought about going up behind her and surprising her, maybe pushing her against the wall and fucking her right there, but then she spun around, her face ghostly white, and he knew what she'd found.

She'd clearly thought the fangs were a joke. Now he would have to tell her they were anything but. His burgeoning erection deflated. She'd been bound to find out sooner or later. He'd just been hoping it would be later.

He leaned against the counter, assuming the most non-threatening pose he could manage, and forced an easy smile. "I think it's time to have that talk."

"Ya think?" Her voice rose as she slammed the fridge door shut. She ran a hand through her tangled hair and shook her head at him. "What the hell is going on? Do you have some kind of blood fetish? You think you're a vampire or something?"

He heaved a sigh, fighting to not pull her into his arms. He doubted she would appreciate his attentions at the moment, however sincere they might be. "I don't think I am. I *know* it."

He saw more disbelief flash across her expression. She shook her head vigorously, chomping her teeth down hard on her lower lip. She paced the length of the kitchen, muttering ridiculous things she probably thought he couldn't hear. He would have laughed if he wasn't half-expecting her to turn around and slug him. She was trying to convince herself vampires didn't exist -- and doing a pretty bang-up job of it from where he was standing.

Finally, he'd had enough. "Carrie?"

She stopped her pacing and came up to him, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "Prove it."

He'd expected her anger. Expected fear. This bravado, this challenge, however, was the last reaction he would have thought she'd display. "Excuse me?"

She squared her shoulders and plopped her fists on her hips. "Prove to me that you're a vampire."

"I think I have, more than a few times."

"The sunlight, the fangs, the sleeping all day." She nodded, as if it had started to sink in, but then she shook her head. "This isn't possible. If you're a vampire, how old are you?"

Way, way too old for her. If he were still human, he'd have long been dust in a grave. He shifted his feet. "Two hundred and twenty."

"Oh." She punctuated the small sound with a nervous smile as she slumped into a kitchen chair. "Two hundred and twenty. Robbing the cradle with me, aren't you?"

He laughed, but it only seemed to make her more uneasy. He slid into the chair across from her. The look in her eyes warned him that she didn't believe him. Some small part of her might want to believe, but she was just humoring him. If he left her alone, she might call the police.

"I'm far from ancient." He reached for her hand, but she pulled away. "Listen, Carrie, this doesn't have to change anything."

"Oh, really?" She got up to pace again. "It changes everything. Now every time you touch me, I'm going to be worried that you want to take a bite out of my neck."

Luke laughed again, louder and longer than the first time. Strange that she'd be making a joke at a time like this, when he could clearly see she was trying so hard to reject what he was telling her. Though he supposed the humor was her defense mechanism. Odds were she still thought he was the insane one.

Unbelievably, he wanted her even more now. The tips of his fangs burned his gums, and he swallowed hard. Somehow, he'd have to get it through his thick skull -- she wasn't going to want him again.

Carrie talked as she walked, arms crossed over her chest. "Oh, this is funny, huh? Not hardly, mister. And stop looking at me like that. You're making me nervous. I have no interest in becoming your human pin cushion, so don't you even think about drinking my blood."

Whoops. "I already have."

She turned on him, her face flaming, and stomped toward him, fists out in front of her in an aggressive posture. "You *what?* Are you freaking kidding me? First of all, it's not even possible since vampires *don't* exist. Second, when could you possibly have done that without my noticing?"

"When I kissed you at your door." *Come on, Carrie. I know it's a stretch, but you need to believe me.* Luke wanted her acceptance. He craved it, even. And here she was, trying to push him away. Luke wouldn't stand for it. He wouldn't let her discriminate. Gays, bis,

transsexuals -- people weren't allowed to be biased against them or against gender equality. Folks shouldn't be dead set against the preternatural world, either. It wasn't right.

He was no different from any other man in her life. At least not much. So he'd been around for a while, and he drank blood. Luke sighed. He'd lived like this for so long, he hadn't even thought about how it might affect her.

She's mortal, idiot. She won't just accept you right away, not after learning this.

Carrie lifted her fists as if she wanted to pound on his chest -- and then she did, for all of a second. Then her hands stilled, and she closed her fingers in his shirt. "Why didn't you tell me, Luke? Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I didn't want to scare you away." She started caressing his chest, a forlorn look in her eyes, and it pained him. He held her wrists to stop her movements and wrapped her fingers in his own. "Is this too much for you to handle?"

She was silent so long he thought she might not answer. Finally, she shook her head and faced him, resignation etched on her face. "I honestly don't know what to believe. This is so crazy, yet... No, it's just nuts."

"Maybe, but it's the truth." He said it softly, but with enough command in his voice so that she'd know it wasn't a question. He wouldn't let her go, not yet. Not when he was so close to finding Samuels, and she was what had been missing in his life for far too long. He'd be lying if he told her he hadn't had relationships before. In his more than two hundred years, he'd had too many to count. Some of them had been serious. Most of them hadn't.

Over the years he'd also heard stories from others of his kind that had been intended to lead him to believe there was one woman out there for him. His mate. A woman who would want to be a part of his life forever. He'd never believed the tales, however, until he'd met Carrie, and he certainly hadn't expected his mate to be *human*. It made sense, though, when he thought about it, since he'd been human once. But it didn't change the facts. Unless she turned, he would have to watch her grow old and die.

The idea of living through that made his stomach clench. His throat went dry. If he hadn't slept with her, he never would have known she was meant for him, which would have saved them both a lot of trouble, because this situation now had the potential to get pretty sticky.

Luke and Carrie moved into the living room and had just settled on the couch when the doorbell rang. Frustrated at the interruption but knowing it might be important, Luke went to answer it. Vince stood there, along with Troy.

"Not now," he tried to tell them. They didn't budge.

"No time like the present." Troy elbowed his way inside, and Vince followed.

"I have company," Luke said softly, gesturing toward the living room with his chin. "I don't want her to know you're here."

“Too late,” Carrie’s voice came from behind him. He spun around to find her standing in the archway, one hand on her hip and the other clutching the doorframe so hard her knuckles had turned white. “I have to go, anyway. I’m supposed to be meeting my sister in a few hours, and I want to get a little sleep first before I have to deal with her.”

Vince smiled and stepped forward, injecting so much charm into his expression Luke had to fight back the sudden urge to wipe the grin off the other man’s face.

“You must be Carrie. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m Vince, and this is Troy.” Vince stuck out his hand, and she took it tentatively. Luke could have strangled his friend when he brought Carrie’s hand to his lips and brushed a kiss over her knuckles.

A bolt of jealousy shot through Luke. Why hadn’t he thought to do something like that when he’d first met her? Of course, Vince had better breeding than Luke did. *Much* better. He came from old family money, and as the sole...survivor, Vince had inherited a massive fortune. He worked with Luke only to keep the boredom at bay, something Luke understood all too well. Several centuries was a long time to live if one had nothing to do with his time.

Vince was Luke’s closest friend. He’d never step between Luke and the woman he wanted, but still, it got his goat to see Vince even touching her.

Carrie looked at Luke; her tone when she spoke was flat, and her eyes were glazed over, her skin deathly pale. “Are they like you? You know.” She made a snarl with her lips.

Luke nodded.

“I was afraid of that.” She turned back to Vince and shook her head. “Anyway, I’ll leave so you can get to your business with Luke.”

Luke gestured for the men to wait for him in the living room. He walked Carrie to her door. When she started to close it behind her, he stopped her with a hand on the panel.

“I want to be alone; I have a lot to think about.”

He understood. Luke didn’t like it, but he couldn’t blame her for needing the time away from him. She would need to think things through and decide whether or not to accept the truth for what it was. “I just want to give you one more thing to keep in mind.”

Before she had a chance to protest he slipped his hand behind her head and kissed her. To her credit, she didn’t fight him. She froze, her lips still against his, before she gave in to the kiss and opened her mouth. He slipped his tongue inside, stroking along hers, making her feel every pent-up emotion inside him. Luke pressed against her, wishing he could crawl inside her skin. His cock hardened against his zipper, but there would be no relief for him tonight; he wouldn’t even ask. It wouldn’t be fair to Carrie, since she’d asked for time to think. When he finally pulled away, the kiss left them both breathless.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Meet me at my place just after sunset, same as usual.”

“I don’t know, Luke. I’m starting to think this might not be a good idea.”

“Carrie, I’m not asking.” It was a gamble, but Luke knew if he’d made it a request, she would have flat-out refused. If he didn’t offer her a choice, he had a better chance at getting her to come with him. He wanted to show her his world. His real world, the parts of him he’d had to keep secret until tonight. It might be dangerous, but he could protect her.

She agreed, albeit reluctantly. “Okay. Go all caveman again. Fine. I’ll meet you. Have a good night’s...I mean, day’s rest.”

With that, she closed her door, leaving him standing on the porch, hoping she really would show up that night.

He shook his head and went back to deal with his friends and to find out what *important* things Vince and Troy had to tell him. He hoped he wouldn’t end up stuck out of town until the following night. He needed to have that talk with Carrie, to get her to understand. There had to be a way to work it out.

* * * * *

Carrie sat at the table in the restaurant, drinking yet another cup of coffee after her dinner with Lauren and their cousin Shelly, a Lauren clone but one who at least had a little meat on her bones. Both women continued to ask her why she was so quiet, but she really couldn’t answer. How was a girl supposed to tell her family she was sleeping with a vampire? It just didn’t happen.

Did she really believe Luke and his buddies were vampires? Well, she didn’t completely believe, but she couldn’t discount the possibility, either. He’d bit her when they’d slept together. Hard. At the time she hadn’t given it much thought, but combined with all the other signs, she couldn’t ignore it any more.

Carrie gulped down the rest of her coffee, trying to focus on a conversation she’d long ago lost interest in. Listening to Shelly go on and on about her new toy poodle was about as interesting as watching grass grow. In real time.

“Carrie?” Lauren tapped the table.

“Huh?”

“Where are you tonight? You’re thinking about the guy you swear you haven’t slept with but are acting like you have, aren’t you?”

Carrie shrugged, trying for nonchalance but figuring she was failing miserably. “My mind is on other things.”

“Involving Brian?”

Shelly perked up. She leaned forward, propping her forearms on the table. “What do you have to do with Brian?”

Lauren’s eyes widened, taking on an excited gleam. She turned to Shelly and started speaking in the breathy, Marilyn Monroe voice that made Carrie want to reach across the table and wrap her hands around her sister’s slender neck. “I asked Carrie to help me find

him. It turns out her neighbor is a private investigator, and he's working with Carrie to help."

"That is so cool," Shelly gushed, a huge smile on her bee-stung lips. She tugged at a lock of platinum-blond hair.

Give me a break. "It isn't like that."

They both ignored her. "And to make it even better," Lauren continued, as if she knew what she was talking about, "her neighbor is this total hottie who seems to have a thing for Carrie."

Yeah, he has a thing for my blood. "Shush, Lauren. Everyone is looking at us."

Lauren just shrugged and clicked her tongue. She glanced around the restaurant, waving to a few of the other patrons and flashing them a huge, too-white smile. "They're all jealous."

Shelly sighed. "I know I am. Tell me, Carrie. What is it like investigating an actual missing persons case?"

When had her life turned into an episode of *Law and Order*? *Let's see... Things were thrown out of a second story window at me, I was almost shot, and I was nearly run over by a bad dude driving a van. Oh, yeah, and a "vampire" told me he drank my blood, too. Does that about cover it?* "It's been fun. You know what? I'm supposed to meet Luke in a little while. I really should go."

Shelly gasped in the dramatic fashion only she and Lauren could pull off. "You're meeting him at *night*? Why, if you're not sleeping with him?"

Uh-oh. Carrie scooted back against her chair and threaded her hands in her lap. "He's got a little allergy to the sun. Does most of his work at night."

"How cool is that?" Shelly squealed.

Carrie felt like she'd been transported back to high school. Luke and his vampiric buddies were starting to seem average compared with Lauren, Shelly, and Brian. She loved her family, but she could only take them in small doses.

She pulled a twenty out of her purse and handed it to Lauren. "Here. That should cover my dinner. I'll call you when I get back in the morning."

"Stay, Carrie." Lauren blinked up at her. "We'll have cosmos."

Just what she needed. To get drunk and then have to face Luke. *Not happening tonight, Lauren.* "Maybe next time, but thanks for the offer."

She got up from the table and left. Once in the parking lot, she breathed a sigh of relief. Her relief lasted only until she got her car on the road. What was she going to do about Luke?

He was a vampire.

That was *so* not normal. So much for finding a nice, normal guy to settle down with, like her parents kept telling her to. *Carrie Holiday, magnet for the undead.*

The thought sent a shiver through her. What was she going to *do* about him?

She knew if she didn't meet him tonight, he'd come looking for her -- he'd made that quite clear earlier. Carrie decided she had to meet him, no matter how nerve-racking the idea was.

In truth, spending time with him wasn't all that unpleasant, anyway. She still got hot whenever she thought about him; that much hadn't changed. Her pussy still quivered when she remembered how easily he could make her come. They still had a lot to talk about, but her body didn't seem to care. It just wanted Luke. That part of him that fit her so perfectly.

Ten minutes later, she pulled into her driveway. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. Carrie tried to brush off the sensation, but the feeling of unease got stronger. The sun had just set, bathing the yard and the house in an eerie glow. She told herself Luke was what was causing her nervousness, but it didn't work. Something was wrong.

As she got out of the car, she saw her wide-open door. Her heart started beating double time.

With caution, Carrie walked up the steps and peeked inside her home. Her living room was in shambles, the couch cushions ripped and stuffing scattered across the floor. The coffee table was overturned, one leg broken. Her collection of books and DVDs had been strewn across the carpet.

Shaking, she took her cell phone out of her purse. She rushed back to her car and dialed 9-1-1.

Chapter Fifteen

A siren cutting through the quiet dragged Luke up from the couch where he'd been sitting. When he peered out the window at the otherwise dark night, he realized the siren was coming closer. Soon a police car pulled into the driveway. *Carrie!*

Luke threw on his clothes and ran out of the house. He found her standing in the front yard. After saying a prayer of thanks that she was okay, he started walking toward her.

She looked over as he approached, and he saw her eyes were spitting fire. She was pissed, and she was scared. What the hell was going on? Luke wanted to wrap her in his arms, but something in her expression told him that might not be a good idea. Instead, he stopped in front of her. "What happened?"

She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. When she opened them, her expression had gotten more dangerous. "Someone broke into my house and trashed the place."

He stiffened. Sometime during the day he'd awoken to muffled thumps, but had brushed the sounds off as remnants of a dream. "Is anything missing?"

Carrie shrugged. "I don't know. My couch is ripped to shreds, and some of my furniture is broken, but that was all I could see from the front door. I never had any trouble like this until Lauren asked me to find Brian. Now he seems to be the cause of all my problems. My life was so quiet until he disappeared. When I find Brian and his little girlfriend, I'm going to kill both of them."

The woman obviously had no clue who or what she was dealing with. Her anger wouldn't protect her from Zyra. The female vampire might not be able to hurt Luke, at least not much, but she could snap Carrie's neck with two fingers. "It might not be such a good idea to go after Zyra."

"Let me guess. She's a vampire, too. A powerful one who will only make my life a living hell or kill me if I try to stop her."

“Close enough.”

“This whole thing is starting to feel like my worst nightmare.”

He laughed despite the gravity of the situation. “Sweetheart, you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She narrowed her eyes, her clenched fists propped on her hips. “You know what, Luke? Tonight I’m not really in the mood for the cryptic statements.”

A police officer came out of Carrie’s place; she told Luke to wait where he was while she found out what was going on. The second Carrie walked away, Luke took the opportunity to walk around the property and see if he could find anything the police couldn’t.

When he stopped at the back of the house, he noticed a familiar scent in the air. Zyra’s perfume. She’d always preferred the kind that lingered in a room long after she’d left it. “Still a creature of habit, I see.”

The woman was beyond trouble, but he’d never forgive Zyra for scaring Carrie like this. She had to pay for her mistakes, and Lord knew she’d made more than a few during her long lifetime.

He came back around to the front of the house just as the police were leaving. Carrie met him by her door, but he told her not to go inside. “I don’t feel comfortable with you staying at your place tonight.”

“So what do you suggest? I need to get this cleaned up.” She blinked up at him, tears welling in her eyes. She swiped them away with the back of her hand. Luke wasn’t surprised she refused to let them fall; she was a lot stronger than she realized.

“I’ll help you. Then I want you to come and stay with me. I don’t want to leave you by yourself. In fact, I don’t plan on leaving you alone at all until we find Brian and put a stop to all this.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“Not *we*, as in *us*. I was referring to Vince and Troy, not you. I’m not letting you put yourself in any more danger, but I’m not letting you out of my sight, either. You’ll just have to come along for the ride from now on.”

“What about work?”

“It’s very unlikely that she’ll strike during the day, but you never know if she’ll hire someone to do it. I’d rather you didn’t go to work at all.”

She snorted.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Just promise me you won’t go anywhere after sunset by yourself.”

“Luke, I --”

“Do you want to live?”

She nodded.

“Then it’s not such a difficult promise to make, is it?”

“I just don’t like being dependent on other people.”

Yeah, he’d learned that about her. Carrie was a doer. A caregiver, even. But she wasn’t complacent, and sitting around twiddling her thumbs would drive her insane within a few days, but he didn’t have much choice. Zyra had brought Carrie into this, and Carrie was no longer safe. Luke cupped her chin in his palm and spoke softly. “Has your life ever been in danger before you started looking for Brian?”

She shook her head, dislodging his hand, a defeated expression on her pretty face. “No.”

“Then I think you’re going to have to trust me on this one. I know what I’m talking about.”

He thought she’d brush him off, call her sister and ask if she could stay with her instead, but she finally relented with a nod. “Okay. I’ll stay with you. But I expect *us* to have this taken care of very soon.”

“We will.”

He hated to keep her involved now that things had started to get more dangerous, but he wasn’t going to leave her vulnerable to attack. Zyra was serious. *Always*. And apparently, because of Brian Samuels, she had it in for Carrie.

Luke clenched his teeth. When he got a hold of Brian, the other man was going to *wish* he was dead.

Frustration swept through him. He balled his hands into fists and shook his head, walking a few steps away before stalking back toward Carrie. He needed to get control of his anger, since there wasn’t anything he could do about it tonight. At the moment, his only priority was making sure she was safe.

At her soft gasp, he snapped his gaze to hers. She shook her head. “Your eyes.”

“What?”

“They’re...red.” She seemed to tense, but she didn’t back away. He had to give her credit for that. The woman had been through so much lately, and most of it was his fault.

“They do that sometimes when I get angry. Right now, I’m pissed, and I can’t wait to get my hands on your brother-in-law.”

“It isn’t human. People’s eyes don’t do that.”

Was that what it would take to prove to her that he really was a vampire? “Yeah, well, mine do.”

She flicked her gaze toward her house. “You really are a...um...immortal?”

In answer, he just sighed.

* * * * *

Carrie sat in Luke's living room, rocking from side to side on the couch, scared, angry, and dazed with shock over what had happened. She'd thought she'd been upset when she had found out Luke was a vampire; well, it turned out she hadn't really known what that emotion was until she'd seen what had been done to her house.

Luke came into the room and offered her a glass of water. She declined with a wave of her hand. Water wasn't going to cut it tonight. If she was going to spend an extended amount of time here, she was going to have to do some shopping. He might be able to live on blood, but her stomach rolled at the thought.

"It's almost sunrise," he told her.

She cocked her head to the side. "Brilliant deduction, Einstein. Where did you come up with that one?"

"Come on, Carrie. Don't take this out on me. You wanted to be involved, no matter how many times I warned you that it was a bad idea."

He pulled her up from the couch and into his arms. She stayed stiff, even when her body wanted to melt against his. Just inhaling his scent had her biting back a whimper. Carrie held on to her anger, let it wash over her, and found that distancing herself from him became that much easier. Until she felt his breath against her ear.

She fought to pretend her legs weren't wobbling. "I wanted to find Brian. I didn't want to nearly be killed and have my house trashed." Carrie laughed then, the comment sounding ridiculous even to her own ears. She put her arms around his neck, telling herself it was only to keep steady. "This is crazy. You know that, right?"

Luke nodded and ran his tongue over his bottom lip. The gesture hit her right where it counted and made all the moisture in her body flood south. She knew his attentions at the moment were probably just to get her mind off what had happened to her house. It worked.

Carrie turned her focus on the very warm, very hard man in front of her. Call her crazy, but at least sex would be a way to get rid of the leftover adrenaline. "So, are we going to stay up all day, or are we going to bed?" She winked.

Luke's eyebrows shot up. "Don't you have to work this morning?"

"I'm not going in today. I called and left a message on the machine at the library when I saw the state of my house."

"Good."

He bent to scoop her into his arms, but she dodged him and ran down the hall. She stepped into his bedroom and was instantly taken with everything he owned. Even in here, it was so much nicer than her house. The walls were painted another dark color, this time a warm bronze. The bed was a wrought iron, canopy style with a black silk comforter. The dressers and table lamps also looked like antiques.

Luke walked into the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

“When you said you were a collector,” she began. “You meant you bought all these antiques new, didn’t you?”

He watched her, seeming to gauge her reaction, before he nodded slowly. “Yes, I did.”

It scared her to think he’d been around long enough to be able to do that. She shivered, from anxiety this time, and wrapped her arms around herself to keep warm.

“How are you holding up?” Luke asked, seeming to read her thoughts.

Carrie licked her lips. “Can you read my mind?”

He didn’t even hesitate. He let out a short burst of laughter and leaned against the wall by the door. “No. You already asked me that before, remember? I told you the truth then, too. Some vampires can, if, as humans, they were psychically sensitive. I’m not one of them.”

Interesting. He seemed to be so in tune with her. What did that mean?

“You didn’t answer my question,” he prodded. “How are you doing?”

“Tell me about Zyra,” she said by way of an answer.

“Now isn’t the time.”

He was *so* not going to pull this crap with her, not after all she’d been through. Yes, she wanted him inside her right now, but she’d walk away if she didn’t get at least a little of the truth. “Oh, I beg to differ. This is *definitely* the time. I’ve had it up to here with Brian and vampires and people *shooting at me*. Start talking, or I walk.”

Luke sighed and went over to sit on the edge of the bed, patting the mattress next to him. “If you want to know, fine. But at least come and sit down. Be comfortable. You look like you’ve been sitting on a porcupine.”

Carrie wrinkled her nose, but followed him and sat on the bed. He put his hand on her thigh, but she brushed him away. Taking the hint, he flopped onto his back on the mattress and closed his eyes.

“I met Zyra when I was seventeen. I’d had a hard life, and I’d been working as a carpenter to make ends meet and help my father with my younger siblings. Zyra offered me a job. I took it. A few years later, she made me what I am.”

Now that was the last answer she’d been expecting. “She did? So this woman who’s trying to ruin my life is like your mother?”

He laughed. “Um, no. She turned me, but she didn’t care for me like a mother. Turning someone is definitely not the same thing as giving birth. Besides, she’s been a vampire only a few years longer than I have. When you get to my age, those few years don’t count for much.”

Oh, boy. This was almost too much reality to take. Carrie flopped onto her back beside him and gazed up at the ceiling. She really didn’t need to know this, but she couldn’t stop herself from asking the question. “You were involved with her, weren’t you?”

“We were lovers, yes.”

“Was she any good?”

He laughed. “You really don’t want me to answer that question.”

“So she was.”

He closed his eyes for a brief second and shook his head. “You have to understand that I’ve been alive longer than you. I have had more than a few lovers in my time here.”

“Well, duh. You’re a *guy*.”

He frowned and looked at her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“That’s what guys do. Sleep around.”

“Is that what you think this is between us? Me, *sleeping around*?”

She shrugged. “I’m just calling it like I see it. No need to get offended, and no need to lie to me. I know the truth when --”

He put his hand over her mouth to keep her from finishing her sentence. “You have no idea what the truth is here.” He cursed softly as she bit his palm. “I would suggest you don’t bite me, at least not if you want to be finished with this conversation.”

She smiled. “You like biting, huh?”

“Yes, I like biting. Love it, actually. For future reference, that’s a really good way to find yourself naked and under me in seconds flat.” His expression turned grave, and he hesitated before he started speaking again, his tone lower this time. “I like *you*, and whatever having you around involves.”

“You do?”

He nodded. “Yes, I do. I’ve never felt this connection with anyone before.”

She’d felt it, too, but she’d chosen to chalk it up to an overactive imagination and hormones set on permanent hyperdrive. If he also felt it, was there maybe something more to the bond forming between them than a woman going crazy? “Oh, really?”

“Yes. Most definitely. I noticed the connection probably from the first time I saw you, but it’s becoming a problem.”

“How so?” she asked slowly.

“I’ve made it a point never to need anyone.”

“Okay, how does that involve me?”

Luke rolled to his side and grinned at her. He actually liked her. *Really* liked her, and not just in a friends-with-benefits sort of way. She was growing attached to him, too. Maybe it was being thrown into this situation, working together under such close quarters every night. Maybe it was the chemistry she’d felt from the beginning. Whatever it was, she liked it.

Carrie drew in a deep breath full of Luke’s spicy, clean scent, and something low in her stomach fluttered.

“There you go, analyzing everything again.” He laughed softly, as he brushed a lock of hair away from her face. “Stop. There’s nothing to analyze.”

“I keep forgetting. You’re a man of action, not a thinker.”

“Hey!” His protest died on his lips, turning into a hiss as she cupped his semi-erect cock in her hand. His protests turned into low moans as she stroked him through his jeans.

“You know what I think?”

“What?” His voice sounded hoarse.

“I think you have on too many clothes.”

“I think I have to agree with you on that one.” He laughed, his tone sounding harsh and raspy.

She smiled. She had this effect on him. She, Carrie Holiday, librarian extraordinaire, could bring a big, bad vampire dude to his knees. She gave a silent cheer. “So, do something about it.”

Luke rose to sit on the edge of the bed and took off his shoes. His socks soon followed, and then he stood to strip off the rest of his clothes. Carrie propped herself up on her elbows to watch the bend and flex of his muscles under all that smooth skin. The man was a work of art and, for the moment at least, he was all hers.

He let his pants and boxers slide down and stepped out of them. She licked her lips at the sight of his cock, thick and long. A drop of pre-come had already formed there, and she wanted to swipe it away with her tongue.

“Come here,” she demanded softly, sitting up to beckon him with a crooked finger.

Silent, his gaze intense and hot, Luke did as he was told. He stopped when he reached her, and she rolled off the bed and dropped to her knees in front of him. Her tongue darted out to collect the drop of moisture, and Luke hissed. Smiling to herself, she swirled her tongue over the head of his cock, delighting in the shudder that ran through him. She liked him like this, out of breath, with her holding all the power.

She licked his cock from root to tip. “Hey, why do you breathe, anyway?”

“Huh?” Luke’s face was flushed, his eyes glazed with passion.

Carrie had to admit, she liked the sight. A lot. She licked him again, enjoying the teasing. “You breathe. Your heart beats. I thought vampires are...dead.”

“No,” he ground out, bucking his hips toward her when she kissed the head of his cock. “That’s just folklore. Vampires are alive, like humans. We’re just immortal, and we survive on --”

“Don’t even go there.” She stroked her tongue up the satin-coated steel of his cock again. “And you can’t go out in sunlight. Does it kill you?”

“Not exactly. It causes second- and third-degree burns. Prolonged exposure can kill, but the burns are painful enough.” His hand tangled in her hair, and he growled. “Jesus, Carrie. You’re killing me here. *Suck* me.”

“With pleasure, *sweetheart*.” Chuckling, she took him inside her mouth.

Luke groaned, his fingers tightening a little more in her hair with every passing second. He thrust his hips toward her, silently urging her to take more. Carrie was more than happy to comply. She cupped his balls in her hand, squeezing gently, her other hand stroking his thigh.

All too soon, Luke tugged at her hair and moved away from her. Carrie frowned up at him. “What’s the matter?”

“Get your clothes off.” He reached a hand down to her and helped her off the floor. When she just stood there smiling at his sudden urgency, Luke gripped her waistband in his hands and gave a sharp tug. The sound of ripping denim rent the air. Carrie shuddered.

“Vampires really do have super strength?”

He nodded. “And all my senses are heightened. That’s why the scent of your wet pussy is driving me insane right now. You can ask all the questions you want. Later. Now’s not the time for talking. It’s for fucking.”

He made short work of the rest of her clothes, leaving them in a pile of tatters on the hardwood floor. Once she was naked in front of him, he picked her up as if she weighed less than a feather and dropped her unceremoniously on the mattress. Within seconds he was between her legs, the head of his cock prodding her entrance.

No way was he taking control now. She’d started this, and she damned well was going to finish it. Besides, there was something she’d been dying to try with him. Well, not *dying*. For some reason, using that word around Luke made her stomach twist.

Carrie shook her head and rolled him onto his back. “My turn tonight.”

She proceeded to explore every inch of his body, kissing here, licking there, until Luke was panting beneath her. He grabbed her hips and tried to guide her onto his cock, but she laughed and batted his hands away.

Carrie laved her tongue over first one flat nipple, and then the other, biting him gently and earning a rumbling growl.

Grinning, she moved up his body and kissed him, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. He didn’t hesitate to kiss her back. Her pussy clenched, and arousal curled in her stomach. She needed him inside her. Like yesterday.

She broke the kiss, settled herself over his hips, and lowered herself onto his waiting cock. He hissed as she brought herself down slowly, feeling every inch of him filling her wet pussy. Once she’d seated him fully inside her, she sat there, running her hands over the rippled muscles of his abs.

Luke grabbed her wrists, the look in his eyes hinting at his lack of control. “Move.”

Teasing him had been fun, but she couldn't stand to be still anymore. Carrie raised and lowered herself, squeezing her inner muscles over him. Soon Luke's hips were bucking, driving his cock deep into her every time she came down on him. He raised his knees, changing the angle of his thrusts and hitting her in just the right spot. Light exploded behind her suddenly closed eyes. The orgasm took her by surprise, pulled her along on a tide of sensation. She writhed and bent forward, her arms dropping to the mattress on either side of Luke's body. Pleasure rocketed through her.

"Look at me, Carrie," Luke ground out, sounding about as far gone as she was.

Her lids snapped open, and her gaze locked with his. She wouldn't have been able to look away if she wanted to. She found heat there, just as she expected, but there was something else. Tenderness. Compassion. Caring. Her badass vampire dude had a soft spot after all. For her.

Luke gripped her hips and pulled her down hard on top of him. Then, he stiffened, her name a hoarse cry on his lips as he emptied himself inside her. He didn't break eye contact, even after his tremors had subsided.

Carrie snagged her lower lip between her teeth. She felt the connection more than she ever had, and Luke hardly tried to stop her from taking control. She was happy that he let her have the upper hand, even if it was only for a little while.

She fell asleep in his arms just about the time the sun rose over the horizon.

* * * * *

The shrill ring of something irritating woke her sometime later. The room was completely dark, and it took Carrie a little while to orient herself. Once she did, she remembered she was in Luke's house -- in Luke's bed. Her sigh of relief was short-lived. The present source of irritation was her cell phone blaring into the silence.

She dug around on the floor until she found her jeans and then unclipped the phone from the ruined waistband. "Hello?"

"Where have you been? I've been trying to get a hold of you for over an hour."

Carrie yawned. "Lauren?"

"Yes. Have you seen the news?"

"No. Why?" She stretched her arms over her head and yawned again, hoping to bring some much-needed oxygen to her brain so it would function correctly.

"Do you remember telling me that you and Luke went to visit someone named Steven Albert in your search for Brian?"

Carrie thought back to the visit with Steven Albert. Had something gone wrong? Had Brian been found?

Had Steven threatened Lauren?

She shivered at the thought. “Lauren, is everything okay?”

“No, it’s not. Not really.”

Now Lauren had her full and complete attention. She was using her normal voice, so that meant the drama was real and not imagined. “What happened?”

“Turn on the news, Carrie. It’s all over the place. Steven Albert is dead.”

Chapter Sixteen

“He’s *what?*” Carrie tried to process what Lauren said, but the words wouldn’t come through. She searched around for a clock. She didn’t see one. Of course he wouldn’t have one. Vampires probably had internal clocks or something. “What time is it?”

“It’s noon.”

“Noon!” Oh, man. Was she turning into Luke’s clone now? How had she slept so long? She poked him in the side, but he grumbled and said something unintelligible.

“Carrie, who was that?”

“A friend. I have to go, Lauren.”

“No. Turn on the news.”

She glanced around the room, but saw no TV either. Did he have something against electronics? “Luke, wake up.”

“You’re in bed with Luke? I thought you said you weren’t --”

Sorry, sis. No time for you right now. She cut off Lauren’s questions as she disconnected the call. “Luke, where’s your TV?”

“Living room. Above the walnut cabinet. What happened?” He rolled over and grabbed her hand. “This had better be important.”

“Oh, believe me. It is.” Carrie got up and pulled on one of Luke’s shirts she found lying on a nearby chair. “Is it okay to open this door? I mean, it’s dark everywhere here, right? It’s noon.”

“I know what time it is. And yes, it’s safe. All the shades throughout the house are drawn. I always make sure of that before I go to bed.”

She edged the door open, not trusting anything after the break-in, and was relieved to find out Luke was right. He stopped her as she started to slip out the door. The fact that he

was still naked didn't go unnoticed -- but she didn't have time to get back into bed with the guy. They had bigger problems on their hands.

"Come back to bed," he pleaded, his eyes still glazed with sleep. He yawned, trying to tug her back across the room.

"Luke, stop. Steven Albert is dead."

"What?" He rubbed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"My sister called. She told me about it. She said to watch the news."

Luke followed her down the hall and walked over to the TV -- a plasma TV she hadn't noticed before because it hung on the wall. She might have been jealous if she wasn't so scared.

Luke turned the TV on and settled on the couch, his head resting against the back cushion. His eyes were half closed -- until a picture of Steven Albert flashed across the screen. According to the news anchor, the man's body had been found with puncture wounds on the chest. And he'd been drained of blood.

"Shit," Luke whispered, shaking his head. "This could be a real problem."

Carrie shuddered. How could this possibly have happened? How could she have not known trying to find Brian would stir up this much trouble? She should have just let him stay missing. Lauren could live without the money. Lord knew, their parents would help her if she needed it.

She turned to Luke. "Don't get offended, but I need to make sure. You didn't have anything to do with this, did you?"

To his credit, if her question upset him, he didn't show it. "No. Of course not."

"What are we going to do?"

"I can't do anything about it now," he told her. "Not with it so light outside. Any move I make is going to have to wait until tonight."

"I know. Listen, I want to go in to work today, just for a little while."

Luke bolted upright on the couch, already shaking his head. "Why?"

She should have known he'd react this way. She could understand that he'd want to look out for her safety, but what could he do to help her during the day? If the woman behind all this was a vampire, Carrie was probably just as safe at work as she was trapped inside Luke's dark and suddenly gloomy abode. "I just don't feel like being cooped up here with a man sleeping like the dead all day."

"I can stay awake if I need to." He winked. "I'll keep you busy."

Pig. "Seriously. I need to keep *myself* busy." Hoping to staunch further protests, she was already headed for the living room doorway. "I'll be back a little later, okay?"

"When?"

“I can get back here around nine.” She winced as she said the words. Yes, it was after dark, but it was still early enough that she’d be fine. Sarah would want Carrie to stay. She’d find some way to guilt her into taking a full shift.

Luke looked like he might protest. He stood and strode over to her, arms crossed over his chest. “I don’t like it.”

“Deal with it.”

He shrugged. “I have a meeting tonight. Why don’t I pick you up in front of the library right after?”

She let out a breath. “Sounds like a plan.”

* * * * *

Once Carrie left to go home and get ready for work, Luke dressed, found his own phone, and dialed Vince’s number. Vince answered on the seventh ring, sounding groggier than Luke.

“This had better be good, Nolan.”

“Albert is dead.”

“What?”

Luke could just picture the other man bolting upright in bed. “Puncture wounds to the chest. What do you make of that one?”

“After Carrie’s place was broken into.” Vince sighed. “Zyra is baiting you.”

“I know that. I just don’t know what to do about it. I have to stop her before she hurts Carrie.”

“What do you care whether or not she hurts the human?” Vince’s tone was light and amused. What would a day be without a ribbing from his best friend?

“I have good reason to care.”

Vince was silent for a long time before he let out a long, low whistle. “I don’t believe it. You’ve --”

“Don’t say it.”

“But she’s your --”

“Not now, okay?” Luke settled back against the couch cushions and closed his eyes, not liking the direction of the conversation. Of course Vince would have noticed. They’d been as close as brothers for two centuries. There weren’t many secrets between them. Luke knew the word Vince had been about to use. *Mate*. He’d scare her if he told her what he was feeling. But damn it, Luke wanted it all with her. If he could find some way to keep her with him always, he’d do it in a heartbeat. He hadn’t yet completely explained things to her, though, because he was still searching for the right words.

“Hello? Earth to Luke.”

He heard Vince's voice and pulled himself out of his ridiculous fantasies. Carrie deserved so much more than he could ever give her. She deserved a home and family, kids running in the yard. He couldn't give her children or daylight hours with him. He could only give her the nights.

Talk about depressing thoughts.

Never once had he regretted becoming a vampire. At least not until now.

"I'm here."

"So what are we going to do about Zyra?"

Luke had no clue what to do about the troublesome woman. "I'll figure something out. I know I'm not going to leave Carrie alone right now."

"Don't blame you. If she were my woman, I'd feel the same way."

"She's not, so don't get any ideas."

Luke disconnected, feeling for the first time like a crotchety old man.

He went into the bedroom and climbed back into bed, falling asleep almost instantly. But his sleep was fitful. Thoughts of Carrie in Zyra's clutches haunted his dreams.

* * * * *

Carrie left work just before sunset that night, telling her mom she had a killer headache and needed to go home and sleep it off. No way was she hanging around any longer than she had to, only to wait for Luke. Oh, she'd meet him at the library later, just as she'd told him, but now she had nearly forty-five minutes to kill, and there was someone she wanted to see about a certain person they both knew. It wasn't a meeting she wanted to drag Luke to; this was something she had to do on her own.

She made a quick phone call to her parents' house, but when no one answered, she hung up before leaving a message on the voicemail. If her father wasn't at home, she knew exactly where to find him, workaholic that he was. On foot, she headed the few blocks to his office.

After a quick rap on the door, she walked into her father's outer office, hoping he'd still be there. When she entered the room, there, sitting in a chair across from her father's desk, was the man she'd left that morning.

To make matters worse, he seemed to be joking and laughing with her father.

"Carrie! What a nice surprise," her father said, pushing up out of his chair. "You know Luke Nolan, right?"

Just about as well as any woman could know a man, but you don't really want details, do you, Dad? "Yes. We're neighbors."

"Oh, that's right."

“So Dad, exactly how do you know Luke?” she asked, as a ball of something akin to dread settled into her stomach. “He’s mentioned knowing you, but I’m assuming it’s business-related since he’s here in your office tonight.”

“His investigation firm does some freelance work for my company.”

She shook her head at Luke’s guilty expression.

Oh, yeah. Heads are going to roll tonight, baby.

Chapter Seventeen

“Have a seat.” Max gestured to the chair next to Luke.

Carrie crossed her arms over her chest, fuming. “No, thanks. I’d rather stand.”

“Okay. If you insist. I can’t force you.” Her dad cleared his throat. “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing important. It can wait.” Actually, nothing at all anymore. Seeing Luke there had answered the question she’d been wanting to ask. She’d come to her father’s office to find out how he knew Luke, and how Luke was tied to Brian. Now she understood. Luke friggin’ *worked* for her father.

Why had he not felt the need to tell her what was going on? Did he not trust her with important information?

Shouldn’t a girl have the right to know that the man she was sleeping with worked for her dad?

“I think I’ll go now. Talk to you later, Dad.”

She started to walk out the door, but Luke’s hand on her arm stopped her. He leaned close, drawing Max’s attention to them. “I thought I told you to wait for me at the library?”

“And I thought I made it perfectly clear to you that you’re not the boss of me.” Juvenile, sure, but it felt good to stand up to the big jerk.

“Did I miss something?” Max asked, stepping away from his desk. “What’s going on?”

Oh, lovely. Just what she needed -- her father after Luke. And he would be. He had an overly protective streak when it came to his daughters. In fact, she wouldn’t put it past him to make Brian pay for what he’d done to Lauren, especially since even her father had been fooled by the man. Could it be possible that Luke was more serious about her -- plain old Carrie -- than she’d thought?

Nah. The idea was laughable at best. “Nothing’s going on, Dad.”

Carrie couldn’t see Luke’s face, but his expression must have been forceful for Max to back off the way he did. “We’re fine, Max. I won’t let anything happen to your daughter. I promise. I’m going to make sure she gets home safely now.”

Max moved over to his chair and sat. “You’d better really mean that. We *will* discuss this later, Nolan.”

Carrie turned to Luke as he led her out of the office and shut the door. “Why did he accept your explanation so easily?”

“He didn’t. When he said we’d talk about it later, he meant it. Knowing Max, he’ll be spitting nails. You might want to steer clear of him for a while. I wouldn’t put it past the guy to lock you in a closet somewhere and hire someone to hunt me down with a stake.”

Carrie gulped. “He knows what you are?”

“Yes.”

“And he believes you?”

Luke’s lips twitched, like he was trying to hold back a smile, but then his expression once again went serious. “He found out by accident one night, when he ran into me downtown. I was...feeding. I tried to convince him he wasn’t seeing what he thought he was, but your father is smart. And persistent. Like you, he needed me to prove to him what I am. It’s taken him a while to accept it. He won’t mess with me. He knows what I’m capable of. But I don’t want him to make your life miserable.”

“Why would he do that?”

Luke glanced at the ground, seeming to measure his words, before he looked up at her again. “Because he warned me to stay away from you and your sister.”

He did *not*. Where did her father get off, thinking he could interfere in her life? “When?”

“Months ago. When I first started working for him not long after I moved to town.”

Oh, lovely. What would go wrong next? She wanted her life back. “I never should have come home. I should have stayed in New York in my cramped little studio apartment in a city where no one knew who I was.”

“Your dad mentioned you lived there for a while. Do you miss it?”

She thought about it for a minute, but then nodded. “In some ways. In other ways, I grew up here and as much as I hate to admit it, this will always be home.”

The silence stretched between them for a few seconds before Luke took her elbow.

“I’m parked around the back of the office. I’ll give you a ride to your car.” He led her out of the building onto the street, and they walked to where Luke had parked his SUV. “Why did you ever move back to this place?”

“I went to college in the city, and stayed, working as a buyer for a department store. Then, my mother fell and hurt her back, and had to have surgery. Lauren told me she was really in a mess as far as her marriage was concerned, so she asked me to come home and help take care of our mother.”

“That was very nice of you.”

She snorted. “Have you met my mom?”

“No, why?”

Meet her, and you'll understand. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Nice? Ha! It was pure torture. I figure I must have been a horrible person in a past life, and it came back to haunt me in this one. I knew Lauren was just making excuses, but if you knew her the way I do, you’d understand. She’s not the type who could take care of someone after surgery. She can’t even keep plants alive.”

Luke snorted a laugh; then he cupped her cheek gently in his palm for a few seconds before dropping his hand. “So why do you stay if you aren’t happy here?”

“My mom’s still recovering, even though she won’t admit it. She has my dad to help her at home, but she still needs help at work, and he can’t be there for her then. My lease is up in a little less than two months, so I plan on leaving then.”

All traces of humor fled Luke’s face. He stepped in a little closer. “I guess I can understand why you feel the way you do, but I wish I had family problems.”

“No family?” She realized the stupidity of the question the second the words left her mouth. The guy was more than two hundred years old. Of course he had no family. “Um, sorry.”

“It’s fine. I have Vince and Troy, and they’re like brothers to me.” He stepped closer and brushed her hair off the side of her neck. “And I have you, don’t I?”

“I don’t know. In the past couple of days, you’ve given me a lot to think about.”

“Yeah, I know. My life is complicated.”

“And mine’s not?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, it’s not. But still, you could have mentioned the silly little fact that my father signs your goddamned paychecks.”

“I didn’t think it was a big deal. And like he said, we freelance for him. I have other jobs, too. I don’t specifically work for any one person.”

She snorted. “Not a big deal, huh?”

“Does it affect anything, really?”

“Well, obviously.” Why did men have to be so dense? “It changes everything.”

That wicked gleam was back in his eyes, telling her he was about to prove her wrong. Typical man, able to go from zero to sixty in seconds flat. Not that she was complaining. Her

body responded to the slightest touch from his hand, or the gentlest kiss. Even now her nipples pebbled against her bra.

He stepped closer, pushing her into the side of the SUV. “Oh, yeah? You really think it changes *everything*?”

Well, okay, it didn’t change *that*. The way her heart thudded to a stop before it picked up at a breakneck pace. The way every cell in her body cried out for him to touch her. Carrie put her hand on his chest to hold him back but ended up balling his shirt in her fist and pulling him closer instead.

“Okay, so this is still the same. But don’t think I’ve forgiven you yet, buddy.”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Luke leaned in and kissed her, hard and fast. It was a kiss of possession that stole her breath and left her weak-kneed. With his lips, teeth, and tongue, he reminded her of how little things really had changed. She bristled at the thought, and he broke the kiss.

“Believe me, honey. This feeling...it’s mutual.”

The hair on the back of her neck rose. “I thought you said you couldn’t read my mind.”

Luke shrugged. “I can’t. You broadcast your thoughts very completely with your expressions and your body language. I make you nervous. That’s okay. You make me feel the same thing. Get in.”

“What?”

“Get in. We’re taking a drive to Concord to check out Venus. We should have done it sooner, but with everything that’s been happening, the chance hasn’t come up. Oh, and if you ever tell anyone that a woman makes me nervous, I’ll personally see to it that you’re tied up and tortured for nights on end.”

“Torture, huh? Sounds promising.”

He laughed. “Come on. Get in the SUV. It’s getting late, and it’s a few hours’ drive.”

She climbed in. Luke started up the engine and then pulled away from the curb. Carrie turned to him once they’d hit the highway on the way out of town.

“How is it you work for my father and haven’t strangled him yet?”

Luke glanced at her, his expression questioning.

“I mean, he can be an overbearing jerk sometimes.” She loved her father, but she’d known him long enough to understand his alpha dog personality.

“Uh-huh. And I can’t?”

“Good point. Still, why would you want to?”

He shrugged, his gaze back on the road. “It’s a job. It keeps the boredom at bay.”

“Yeah, I suppose two hundred plus years of existence would get a little stale.”

He slid her another look, this one filled with heat. “It was, but then something happened to change everything.”

“What’s that?”

“You.”

He said the word softly, with so much sincerity in his voice that it hit her right in the center of her heart. If she’d been the wimpy sentimental type, she would have cried over his declaration. As it was, she felt a little misty. He put his hand on her thigh and gave it a light squeeze. “Forgive me yet?”

Yes! “What are you, crazy? It’s going to take a lot more than sweet words, buddy.”

He heaved a dramatic sigh. “What can I do to make it up to you?”

“Flowers are good. Not red roses, either; that’s so cliché. I want tiger lilies, orchids, and freesia. Anything unusual. And chocolate always works. Godiva is preferable. It’s the best, don’t you think?” She laughed. “Sorry. Never mind. You wouldn’t know.”

He laughed with her as he continued to drive. There were few other cars on the road, and it gave the area a strange feeling of emptiness. With all that was happening, Carrie was happy to have Luke with her. If she had to have some kind of protection, she was glad it was him and not one of his vampire buddies.

* * * * *

This time she didn’t fall asleep on the ride, but they lapsed into silence. By the time they arrived in Concord at the address Vince had given him for Venus, Luke was glad to get out of the suddenly uncomfortable atmosphere of the SUV. The only problem was, the building they now stood in front of was locked. He glanced in the windows and found the place empty.

“What’s going on?” Carrie asked. “This can’t be the right place.”

The black-and-silver sign hanging over the door said “Venus.” “It is. She’s apparently too fast for us.”

“So this is another dead end?”

“I’m afraid so.” If he didn’t find her soon, Carrie might be the one who ended up dead. The thought made him go cold all over.

“So what do we do now?”

“We give Vince a call, see if he found anything from the other names I gave him, and take it from there. And then we can look around the area and see if I can pick up any signs of her.”

Carrie wrapped her arms around herself. “You gave Vince the list of names?”

He nodded. “We don’t have a lot of time. Look at what’s happened in a few short days. With so many names to go through, I thought we could use a little help.”

She let out a sigh. “You’re probably right. What are we waiting for? No sense hanging around here. I want to go home.”

“Okay. That’s probably best.”

After a quick phone call to Vince, where he told Luke he hadn’t managed to dig up anything new, Luke spent a little time searching the area for signs of Zyra. He could pick up her lingering scent, but the woman was long gone.

They got into the SUV and drove back toward Pine Tree Grove. Luke wanted to say something to comfort her, but he didn’t know what. Just when everything seemed to be going better again, it had to go and start falling apart.

“This is stupid.”

He nearly laughed at her proclamation. “Yeah. I have to agree with you. Don’t worry. It’ll all be over soon.”

One way or another. And if anyone tried to hurt Carrie, they’d have to answer to him. Zyra was strong, but he’d also grown stronger, and he had the motivation of knowing what Carrie was to him on his side. A vampire male would die to protect his mate. He would gladly give up his life for Carrie, if that was what it took. He wouldn’t give anyone the chance to hurt her. And then he’d make sure Zyra paid for what she’d done to Carrie so far.

“Can you stop by the library? I want to pick up my car. I’ll follow you home.”

“That depends. Do you promise you’ll follow me, and not take off on your own?”

“Of course.”

Luke didn’t know if he believed her, but he did as she asked anyway. He didn’t see any other option. If Carrie didn’t have her car, she’d need a way to get to work during the day. Since his own SUV was still out of commission, he couldn’t lend her the one Troy had lent him.

When he pulled into the deserted library parking lot, he noticed something strange as his headlights illuminated the hood of Carrie’s car.

What the hell?

He stopped the SUV.

Carrie figured out the problem before he did. She cleared her throat and spoke in a voice shaky with disbelief. “Um, Luke? There seems to be a *body* on my car.”

Chapter Eighteen

Carrie jumped out before Luke could stop her. He cursed and followed her, not wanting her to touch anything. He shivered when he saw Scott Tremaine sprawled over the hood of her car, his throat slashed from ear to ear, the blood drying on the front of his shirt.

“Oh, isn’t that lovely.” Carrie’s eyes shone with unshed tears, fear, and a good amount of anger. “You know, I’m starting to feel like this is a personal attack. And I hate being scared all the time. Have I mentioned how much this pisses me off?”

Luke frowned at her, taken aback by her strange reaction. “What?”

“I really, really, *really* don’t like having my life disturbed.” She slammed her fist into the side of the car and kicked the tire.

He called the police on his cell phone as he put his free arm around her shoulders. Luckily the police station was right down the block from the library. The cops would be there soon, deal with the problem, and then he could get Carrie home before sunrise. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I feel so out of control. I *hate* that. I just want to hurt someone.”

“Calm down. This isn’t good for you.”

“And finding bodies on the hood of my car is? Now I’m going to have to sell the thing, since I’ll never be able to drive it again.”

Her voice had started to crack. Luke pulled her closer to him and kissed the tip of her head. “Why not? You can get it cleaned up.”

“Ewww.” She grimaced. “Gross. Though I suppose you deal with blood all the time, and it doesn’t bother you.”

The police got there, saving him from defending himself against the verbal attacks he was sure would continue. She was angry, and she had a right to be, but her reaction was far from what he expected.

She had to be in shock, and would probably break down later. He'd have to make sure he was around to catch her when she fell.

While Carrie talked to the police, Luke made a second call, filling Vince in on everything that had happened. His friend showed up a few minutes later, looking disheveled. He walked away from the scene and met Vince a few buildings down from the library, where Vince had parked his car.

"Is everything okay?" he asked Luke.

"As okay as it can be," Carrie answered, coming to stand at Luke's side.

Luke grabbed her hand. "Are you all set here?"

"I am, but my car isn't. They have no idea when I'll get it back, but that's probably just as well. I'd just as soon burn it as drive it again."

Vince shook his head. "Sorry about your car. That sucks."

She shot Luke a glance. "My thoughts exactly. Thanks, though. I appreciate it."

"No problem. I know how tough it must be. If there's anything you need, just let me know, okay?"

Luke clenched his hands into fists and faced Vince with narrowed eyes. "Would you like me to leave the two of you alone?"

Vince laughed. "Relax. I'm not going to make a move on your woman."

"His woman? Are all you vampires like this?"

Vince chuckled. "Like what?"

"So archaic?"

"Those of us who've been around for a while tend to be."

"Figures. Are you as old as he is?"

"Close enough." Vince put his hand on Carrie's shoulder, and Luke felt an almost overwhelming urge to punch his lights out. He barely held himself back. Vince shot him a grin over his shoulder as he helped Carrie back into Luke's SUV. He shut the door and turned to Luke, his playful expression turning grave.

"Zyra's upset that we're looking for Brian, and also about her." He gestured with his chin toward where Carrie sat in the SUV.

Luke splayed his hands in the air. "No shit. Of course she's going to be mad. Part of her still thinks she has some claim to me, even when she's out finding other men to tear down."

"She clearly isn't fooling around. She's trying to get back at you for leaving her. Haven't you noticed that she chooses her playthings in places near where you're living at the time? I don't want to see your mate be next."

“Don’t say that too loudly. Carrie doesn’t know.”

“Would you prefer a more human term? Does girlfriend suit better? Soon-to-be Mrs. Bloodsucker?”

Oh, yeah. That was a hell of a lot better. Good thing Carrie hadn’t heard. She probably would have strangled Vince for his comment. “I need to get her home.”

“You need to not let her leave your side until we find Zyra.”

“I won’t let anything happen to Carrie. She’s tough. You’d be surprised.”

Vince slapped him on the shoulder. “She’d have to be, to put up with you, old man.”

Luke joined in the laughter. Vince knew him too well. He had a feeling his friend and his...Carrie would get along just fine. “Anything new from the names on the list?”

Vince shrugged. “Just a bunch of dead ends. Brian hasn’t been in contact with anyone on the list for a few days, at least, and the few who might have known where he is are dead. None of the contacts know anything more than a little surface information on Zyra, but that doesn’t surprise me. She hides her tracks well, but there has to be something that’ll lead us to her”

“We’ll figure something out.”

“Yeah, but what?”

“I wish I knew. Keep me posted, okay?”

Vince agreed just before he disappeared into the night.

Luke climbed behind the wheel and fixed his gaze on Carrie. Her eyes had glazed over, and she was shaking. He didn’t say a word, because he had yet to figure out what to say to her. Instead he grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze, rubbing his thumb along the inside of her wrist. Carrie didn’t move at first, but finally she leaned in and rested her head on his shoulder. He pressed a soft kiss to her hair. The poor woman had been through so much. He only hoped he could bring an end to this soon.

“I want to go home, Luke.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. She straightened, dislodging her hand. “Can we please just go now?”

“Sure. No problem.” He started the SUV and pulled away, wishing he knew what to say or do to take away her pain.

When they walked up the porch steps and into his place, she still said nothing, but she pulled him down for a kiss. Maybe she needed to forget. Maybe it was all that excess energy she’d spouted off about earlier. Whatever it was, Luke didn’t care. Who was he to argue with a beautiful woman?

Without a word, he took her hand and led her to the bedroom. Her fingers were at his waistband, tugging and pulling at the zipper, but he settled his hands over hers to still her movements. She might not realize it, but she needed gentleness tonight.

Who was he kidding? He was the one who needed gentle. Slow. Luke wanted to touch her everywhere and reassure himself she was okay. He leaned in, taking her lips in a kiss.

Luke spent time learning her. Memorizing everything about her, now that he knew what she was to him. He couldn't say what the immediate future would bring, so for now, he would have to content himself with holding her in his arms. Funny how he hadn't been looking for a mate when he'd proposed they work together. He'd just been looking for a good lead on Brian Samuels's disappearance as well as a woman to warm his bed on a temporary basis. Instead, he'd found so much more.

He tipped her head back and trailed kisses down her throat until he reached the sweet spot where her shoulder met her neck. He bit down there, hard enough to break the skin, and reveled in the taste of the blood trickling from the wound. Luke could get drunk on the flavor of her.

He continued to suckle at her neck until she writhed against him. Her breasts pushed against his chest, and Carrie arched her hips, silently begging him for more. He would be happy to oblige -- soon. A dormant instinct kicked in. Luke drew his lips away from her skin and nipped his finger with his fang. Hoping she wouldn't recoil, he brought the finger to her lips and pressed it inside.

Carrie's eyes widened, but she licked the tip of his finger before sucking the whole digit into her mouth. The swirl of her tongue and the way she drew him in mirrored another act too closely. An act that made his cock twitch against his zipper. Luke pulled his finger away, dangerously close to the edge and not wanting to topple over until he was inside her.

Carrie's fingers flew to her lips, and she blinked at him, almost as if she was in a daze. "I taste blood."

"Um, yeah. Listen, Carrie, I want to protect you; this is one way that can help me do so. A little of my blood will mark you as mine, and other vampires will sense that. Most of them will steer clear, or at least pause before trying to hurt you. My blood, even a small amount, will also strengthen your immune system quite a bit, and you'll heal faster if you're hurt."

Marking her as his mate would give her a little bit of added protection, at least from other preternatural creatures who might mean her harm. Most of them would sense the bond and thus stay away from her.

Luke pulled her in for another kiss, this one longer and deeper than the first. He caught the faint hint of his own blood in her mouth, and something reared up inside him. *His woman.* His mate.

They stripped. Once they were undressed, he cupped her breasts in his palms, his thumbs stroking across the peaked nipples. He leaned down to take one in his mouth, at the same time reaching a hand between her legs to swirl his finger over her clit. Carrie arched into him. Small moans escaped her lips. She'd never been more beautiful to him than she was at this moment. No matter what happened, he would always have this memory. He'd keep it close to his heart.

He pushed two fingers inside her and found her wet and soft. So ready for him. Luke's cock hardened even more, pressing against his stomach. His balls drew up tight. *Fuck*. Forget slow and easy. It wasn't happening tonight. With Carrie, maybe not ever.

Luke pushed her back onto the bed, the need to drive into her stronger than he'd ever felt. It was a burning in his gut, a searing pain slicing through his bloodstream and whipping against his nerves. He'd heard true mating was like this, but he'd never experienced it himself. His control slipping by the second, he fitted himself between her thighs and thrust into her waiting pussy.

Carrie cried out. Her nails dug into his back, prodding him to thrust harder. His strokes were wild. Uncontrolled. Carrie seemed to be in a similar situation. Already she was writhing beneath him, panting and moaning and calling out his name. He leaned in to lick a bead of sweat off her cheek and reveled in the salty essence of his woman.

He raised her hips, changing the angle of his thrusts, and pushed harder inside her. It wasn't enough. Luke needed to be closer. To crawl inside her skin -- and even that wouldn't be close enough.

Carrie cried out, and then the cry turned into a scream as she came, her muscles clenching around him. The feel of it was enough to drive him over the edge. When the orgasm washed over him, her name was on his lips.

When it was over, Carrie cuddled against his side, and he stroked her back. She kissed him gently on the chest and the cheek.

"How are you holding up?" he asked her for what felt like the millionth time since they'd met. He should have warned her from the start. Being around him could be hazardous to her health. But now, at least, she'd be protected.

"I think I'm doing okay, considering. Remember, I'm really good at blocking anything I don't like from my mind. And it helps, too, to have you around to work off all this nervous energy."

She said that now, but what would she say when she learned the truth? With his feeding tonight, and with the drops of his blood he'd fed her, he'd claimed her as his mate. He was bound to her. Once she turned -- *if* she chose to turn when he offered her the option -- she'd be bound to him, too.

Chapter Nineteen

Carrie woke the next morning deliciously sore in all the right places. Luke had done things to her the night before she'd only dreamed about. And they had been magical.

The only problem with magical was it always wore off. She'd woken up next to a man who was, for all intents and purposes, dead to the world. She could wake him with a little bit of effort, but knowing how grumpy he was when his beauty sleep was disturbed, she thought better of it. She sighed and rolled over, trying to go back to sleep, but it was no use.

And then her cell phone rang. She was starting to sense a pattern here.

Not wanting to deal with Mr. Grumpy and still trying to block out the gory present she'd found on her car, she found her phone on the floor by her pile of clothes and flipped it open. "Yes?"

"Carrie Ann, where are you?"

She checked the time on the phone. Eleven a.m.? She was supposed to have been at work three hours ago! "I am so sorry, Mom. I'll be there in just a few minutes."

"No. That isn't necessary."

"What?"

"You have been very unreliable lately, and I know you don't like the job. I'll save you the trouble of quitting and let you go."

She sat back against the headboard and frowned. Had her mother really just fired her?

Whatever had happened to family loyalty?

"What are you talking about?"

Sarah heaved a sigh. "Look, Carrie. I know you aren't happy here. Go out, and chase your dreams. You deserve it."

What? This, coming from the woman who had always complained about Carrie's daydreaming -- the woman who said countless times during Carrie's childhood that she needed to stop dreaming and start thinking about a stable career? "Let me get this straight. All my life you and Dad have been telling me to get my head out of the clouds, and now you *want* me to follow my dreams? What is this all about?"

"It's about you taking care of *you* for once. How are you holding up?"

She sighed. Had Luke done something to her mother like he had to her father? "I'm fine, Mom. Really. You just caught me by surprise."

"I'm talking about the situation with your sister's husband."

"You know about that?"

"Yes. Lauren told me earlier when I spoke with her. And I know about your house and car. News travels fast around here."

Like she didn't know that. Carrie wrinkled her nose. "I'm fine."

"And you have that neighbor of yours for protection?"

She snorted. "You've been talking to Dad, huh?"

"I spoke with your father on the subject, yes."

"You two have nothing to worry about. I can take care of myself, and I'm in very good hands with Luke." *Very, very good hands.* What the man could do to her with just a touch...

"I'm not so sure I like you spending time with someone like him."

"Someone like him" could mean many things. She chose to go with the whole bad boy thing rather than assume her mother knew about Luke's little sunlight issue. "He's harmless, Mom. Trust me."

"I'm not so sure. But you're going to do what you want to do anyway. You always have."

Carrie smiled at that. How many times had she heard that over the years? "I know that, deep down, Luke is a great guy."

Mostly.

"Okay. If you say so, I'll have to take you at your word. Be careful, Carrie."

"I always am."

After Carrie disconnected, she went down the hall to the kitchen to find something to eat. And then she remembered she was in Luke's house, and the only food in the house was vampire snacks. Not her idea of a nourishing meal. She dressed and got ready to head next door for food -- if she had anything -- when she noticed Luke's keys sitting on the bedside table. She didn't have her car, but what would it hurt to borrow the SUV he in turn had borrowed from Troy? It would only be a quick run to town to grab something to eat. Everything in her fridge was likely spoiled, anyway. It had been a few days since she'd been

home long enough to check. She also wanted to pay a visit to her father, since she hadn't had the chance to talk with him the last time she'd stopped by his office.

She climbed into the SUV -- or struggled, really -- and after adjusting the seat and mirrors, started the vehicle. She backed out of the driveway without hitting anything and gave herself a mental pat on the back. It was a big SUV but not such a bad vehicle to drive.

Carrie headed downtown and stopped at her favorite donut shop for something sweet for breakfast, even though it was closing in on lunch time. Being with Luke was playing havoc with her sleep schedule.

She got a couple of chocolate donuts -- a girl had to keep her strength up after another night of amazing sex -- and a large coffee. Then she sat at one of the outdoor tables.

And that was when she saw him.

Brian.

He stood across the street, nearly hidden in the shadows of the bank, smoking a cigarette and watching her watch the others. When he saw her swing her gaze to him, he smiled, gave her a quick, taunting wave, and walked away.

She stood, all thoughts of caffeine and sustenance gone, and raced after him. She rushed off toward the SUV, and then saw Brian get into a car across the street and a block down. She started the SUV and took off after him, hoping to catch him.

She turned a corner too sharply, and the SUV came within inches of taking out a street sign. Carrie let out a groan. She needed to be careful, or Luke was going to kill her.

As if fate had decided to play a joke on her, a few seconds later she grazed the side of a tree. She heard a sickening crunch, but chose to ignore the sound. She was closing in on Brian. She was almost there. And then he and his little sports car slipped around a turn she couldn't make; she had to slam on her breaks to keep from barreling into the side of the Pine Tree Grove Police Department. Carrie sat there a few seconds, sucking in deep breaths and trying to calm her racing heart. She'd lost him.

"Damn it." If she'd had her trusty little hatchback, Brian Samuels would be toast.

Backing away from the old brick building, she pulled alongside the street, shut the borrowed SUV off, and got out to survey the damage to the vehicle. It wasn't bad, really. If Luke didn't notice the broken headlight, she'd be all set.

Bull.

Luke was going to *kill* her. She might as well pick out her burial plot now and save him the trouble.

Still a little shaky, Carrie got back in the SUV, drove to her father's office, and parked in front. She jumped out and ran inside.

"Morning, Mary," she said to his secretary. "Is he in?"

"Hi, there. He sure is. Go on ahead."

Carrie stepped into her father's office. He hung up the phone he'd been holding when he saw her. "Hi, Carrie. What can I do for you?"

She decided to get right to the point. "Why is it you felt the need to hire a private investigator?"

Max sighed and leaned back in his chair. "It's complicated."

"And me, of the simple mind, couldn't understand? I just want to know why you felt it necessary to hire Luke."

"Someone was stealing money from the company. I had a pretty good idea who it was, but I didn't want to make accusations without knowing the facts."

Suddenly, everything clicked into place. The breath left Carrie's lungs in a whoosh. "Brian."

"Yes. Luke had just delivered the confirmation to me when Brian disappeared."

Yet another thing Luke had conveniently decided not to tell her. He'd be lucky if she didn't pull a Lorena Bobbitt on him one of these mornings. "Did you contact the police?"

"Yes. But they haven't been able to find him."

So the police were involved. "You don't trust the police to find him?"

"I do, but it never hurts to keep your options open."

Options being Luke. Of course. Why hadn't she seen this sooner? Luke was apparently involved a lot more than he wanted to admit. She frowned.

"Interesting. You do know he's a vampire, right?"

Max laughed, albeit somewhat nervously. "Yes, that fact has been brought to my attention."

"And it doesn't make you nervous?"

"Of course it does." He gave her a distressed look. "It makes me even more anxious knowing you're mixed up with the guy."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know you can."

He sounded so sincere, she almost believed him. What was it about her parents lately? When had they had personality transplants? Carrie glanced down and saw the folder on her father's desk marked Mary Ellen Smith. She recognized the name, but from where? She blinked. From Brian's list. Red flags went off everywhere in her head. "Hey, Dad, who is Mary Ellen Smith?"

"A widow we just built a summer house for out on the coast."

Why did she doubt that? "A widow? How old are we talking here?"

He shrugged. "In her late forties, early fifties, I assume. Though she looked a little younger. She had a lot of money and wanted a house built where she could come and visit during the summers."

“Did you notice anything strange about her? Was she involved with Brian?”

“No, and she wouldn’t have been. She told me she teaches first grade at a parochial school.”

Yeah, right. Carrie would be willing to bet the only thing she’d ever taught anyone was how to drink blood. “I think this might be important. Can I get her address to take back to Luke?”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because Luke has been looking for a woman he thinks Brian took off with, and I have a suspicion Mary Ellen Smith is who he’s been trying to find. Please. I really need this.”

He hesitated so long she thought he’d say no, but eventually he gave in and wrote it down on a scrap of paper he handed to her.

“I’ve got to go, Dad. I’ll talk to you later.”

Folding the piece of paper and stuffing it into her pocket, Carrie rushed out of the office without waiting for a reply.

Was the widow Zyra? Carrie had a funny feeling she was.

Carrie drove home, having a much better handle on the SUV now. She went into her own place and tried to lie down in bed to get a few hours’ rest, but keeping her body still wasn’t even an option. Mary Ellen Smith. The lead they’d been waiting for. She had to tell Luke. Couldn’t stand to wait much longer. She took a quick shower, dried her hair, and went to return Luke’s keys.

She let herself in with the house key on Luke’s key ring, careful to close the door quietly behind her. Her original intention had been to slip back into bed with him and pray he hadn’t noticed she’d been gone, but all her tossing and turning would have awakened him.

Carrie set the keys on the counter and made her way through the semi-darkness created by the drawn shades to the living room. She could watch TV until he got out of bed. At least it would give her something to occupy her racing mind.

She flipped on the light. And there was Luke, sitting on the couch, looking wide awake and ready to kill.

Oh, boy.

She was in so much trouble now.

Chapter Twenty

Luke glared at Carrie, still disbelieving that she'd gone anywhere. When he'd noticed his keys missing, he'd been *pissed*. She was okay, unharmed, so he skipped the formalities. "Just tell me you didn't crack up the SUV."

He didn't like her pause. Not at all. She smiled sheepishly. "Well, I didn't *crack up* the SUV."

Good.

"Just the right headlight."

He narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"You heard me. It's no big deal. It isn't even your SUV. It's the one you borrowed. Troy can fix things like that, right?"

"I should have reported the SUV stolen when I found the keys missing."

That got her attention. Carrie's eyes widened, and her lips parted. "You wouldn't have done that."

"How do you know?" The way he was feeling right now, if she hadn't shown up in another few minutes, he would have called the cops. At least they would have been able to find her. As it was still daylight, his own hands had been tied. Talk about being worried sick.

"Um, what about the sunlight? You'd have to open the door for the police."

She had him there.

Then again, there were ways around his inability to tolerate the sun. "I could stand behind the door and invite them inside."

"I'm really sorry. Tell Troy I'll pay for all the damages. If it helps, I have a peace offering," Carrie told him. "Two, actually."

"And they are...?"

“First, when I was downtown having breakfast, or lunch, I saw Brian.”

“You *what?*” He sat up a little straighter now. She couldn’t have said what he thought she had.

“That’s when I *accidentally* brushed a tree with the SUV. I was trying to chase him.”

“But you lost him.”

She frowned. “Well, obviously. Anyway, I went to visit my father -- I’m mad at you again, by the way. You knew Brian was embezzling. Anyway, Dad told me about a woman his company just finished building a summer house for. Her name is Mary Ellen Smith, and here is her address.” She handed him a slip of yellow-lined paper.

“What does this mean to me?”

“Call it a hunch, but I think Mary Ellen Smith is Zyra. I mean, just think about the name. How fake could you get?”

She might have a point there. Luke grudgingly nodded. “I’ll have to check this out tonight.”

“You mean *we* will.”

“No. I mean me. You’re going to stay with Troy while Vince and I do some investigating.”

“Wanna bet?” Carrie put her hands on her hips. “You are *not* leaving me behind with him. Why can’t I stay with Vince?”

Not likely. “Because you asked. That shows me right there it would be a terrible idea.”

“Why?”

“Because. That’s why.”

She smiled. “Somebody’s jealous.”

“Am not.” *Liar*. “I just don’t think it would be a good idea for you to come with me to find Zyra.”

“Why not?”

Because she’ll sense you’re my mate, and then she’ll most likely try to kill you. It was well past time someone put the mental case out of her misery. “Because she’ll try to hurt you. She’s angry that I left her. I thought she would have gotten over it by now, since it’s been so many decades since I walked away, but she’s not one to let things go. She’s good at holding grudges, and with immortals, that quality is never a good one to have.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Not when it comes to her.”

“What would it take to destroy her? Does a stake through the heart really work?”

He nodded. “But I doubt she’d let you get close enough. It would take someone with a lot of speed and strength to sneak up on her.”

“What if she’s not there? What if she comes here when you’re gone?” Carrie shuddered. “I’d feel safer with you than here with someone I barely know.”

She would never let this go, and she was just stubborn enough -- and cute enough -- to convince Troy to take her to this Mary Ellen’s place. Instead of arguing any further despite knowing that it was a huge mistake, Luke relented. “Fine. Against my better judgment, and because I know you’ll follow anyway, you can tag along. But you stay out of our way and out of sight. Got that?”

The smile she shot him was nothing short of brilliant -- and triumphant. “Okay.”

Carrie might have said “okay,” but he didn’t believe she meant it for a second.

* * * * *

Later that night they stood in front of Mary Ellen Smith’s summer house. The entire place was dark, making Luke nervous. Why did he get the feeling this was some kind of elaborate trap?

He pulled Carrie closer to his side when Vince started breathing down her neck. Even though he’d already stamped her with his possession, he didn’t entirely trust anyone with the woman he’d claimed.

They looked in the windows and tried to find any signs of life, but saw nothing. Zyra had been here recently, if she wasn’t hiding somewhere inside tonight. Luke could sense her everywhere.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Vince asked.

Carrie nodded. “I know it is. I have this gut feeling.”

“Are your instincts usually right?” Vince asked.

She nodded.

“Well, I think they failed you when you got involved with Luke.”

She laughed. “No, I really don’t think they did.”

Luke liked the sound of that.

They walked around to the front porch and had started to peer in through the glass panes in the door when the door swung open.

Zyra stood before them, wearing black vinyl from head to toe -- and a big grin on her face.

They all stared at her.

Vince shook his head.

Zyra grinned. “Well, look at this. Four for the price of one.”

Definitely a trap. She’d been expecting them. All of this had been to draw them there, but why? Luke pushed Carrie behind him. “What the hell do you think you’ve been doing?”

She clicked her tongue. "I think you should come in so we can talk about this."

In all the years that had passed, she hadn't changed a bit. Still beautiful. Still completely insane. "No fucking way." He lunged, grabbing her arm and pinning her back to the side of the building. Luke leaned in close, making sure she understood he meant business. Zyra was strong, but he was stronger. After several centuries, the few years she had on him made no difference, and even as a human he hadn't been a small man. If all things had been normal, they might have been equally matched, but given her mental state, he could take her down, though she'd put up a good fight. "Where's Brian Samuels?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "What did you do to him?" He caught a sliver of fear in her eyes, but it was gone within seconds, replaced by the intense, familiar loathing he'd seen so many times.

"Nothing. He came with me of his own free will." Zyra continued. "I offered him what he needed. Money. Brian has a gambling problem. That simpering wife of his couldn't give him enough money to cover his debts, but I could. I met him when I was meeting with Max Holiday about building this house, and we...hit it off. Once I offered to help him with his money problems, he was hooked. Getting you back for hurting me is an unexpected bonus." She looked over at Carrie. "I was able to draw your woman here, wasn't I?" She looked back at Luke, contempt written all over her face. "Now you can watch while I have a little fun with her.

"Before I kill her."

In an unexpected burst of strength, Zyra shoved him away and grabbed Carrie, dragging her into the house and slamming the door.

* * * * *

Carrie's heart lurched into her throat and lodged there, making breathing nearly impossible. Zyra. Her palms started to sweat, and a ball of dread settled in her stomach. So much for taking care of this woman herself. Where Luke was in control most of the time, sometimes freakishly so, Zyra seemed to be teetering on the edge of the abyss.

She dropped Carrie to the carpet in the dark living room with an unceremonious thump. "You had to get in the way, didn't you?" the crazy vampire spat.

Not willing to let the other woman see any weaknesses, Carrie pushed herself up from the floor and brushed her damp palms down her thighs. She might be shaking on the inside, but that didn't mean she had to show it. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I think she's talking about me," a voice spoke from behind her.

Carrie spun. Brian stood in the doorway to the living room, leaning against the frame. The expression on his face was casual, but the knife in his hand was anything but. He walked over to her, whistling and acting very un-Brian like.

He brandished the knife in front of her. "Did Lauren put you up to this?"

She shrugged. "Does it really matter?"

"I guess not." He lunged at her then, knife held high over his head. An instinct Carrie didn't even know she had kicked in, and she swooped her arm through the air, smacking Brian's wrist and sending the knife flying across the room. Without thinking about it, Carrie brought her leg up and kicked him in the stomach hard enough to knock him on his ass. He gaped up at her, speechless and unmoving.

Shit. Had she really just done that? Carrie allowed herself a silent cheer before dragging her thoughts back to the present situation. Zyra. Carrie let out a breath. Where the hell was Luke when she needed him?

As if on cue, the front door burst open, and Luke and Vince rushed into the room. They were so focused on dragging Brian up off the floor that they didn't seem to notice Zyra standing in the shadows of the corner.

The female vampire's wicked smile made Carrie narrow her eyes. This was the woman who'd disrupted her life. The woman who had possibly killed people. Anger bypassed her fear. Something inside her snapped, filling Carrie with a white-hot fury she'd never known before. She would probably die, but she had to at least try to save her own life. Luke had said a stake through the heart would kill a vampire. She didn't have a stake, but before they'd gotten out of the car, she'd grabbed something out of her purse she hoped would work equally well -- one of the oversized, thick pencils her mother kept stocked in the children's room of the library. If Carrie could distract Zyra long enough, and if she got the angle of the pencil just right, she might have a small chance at destroying the woman who'd been causing problems for so long.

Carrie's hands clenched into fists, and she took a step forward. No way was she letting Zyra get away with all of that.

Seething, feeling a little like she was floating outside her skin, Carrie stalked over to the other woman and pointed her finger in the vampire's face.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Did you think it was okay to pull all this shit? Did you really think I'd let you get away with it?"

Zyra laughed, and the sound sent a chill through Carrie. "Did *you* really think I would let you step in and try to ruin everything I've worked so hard for?"

"If you're talking about Brian, believe me, he isn't worth your time. You could do so much better."

Zyra snorted. She seemed to relax a little, and Carrie let out a breath. All she needed to do was get the woman off guard, and everything would work out fine. Another few seconds and a little more banter to make Zyra think Carrie was a dim-witted blonde.

And then Luke had to go and ruin it by shouting her name and rushing toward them.

Zyra, apparently feeling threatened again, grabbed Carrie by the hair and started to lift her off the ground. Her fingers dug into Carrie's neck, cutting off her air supply and bruising tender skin. Carrie kicked her feet, striking Zyra in the shin. Zyra dropped her with a

surprised grunt, and Carrie knew the time had come. Call it destiny or fate. Hell, whatever it was, she felt like she'd been living for this moment all her life. Carrie plucked the sharpened pencil from her bun and struck out, slamming it into Zyra's chest.

At first, it didn't seem like anything was happening, and Carrie started to panic. Bile rose in her throat, and she couldn't draw a full breath. Her vision grayed at the edges. So this was it, huh? The moment her life was supposed to pass before her eyes. Funny, but nothing was flashing. In fact, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion.

And then it happened. Zyra's mouth opened in an ungodly wail. She doubled over, her hands covering her head, her body thrashing from side to side. And then her body burst into flames. Carrie was vaguely aware of Luke's hands on her arms, dragging her back against his chest, but she was too caught up in the sight before her to acknowledge him. She'd done it. She'd staked a dangerous vampire. The thought made her a little queasy.

"Are you hurt?" Luke asked against her ear.

Carrie, watching as the flames quickly died down and left nothing but a pile of dust, shook her head.

"Talk to me," Luke continued. "Let me hear your voice. I want to make sure."

"I'm fine." This time, her whole body trembled, a surreal feeling settling over her. Just a few seconds ago, there had been a woman standing in front of her. Said woman had now been reduced to a pile of smoking, stinking ash.

"Good. Jesus, Carrie. What did you stake her with?"

"A pencil." A giggle bubbled up in Carrie's chest and burst from her throat. After this night, she was going to need an extended stay at the nearest mental health facility. "And relax. No need to worry. Everything is okay."

Except that I think I'm falling apart at the seams.

Luke shook her shoulders gently before he turned her around, draping one arm over her shoulder. "Of course I was worried about you. You're my woman. My mate."

Carrie shrugged off Luke's arm. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"He's talking about the little ceremony where you drank each other's blood, and you became his life partner," Vince chimed in with a laugh. "Or didn't he explain to you what was going on?"

A wave of icy coldness washed over her. This had to be some kind of joke. "He didn't tell me anything. I have no idea what ceremony you're talking about. I didn't drink any..."

Her voice trailed off as a memory raced through her mind. Luke, pricking his own finger and bringing it to her mouth. Slipping it inside. Why hadn't she protested? It was almost like she'd been under a spell.

Carrie spun on him, hands on her hips, her face flaming. She would never forgive him for as long as she lived. "Why would you do something like that without asking me first?"

“I explained this to you when you drank my blood. I thought you understood. You didn’t tell me to stop.” Luke shrugged, apparently trying for casual when he was clearly anything but. He looked ready to spit nails, and she could only assume his anger was directed at Vince for letting his secret slip. “Vampires don’t marry. We mate. For life.”

“I didn’t realize this was a forever sort of thing. I thought...hell, I don’t know what I thought.” She stalked past him, heading for the door and slipping her cell phone out of her pocket as she went. “In case you didn’t notice, I’m not a vampire. I’m a fucking human!”

Luke caught up with her in a few strides and blocked her exit. “Don’t stomp away. Maybe I wasn’t clear about what was happening, but at the time you didn’t seem to have any objections.”

Carrie snorted. Wasn’t that the understatement to end all understatements? “No shit you weren’t clear. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to call 9-1-1.”

She pushed past him out the door and stepped onto the front porch where she could finally breathe again without inhaling the stink of dead vampire -- and the live vampire she would have staked if she’d had an extra pencil.

Chapter Twenty-One

Luke shoved the last pair of jeans into his duffel bag and zipped the black canvas shut. The movers he'd hired would arrive later that day to pack the rest of his things and ship them to a storage facility until he found a new place to live. He'd worn out his welcome in Pine Tree Grove. At least as far as Carrie was concerned. Max had offered him a full-time job. He couldn't take it, though. It would mean being close to Carrie way too often.

The past three weeks since she'd killed Zyra had been hell on him. Brian had confessed to the embezzlement as well as the two murders. Luke wasn't sure if he'd really killed the men, but Brian had been half insane since watching Carrie stake his lover. According to Troy, who had a source at the police department, Brian spent most of his time babbling incoherently about pencils turning women into ash. Lauren wouldn't likely ever see her money again, but at least the investigation had come to a satisfying end.

His personal life was another story. Carrie -- Luke's woman -- wouldn't speak to him or see him. Luke needed to explain, but she refused to give him the chance. So he'd settled for a letter and slipped it under her door a week ago. He'd explained again why he'd made her his. Luke had even done something he'd promised himself he would never do. He'd begged forgiveness. Told her he loved her. At the time, he'd thought that that had to count for something, but she hadn't come to find him, so she obviously didn't feel the same way.

Life mate or not, it was time for him to go. Luke knew when he wasn't wanted.

He slung the bag over his shoulder and turned, but when he got a good look at the doorway, the duffel fell to the floor. Carrie stood there, an uncertain look on her face, her fingers in the front pockets of her jeans. Her gaze fell to the duffel bag, then met his gaze.

"Going somewhere?" she asked, her tone sarcastic and more than a little hurt.

"Yeah. I'm moving out."

“To where?”

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Haven’t decided yet. Who knows?”

She walked into the room and slammed the door shut behind her. “And you were just going to go without saying good-bye.”

It wasn’t a question, so he didn’t bother to answer. Instead, Luke bent to pick up his bag from the ground. “Whatever you think of me right now, always remember I love you. Nothing can ever change that.”

He would always be joined with her, at least emotionally. It would hurt to walk away from her, but it would kill him even more to stay. She would never understand, and the pain was a physical ache that grew worse whenever she was near. He couldn’t touch her. Couldn’t talk to her or make love to her. It was slowly eating him up inside. Luke just hoped a little distance would help rather than make the pain grow worse.

“I love you, too,” she said, so softly he had to strain to hear. For the first time since Zyra’s death, hope sparked inside him.

“You do?”

“Yes. I read your letter. I’m still angry, but I think I can forgive you in time. Luke, I don’t want you to leave.”

The breath rushed from his lungs in a whoosh. “Are you sure about that?”

Carrie nodded. She stepped closer and took the bag out of his hand. “Vince called me. He and I had a good, long talk. He explained the life mate concept to me. He also told me what it would take for us to be together forever. I would have to let you turn me into a vampire. I have to confess, the idea of swapping huge amounts of blood with you makes me a little queasy. The whole thing’s a little strange, but I have to tell you that the thought of not having you in my life is tearing me in two. Please stay. I know it’ll take time, and I know things are going to be a mess for a while, but we can work this out.”

He’d never heard a more appealing idea. Relief flooded him. She was still pissed and probably would be for a good long time, but at least he had a chance.

A slow smile spread over Luke’s face. He drew her in for a kiss that stirred every part of his body. “Of course we can. Sweetheart, we have all the time in the world.”

She quirked her brows. “This doesn’t mean I forgive you yet. You know that, right?”

“I didn’t expect you to forgive me at all.”

“I’ll get there. But until I do, don’t you dare bug me about turning into a bloodsucker, okay? When I decide to let you do that to me, I’ll make the decision on my own time.”

His smile grew. She'd said "when," not "if." "Whatever you say."

Finally she returned his smile. "If you remember that phrase and use it often, I think we're going to get along just fine."

 THE END 

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Born in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Elisa Adams has lived most of her life on the East Coast. Formerly a nursing assistant and phlebotomist, writing has been a longtime hobby. Now a full time writer, she lives on the New Hampshire border with her three children. Visit Elisa's website at <http://www.elisaadams.com>.