



THE WOLVES DEN

By

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Prologue

I tensed, slowly lowering my sunglasses as a strong rift in the room brought my attention to the entrance of the bar. Peeking over the rim of the glasses, I stared eagerly at the bulky new stranger who entered the bar. He had a strong aura but he wasn't the one I was seeking. I exhaled, a little relieved but also disappointed. Taking a sip of my drink, I slipped my shades back onto my face. At one time, I would have been offended if someone wore sunglasses inside a building, but now I understood the practicality of hiding what humans thought was unnatural. For fear of revealing my supernatural state, I left the shades in place, covering the abnormal glow of my eyes that only increased with my mounting excitement.

My legs dangled off the floor, swinging side to side as I stared absently out the window. The leather pants I wore creaked with the motion of my legs. I enjoyed the feel of soft leather against my bare skin. Even the smell of leather appealed to my senses. I get strange looks because I wear a lot of leather, but I'd like to think it's more practical than weird. The flexible material fit like a glove and added protection against scrapes and cuts that would attract unwanted attention from my enemies.

My hand slipped inside my jacket and thumbed my weapon anxiously. Every nerve in my body tingled with anticipation, almost to the point of pain, as I sat and waited. I gazed at the setting sun's bright orange and red light sneaking through the curtains. Only moments from now, I would know the identity of my informant. He had been feeding me information on the werewolves' locations for over a week, but every time I got close to Adeem, someone interfered.

I adjusted the sunglasses as the last splash of sunlight hit my face, squinting at the light despite my shades. Wearing them served a dual purpose. Not only did they enhance the overall coolness effect, but also effectively blocked the sun's rays. Some would call me lucky that as a vampire I didn't fear the sun. Of course, others call me cursed because of my condition. A vampire killed my mother while I was unborn and alive inside her womb. I found out only recently that her transformation left both vampire DNA and human DNA in my system. Now both strands were permanently seared together as one. I have the immunities that being a human provides and various powers granted to vampires. I'd like to think I am more human than vampire, but it seems that, lately I could feel my humanity slowly slip away.

According to vampire prophecy, I was the one who would bring peace to the earth and save the world from damnation. Imagine that, little ole me, saving the world. Well I guess I wasn't that little, at 5'11" I could best most men, and now my superhuman strength allowed me to do just that. Protecting people was my business and I was good at it, but now minor injuries were a thing of the past. As the energy surged through my body the realization that killing me would be more difficult each passing day hit me. Saving the world seemed a little crazy, even to me. I chuckled at the thought and then remembered how seriously Siön Baptiste had taken the prophecies that he said I would fulfill someday. He felt that protecting me was more important than his own well being. Siön Baptiste, the vampire, the man who changed my life forever.

My knuckles clenched, nails dug into my skin as I thought back to the moment I drank Siön Baptiste's blood. That one instant in time changed my life forever. When his blood mingled with mine, I became much more than just a vampire. If I went by Siön Baptiste's interpretation

of the prophecies, I would eventually be the most powerful vampire of all time. However, with power came a price and that price might be too much to bear. This increased power had not only changed me, but now I was a beacon, attracting more than just vampires. Sometimes I had to wonder if all this strength and power was worth losing my human soul. Some experts argued that vampires were still alive and had souls. My whole take on it was still up in the air.

I took a deep breath and watched the crowd around me. If they knew what I was and what I would become, they would run for their lives. Pain brought me back from my drifting thoughts. Opening my hands slowly, I examined the nail marks as they began to seep blood. As quickly as the bleeding began, it stopped. The cuts healed right before my very eyes. I fought every primal instinct not to lick the wound and savor the sweet, metallic taste of my own blood.

I growled under my breath, placing my palms down, fangs lengthening. "Out of sight, out of mind. Out of sight, out of mind," I repeated quietly. My breathing slowed, as did the hunger. The needle-sharp fangs slowly withdrew. A warm sensation shot down my arm, pooled in my hands and pulsed and tingled lightly. I looked around the room and then carefully turned my palms up, watching in horror as the blood evaporated and disappeared. "How did I do that?" I asked myself.

Siön Baptiste had warned me that my powers would increase over time. I could control weaker minds or probe into the thoughts of unguarded minds. That feat would be harder to do if I came up against a strong Lycan or vampire. I practiced on my cats. If I could only get them to clean out the kitty litter or use the toilet, I would feel like I'd accomplished something significant. Vampires could also control the elements. Some, with a mere thought, could create a flame or move water and earth. Other stronger, older vampires could become invisible or travel through time. The books Sevastian and Siön Baptiste gave me to read were fascinating. There was still so much more to learn about what I could or could not do. Only time would tell just how powerful I would become. Week three of becoming a vampire and already strange, unusual things happened on a daily basis. Things I couldn't control or did without knowledge of how and why. Maybe he was right and I needed his help after all. Only time would tell. For tonight, I concentrated on the task at hand. Find Adeem.

I had one motivation to be here tonight, the creatures I hated most in the world, the Lycans. They saw me as a threat and Adeem was behind my kidnapping. He'd forced Tyler to infect me with the Lycan's disease by threatening Tyler's family. Now all I wanted was for every werewolf involved with my abduction to die. Revenge and the hatred for the monsters that tore my body apart, were my major incentives to keep the search for Adeem alive.

My eyes were watering from the smoke-filled room, but even that would not spoil my excitement. The anticipation of finally finding the creature ultimately responsible for infecting me with the Lycan's disease was enough motivation to sit in this stinky bar all night. I inhaled and exhaled, slowing my body's eagerness for of what was to come.

The Red Moon Bar wasn't a place I'd normally visit, but if I wanted to find Adeem I had no choice. An informant, who chose to stay unnamed, recommended contacting the owner. After paying a pretty penny to both the informant and the owner of the bar, I found out that Adeem visited quite frequently. The bar owner was an immortal and would look the other way, coughing it up to pack business. My informant finally agreed to meet in person to tell me where to locate Adeem. I was prepared to do whatever it took to make him to talk, searching for over two weeks for a clue to the whereabouts of Tyler. He'd been forced to infect me by Adeem's hand.

Unfortunately, nobody in the surrounding clans wanted to mess with Adeem. My research showed him as a cruel leader who beat down his pack and led recklessly. Despite his

obvious flaws as a leader, nobody would spill the beans, but I knew he was the key to locating Tyler. Now all I had to do was wait for him to arrive, and hope that I could track down him and Ty before the next full moon.

I played robotically with my drink, unable to stomach its contents because of nerves. Only taking a sip now and then to fit in with the crowd. The restless energy I felt was only enhanced by my hunger for blood. I refused to feed off humans as if they were cattle. Siön Baptiste had warned me that I could survive for only so long before my body would begin to devour muscle and I'd weaken. If I fed while in the weakened state, the person I chose to feed from would probably not survive. I pushed the thought of food and my hunger to the back of my mind. I had to develop control over my feelings.

Rolling my shoulders, hunger for blood enhanced the restless energy I felt. Human food just didn't satisfy my cravings lately. Fidgeting nervously in my seat, my foot began to tap uncontrollably against the stool. The entire counter was shaking with the force of my motion. If only I could get my hands on that grimy scum Adeem ... No telling what I'd do to him but taking a bite out of crime would have a whole new meaning. Laughing silently, I let the air rush out of my lungs that I hadn't realized I was holding.

Finally, after weeks of searching, I'd found someone in the Lycan clans willing to talk about Adeem's whereabouts. Everyone was so closemouthed because of the fear they held for Adeem. This would all change tonight. Lifting and cocking my head to one side, my neck popped loudly as the tension freed in a loud crack. All the anxiety built up was slowly released as I flexed and moved my body. The strain gathered in my back started to disappear as I twisted and turned in my seat. If my bones themselves were welded in place from waiting, I would continue to wait as long as it took to have my revenge. I owed it to the old man who saved my life three weeks ago from the werewolf attack. I owed it to Trevor, my best friend who was killed. I owed it to Siön Baptiste for his near death and torture. I owed it to myself. My motto since my rebirth as a vampire was "I don't get mad, I get even."

I grabbed the waiter's arm as she passed. "Are you sure the informant is coming tonight?"

She leaned into me, whispering in my ear. "Yes, he comes in like clockwork. He is never late." Shrugging free from my hold, she scooted off to help wrestle a rowdy patron.

I stood slowly and stretched my stiff body. Adrenaline has a way of tensing up muscles, and if you don't keep it in check, you can build up lactic acid. The things you learn while sitting in a doctor's office reading medical magazines. I turned and headed to use the restroom, wanting to concentrate on the task at hand and not my bladder. Yes, even vampires use the bathroom. Blood is filled with nutrients, waste and mostly water. Vampires need to dispel the extra water and waste that is found in blood.

The answers were all in my little book, *Adjusting to Your New You* by some famous vampire author in Pennsylvania. My second favorite new read was *Vampire Myths*. People tended to believe what they saw in movies. I know I did, but now that I've become a vampire, things are quite different then they first appeared. It didn't help that since vampires and werewolves came out of the closet, humans were doing whatever it took to become immortal. Some groups even went as far as to kidnap vampires and drain them dry, using their blood in various experiments. Pharmaceutical companies were now working on developing synthetic blood banks. The world has changed in the last fifteen years, and frankly, I wasn't sure I liked all the changes. Some states were still reluctant to accept this change. Voting rights and benefits were huge issues these days. Some countries maintained the old ways and killed vampires on

sight. They had executioners for hire. That was a scary thought. Others have developed safe havens for whole vampire and werewolf communities. The world was indeed changing and I was right smack dab in the middle of it all.

As I grabbed the bar, a powerful probe seeped into the back of the bar slamming into my mind. I steadied myself, swayed, as the energy seemed to sift through the air, pulsing and vibrating. Whoever it was, they tried to tear down the barrier I'd erected around my thoughts. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as the strong wave of magic moved throughout the bar. Scanning the people inside, I slipped my jacket on. The ability to read a thought was not a simple trick that just any feebleminded immortal would know. He must be a clan leader, and I only knew of one in New Orleans.

"This is no informant...." I growled, blocking the mind probe and covered my vampire aura with a weak human aura. Maybe I'd be lucky and he would be fooled, or maybe my so-called informant had turned out to be a traitor. That thought had me grinding my teeth, irritated that I'd paid ahead of time.

"Where are you going?" the server asked, yanking my arm as I headed for the door.

Whipping around to face her, my smile revealed every inch of my fangs. "You knew Adeem was coming tonight. Did you warn him?" I growled.

She laughed nervously and leaned into me, whispering, "No, I had no idea who the man was, just that he wanted to speak with you."

I lowered my sunglasses so she could see my eyes. "This had better not be a trap ... for your sake."

Panic washed over her face. "No, no, I swear it is not a trap. I told you the truth."

My eyes roamed over her face and settled on the rapidly beating pulse on her neck. I licked my lips and she took a step back. Shaking my head, I turned away from her. She reeked of fear but she didn't appear to be lying. "For your sake, I hope you're right," I mumbled, shoving her out of my way as I stalked past the group of people exiting the bar. I could feel his presence closing in. It was coming from the alleyway just beyond the entrance.

Dark shadows covered the alley as the sun faded and the moon rose. Music spilled into the night from the Red Moon Bar. Dimmed light cascaded over the moonlit night as I homed in on my target. The voices from the bar faded as my vision strengthened in the dark. My jacket whipped violently around in the wind. I stood motionless, honing all my energy in on the shield around my aura. I could surprise him if he wasn't aware that I was waiting ... unless the informant had already ratted on me. He closed in on the alley quickly. I inhaled deeply and watched as my mark rounded the corner, unaware of my presence. Confident that for once I had the upper hand, I casually blew a rogue strand of curly blonde hair out of my face and lowered my sunglasses. "Adeem," I called, barely a whisper on the wind.

Slowly, he lifted his head and our eyes met. A lazy, dangerous smile moved across my face. He slowed and stopped, eyes narrowing into small slits as he watched me. The shock on his face was worth every bit of money and time I had spent hunting him down the past weeks. Hatred welled inside of me and I fed on that hatred.

Two men rounded the corner behind him and halted dead in their tracks, nearly toppling over Adeem.

Bad to the Bone blasted from the bar as I took a step toward the group of werewolves. He had brought backup and they were as surprised to see me, as I was to see them. I was so busy worrying about Adeem that I didn't think he would have anyone with him. My bad, I should have known he wouldn't go anywhere without bodyguards. The jacket I wore moved as if it had

a mind of its own, flaring to life even as my aura pulsed with life. A light above me burst into a thousand pieces, falling to the earth and clattering as it landed. I had to keep my anger in check because if I weren't careful the whole place would explode. I could feel the unseen force behind my aura surge forward, vibrating the very ground I stood on. The tornado of wind whistled loudly around us and up into the heavens, almost knocking Adeem off his feet.

Adeem and his men looked around the alley suspiciously, then back at me, sniffing the air around them. "Tell me why you insist on hunting me, child?" Adeem asked, smirking wickedly as his comrades moved in front of him.

I smiled at the Lycans who were willing to give their lives for the clan leader. Sentinels were fighting machines with only one purpose in life, death to any that dared attack their leader. The look on my face must have answered Adeem's question.

"You will never touch me unless I see fit to allow it. I have a hundred men who will stop at nothing to keep me safe from my enemies." His laughter was overshadowed by the music thumping in the background.

Lifting my hands in a gesture of peace, I took another step forward. "Where are you keeping Ty?" I asked, ignoring his bodyguards.

"You are a foolish girl to think you can threaten or catch me, and my own," he grunted. I laughed and even to me it didn't sound normal. "Adeem, I am not here to warn or catch you."

"What then do you want of me?" he asked, unable to hide his puzzlement.

"I want you to die." I grinned wickedly, pushing my sunglasses back onto my face.

"Give it up!" he shouted. "You do not have the power or the ability to fight me. Either you join us or we will kill Tyler."

I took another step forward. "This is your last chance, Adeem. Where is Ty?"

He threw his head back and howled, the muscles in his neck pulsing and bulging. Great, he was going to get all furry on my arse. "If we cannot have you, then nobody will."

"Oh, that was original," I mocked.

He howled a second time and the two men beside him just stood as if nothing were happening. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, sending chills down my spine.

"Dang it," I whispered.

History was about to repeat itself, and frankly, I wasn't in the mood. Sure enough, Adeem began to change right before my eyes. The night Tyler turned and attacked me came flooding back to my memory. Fear gripped my heart as the thought raced through my mind. As if reading my thoughts, Adeem smiled. I could already see the sheen of slime forming on his skin. Yep, he was going all fur-butt on me, and this time I was prepared. If he wanted to fight, things were going to get messy.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, sending several curls flying. My power flared to life in response to my call. I looked at the ground steadying my nerves then slowly raised my eyes to meet his demonic stare.

Do not play this game with me, Adeem, you will lose. My voice resonated in his mind, trailed by laughter.

His hands flew up to his head, trying to block my scan. "Get out of my mind, you abomination," he demanded. His hands dropped as I felt the tentacles of my aura slipping from the hold it had on him.

I squeezed every ounce of hatred and anger from my being and fueled my energy. Closing my eyes, I reveled in the feel of how strong I had become. My eyes flew open the

moment I made contact with his mind, but as soon as he realized what I had done, he countered my unseen attack, slamming a mental barricade up to block me out. I grunted, taking a step back, trying to dig my way back in, but couldn't break through the barrier he raised between our minds. A sharp pain shot through my brain at the impact of hitting his mental blockade. I closed my mind off to the pain. Adeem could not know he had hurt me, ever. My own mental block was being tested. He couldn't get in. You could lose yourself in someone's mind if your aura wasn't strong enough. I was powerful, but not eating properly had weakened me enough not to take that chance. If someone ever became trapped in another's mind, his or her life would end. A shiver ran down my spine at what could have happened if I hadn't been careful. I'd let my anger get the best of me, but it wouldn't happen again.

I watched silently as my hands fell limply to my side. "Abomination?"

"You are tainted, impure, not a true werewolf," he growled, his voice gravely as he continued to change.

"Ouch, that really hurt. But..." I mumbled, grabbing my heart mockingly. "But you see, we have a problem here, Adeem. You give me no choice in the matter. You took away my choices when you forced Ty to attack me. Infecting me was your first mistake." I growled, my anger flaring back to life. A faint glow appeared on my skin, I glanced down quickly to see my hands shining brightly. Ignoring the unnatural glow, I continued. "I would gladly leave you alone. Just tell me where Ty is and I'll be on my way." I reached into my jacket pocket, mindlessly stroking the silver throwing stars.

He cackled, ignoring my request. "And what, my dear, was the second mistake?" He stared at me from behind glowing, amber eyes.

"Coming here tonight." I casually shrugged my shoulders, smirking at him.

Both werewolves beside him started to chuckle as Adeem continued to speak. "You have two weeks until the full moon. What will you do then?" His lips peeled back in an evil smile. In place of teeth, his fangs began to lengthen, slime running down his crater-filled face and chin. He cracked his jaw as the transformation began. "Ty will scream for mercy when we get through with him and so will you." His voice deepened, ending with a growl.

I hated the fact that Lycans could change at will. The werewolf I had killed before was young, weak. Adeem was a different story. His power rivaled my own and if I didn't make my move now, he would become too strong to fend off.

If everyone could just learn to get along, the world would be a better place. *Gag!* The combined grumbling down the alley snapped me back into reality. I lifted my finger shaking it at him. "Tsk, tsk, Adeem, we all know changing this close to humanity will put your kind in danger."

His head lifted, growing in size as his tendons and muscles popped. "I will eat you for dinner," he rumbled.

I slid my hand back to my pocket. "And you will rue the day you ever messed with me." Without any hesitation, I removed the throwing stars, hurling them at the werewolves guarding Adeem. The force of my throw was too strong to avoid, and the impact sent one werewolf flying backward, but he quickly regained his composure. The werewolf to the left of Adeem ducked and the star flew by him, hitting Adeem in the shoulder. He screamed at the men in a foreign language and with the star still deep in his shoulder, he took off in the opposite direction.

His guards stalked nearer. "You actually ducked so you wouldn't get hit?" I mumbled. "Wow, you're a great protector." The sentinel's head cocked, eyes furrowing together as he frowned.

“Just wonderful, Samantha, make them even more angry why don’t you,” I whispered to myself.

The second star was embedded deeply in the right werewolf’s chest. He seemed unaffected by the dark, red stain now spreading down the front of his shirt.

“Funny, he leaves you to die and runs like a baby? Doesn’t that just piss you off a wee little bit?” I asked, as they continued to move closer.

With hands on hips, I began to tap my right foot annoyingly. Sighing loud enough to show my annoyance. “I’ll give you three choices.”

The guy with the star still in his chest hesitated, cocking his head to one side.

“One, you take me to Ty and I let you live for tonight and hunt you another day. Two, you take me to Ty and feed me Adeem on a plate with mashed potatoes and I let you live. Three, you ignore one and two and I kill you now.”

They both laughed and then moved forward. “What makes you think you can kill us?” asked the unharmed wolf.

I watched them both inch forward. “What makes you think I can’t?” I sneered.

Ignoring me, they continued forward, getting too close for comfort.

“I’ll take that as three, then?” I dropped to the ground, reaching inside my jacket. With inhuman speed, I pulled out my silenced Berettas and aimed them at the men as they came closer. Both halted, lifting their heads to sniff the air. “Very cliché of me, but come any closer and you’re history,” I warned.

The sentinel to the left hesitated but the injured warrior took another step. Not giving them time to react, I littered the alleyway with bullets. My night vision allowed me to home in on them perfectly. The only sound was the quiet click of the trigger being pulled and high-pitched *ping* as it screeched down toward the men. Only when they fell to the ground motionless, did I stop firing. Taking a deep breath, I strolled cautiously up to the bodies. The wind blew my hair in my face as I stood looking down on the mess I’d made, waiting for any sign of life. Placing my boot on the man closest to me, I kicked him repeatedly. Only when he did not attempt to attack was I confident he was dead. Neither werewolf stirred as I reached down and yanked the star from the chest of my first victim. “Two down, only one hundred thousand more to go.” The star was covered in his blood. “Gross!” I swiped it against his jeans and stuck it back in my jacket pocket. “Hope you guys don’t mind, but these things are expensive.”

The wind kicked up again, blowing my hair into a wild frenzy as I strolled casually onto the sidewalk outside the bar. “Adeem, you got away this time but I got what I needed.” I laughed. The minute the star had hit his flesh he’d let down his guard enough for a mind scan.

My next target was Derk Augusta, the photographer. Just two weeks ago, I had witnessed his handiwork first hand. And it was his handiwork that brought Siön Baptiste into my life. The pictures of the vampire’s torture and death still haunted me.

I headed down the sidewalk leaving the alley behind. A pang of regret swept through me briefly, but if I hadn’t killed those Sentinels, they would have torn me apart. I was still struggling with human emotions and attachments. When I didn’t think too hard, my vampire instincts took over and often swayed my emotions. If I didn’t keep myself in check, I could become rogue like so many vampires had in the past during their first year. The same small part of what remained of my human life felt pity for what would happen to Derk if he didn’t cooperate. Yet, in the same breath, the monster I was becoming hoped he wouldn’t cooperate at all.

Chapter 1

“Buy two hotdogs for three dolla,” an old man yelled from the corner of Walnut and Brooks.

I stepped past the vendor, eyeing the man. Sad to say it wasn't the hotdog that tempted me. He shoved his grubby little paws and the hotdog in my face. I nearly vomited as bile burned the back of my throat. He backed off when he caught a glimpse of my eyes. “You are--” I quickly blocked his thoughts, sending my aura into his mind. Long tentacles of control, molding his will to mine. He swayed under the influence of my power and finally turned and picked up where he'd left off, this time leaving me alone. “Two hotdogs for three dolla,” he hollered as I continued down the sidewalk.

All creatures had auras, even something as small as a bug. An energy source surrounded them and most were brilliant colors. Some could be bright and potent, others dull and weak. Humans had auras that were dull and weak. Immortals were colorful and powerful. Like I said, I was still learning, so it was all very new to me. Auras could protect or project. At times, I used my aura to read thoughts or even control thoughts. The most powerful vampires were those who knew how to use their own auras. The aura contained the power they wielded and masters who possessed the proper control over their own energy were both powerful and scary.

I shook my head moving through the crowd. All I could feel were hundreds of beating hearts thumping wildly in my ears, driving me closer to the edge of insanity. I concentrated with all my might to push down the desire to give in and bite every last one of them. My fangs lengthened as I imagined the sweet, metallic taste of their blood sliding down my throat. Blood, like auras, varied in taste and energy. Something else I needed to experience first hand to understand, but Siön Baptiste had ensured me that diabetics were favored among vampires. It had something to do with the high glucose content. I licked my chapped lips, sniffing the air, wondering who might be diabetic in the crowd. As my hunger increased, my eyes began to glow unnaturally. Quickly looking down, I tried to distract my hunger pains for blood with thoughts of normal food.

The gnawing ache had me nearly crawling out of my skin. I concentrated on the smell of coffee and pizza. For more than five blocks, I clenched my hands into tight balls digging fingernails into my skin. I was determined to squelch the craving for blood. I hoped and prayed I had enough human DNA left in me to prevent me from attacking an innocent bystander. The ache cleared my mind and thoughts and usually helped me concentrate, but for some reason, tonight I felt weak with the need of blood. Siön Baptiste had warned me that if I waited too long I might lose control. I hated to admit he was right and I was wrong, but felt as if I was standing on a cliff, poised to fall into a blood rage.

The aroma of caramel popcorn wafted through the air breaking my drifting thoughts and bringing me back down to earth. Finally, my longing for human food overtook any vampire needs. I could still munch on normal food, which was to my benefit. Normal food had kept me sane for the last few weeks. My mouth watered from the delicious scents hovering over the crowds of shoppers. Nothing in the world would quench my thirst for blood, but for the time being, filling my stomach did take the edge off.

The whole time, the shoppers around me were oblivious to my struggle to gain control. If they only knew how much danger was around them, holiday shopping might not be so enjoyable after all. I chuckled low in my throat, it was October, and already people were getting in the holiday spirit. I always did love Christmas and the spirit of giving. This year was going to be different, saving the world might take precedent.

The sun was just beginning to fade in the deep blue, New Orleans, October sky. The frigid breeze blew leaves in my path as I strolled along the city sidewalks. The clouds were dark blue with shades of red and orange as the sun dimmed beneath the sky, gorgeous. I was enjoying the view when someone bashed into me, jolting me back from my wandering thoughts.

"Excuse you," a woman hollered over the crowd as I slid past her.

I turned in time to see her yanking a young boy around by the arm. He had no jacket and his pants were torn. A chill ran up my spine at the sight. The boy kept his big, brown eyes on me as she dragged him along. My hands clenched at my side as the temptation to follow nearly got the best of me. The little boy's thoughts screamed in my head. *I'm cold. Don't make me stay with that man, mommy, he hurts me.*

The sea of people walked past as I sensed my intended target moving further away. Shaking myself free of the violent images toward the woman, I moved a step back. There was nothing I could do about it right now, tonight I was on a mission. Sniffing the air, I noted her smell and aura knowing I would eventually seek her out another night. Hesitating for just a second, I turned my back on the boy and his mother,

Honing my senses on the streets ahead, I located a person weaving in and out of the crowd. "There you are, you bugger," I whispered, picking up speed.

It was exhilarating to feel and see everything so clearly. It had taken me about a week to get my bearings with hearing multiple heartbeats at once, but I soon learned to concentrate on one at a time. Instead of wave after wave of thumping hearts in my ear, I started to enjoy the lulling sounds of human life. However, tonight my concentration was weak as my hunger strengthened. I sped up, sensing the man moving farther out of my reach.

I moved away from the crowd, pulling the hood of my jacket up around my face to hide my eyes. They would definitely shine unnaturally in the streetlights and I didn't want to draw unwanted attention. Been there done that, earlier. Normally, my sunglasses would hide what most would see, but I'd left them in my office. I carefully slid my hands inside my jacket and placed them on both Berettas. The holsters were wrapped around my thighs, hidden by the long leather jacket. Touching the Berettas soothed my nervous anticipation of what might be around the next corner. The target turned into an alley. I waited until he was out of sight before moving to cross the street. The wind picked up around me, my jacket whipping around violently as I paced myself. If I moved in too quickly, he'd get spooked and run. I couldn't afford to lose him again.

Fear of the future no longer haunted me. Fear of dying no longer drove me. When someone was immortal they tended to take things for granted, well, everything but food. As I maneuvered between the humans of New Orleans, my mouth watering, my face hidden, I realized that my only motivation in life at the moment was revenge. It had been two weeks since my abduction and Trevor's death. Not to mention, two weeks since I'd had a real meal. I couldn't stomach too much real food anymore, but the smell of a scraped knee or the lulling beat of blood coursing through someone's body, all beckoned to me. Not being able to stomach massive quantities of dessert was enough to make me kill everyone in sight. So I guess my need for revenge was three-fold. Food, Trevor and the loss of my humanity, not in any particular order

at this point.

Taking a deep breath I exhaled slowly, aggravated that I couldn't just end this now. If I could locate Adeem and take him out, part of my problem would be solved. I was so close the other night. I weaved in and out of shoppers, continuing to follow my prey. Yes, you heard me right, prey. I was really pleased with myself that he was unaware of my presence. It wasn't easy to track a Lycan. They were known for their ability to blend in with their environment, probably why humans were still unaware of their existence even today. Werewolves were especially good at tracking, and unlike other Lycan clans who used relied on their brute strength, werewolves were cunning. Staying downwind enabled me to avoid detection. I would hold back until the time was right to strike.

Many people feel that New Orleans has been a town separated by race, black and white. However, we all know the truth is the variance in species, those who are preyed upon and those who prey upon them.

I smiled to myself, realizing my quarry was unaware of his fate. I was beginning to like the rush I got while on the hunt. Vampires and werewolves were natural enemies and now they were my enemy. Derk was going to give me the information I wanted or die. It's not like we won't all pay for our sins someday, just that he was going to be paying sooner, rather than later.

Waiting a half a second to make sure nobody saw me, I entered the alley and continued on. A drunk slouched against a trashcan grumbled about the cold. The cool air felt good against my heated skin. Whoever said vampires ran cold was crazy. Of course, the Lycan infection in my blood was more than likely affecting my temperature. I had been running at a hundred and two degrees for more than two weeks.

I found myself lost in thought, staring down at the drunk. He was filthy, shivering inside a worn jacket. He watched me with such pain in his eyes, I had to look away so I wouldn't drown in his sorrows. Did I have it in me to take away his pain and suffering? It would only take a minute to drain him, sending him peacefully to the other side. Licking my lips as the hunger filled me, I slowly backed up into the shadows. My incisors lengthened with the thought of taking his blood. Shaking my head, I swore. I had no choice but to fight the monster within to keep my humanity intact. I refused to become one of the creatures I hunted. Who was I to play God?

"Hey, baby, want some?" he asked, holding up a bottle of whisky.

Bile burned the back of my throat as I threatened to vomit from his stench. Slinking further down the alley, I prayed for strength not to tear his throat out. His thoughts were echoing in my mind, such despair and hardship. His daughter wouldn't speak to him and his wife died four years earlier. Amazing how someone can go from a successful businessman to drunken bum in less than two years. I pitied him. Making a note of his aura and location, I would come back to help him later if I could. I glanced back only to find the bum slouched over onto the ground. Picking up the pace, I attempted to put as much distance as I could between his misery and me.

I came to an abrupt halt as I slammed into hard concrete. Stumbling back, I realized I had run into a large nine-foot wall with mesh wiring above it circling the perimeter. Looking for a door or path opening to the river beyond, I walked along the edge of the wall trying to find Derk's scent. I slowed, sniffing the air and caught his smell. He was wearing Old Spice and had recently been with a woman. The faint scent of blood was not his own, maybe the woman's or someone else's. I growled, my contempt for him growing with each passing moment. "This will be your last kill, Derk." There was no doubt in my mind that the woman was either dead or dying. A shiver ran up my spine as the strong scent of blood inundated my senses. Repulsed by

my body's reaction, my sharpened fangs lengthened in response. I paced back and forth, angry with myself for not getting to him sooner. I might have prevented someone's death.

"Come on, Sam, you can still catch him." I slowed my pacing and concentrated on the exact path Derk took. "Right here," I whispered, running my hands along the cold stone. I didn't want to bring attention to myself by using my power. He might be able to sense it even from afar. He was definitely picking up speed, heading toward the Mississippi River.

Wearing leather had a dual purpose. One, it was just plain cool, and two, it protected vital parts from scrapes and bruises. Blood was easily detectable by both werewolves and vampires. I took my jacket off and tossed it over the wire.

He was heading in the wrong direction further away. "Crap!" I was going to lose him if I didn't keep up. I started running and with a skip and a hop, I leaped into the air, catapulting myself over the ledge. The barbed wire dug into my jacket and pants leg but missed my arms and face. Once I'd cleared the wire, I reached back, grabbing my jacket on the way down. I flipped, somersaulting in the air and landed softly on all fours, watching the surrounding trees for a possible attack.

Without hesitating, I trotted off toward the river following the scent of his stagnant cologne in the air, trying to filter out the blood. I stayed away from the sidewalk as it wound its way down by the river. A Cajun mix of playful music floated lazily over the water. It sounded like a wedding party in the local park. There was a cemetery on Fifth Street and I had an idea that this was where the guy was headed.

Rumors had it that there were a group of werewolves taking up residence in the park across from the cemetery. I would find out soon enough.

Chapter 2

The moon was high against the dark sky, clouds floating aimlessly over its bright light. Illuminating beams cascaded across the river and the noise from the party ceased to exist. I stopped dead in my tracks cocking my head to hear him. Jumping off the path, I ducked behind a large tree. He was just ahead. Using my fingers, I felt my way around to the far side of the tree, opposite of where the man's aura was heading, my back pressed firmly against the bark. The brittle bark crumbled under the pressure of my weight, falling noisily to the ground. "Crud," I whispered, holding my breath, hoping he hadn't heard. I closed my eyes, concentrating on his aura.

Flattened completely up against the base of a large tree trunk, I was invisible to any passerby. The Spanish moss drifted gently in the wind. The silvery-grey strands covered most of the trees in the park. This late, the moonlit trees shimmered in a seductive dance, caressed by the long strands of moss. It was beautiful and peaceful, and despite its splendor, I knew that everyone around was in danger tonight. The Audubon Park was creepy this time of night, and with four hundred acres of woods and zoo, it was perfect hunting grounds for a pack of wolves. Four grizzly murders had been found in the park in the last year. Of course, the vampires suspected the werewolves, but the wolves were just too sneaky to be caught. Until now!

I sensed the man not more than two hundred yards in front of me. He sat down on a bench and lit a cigarette. From all outward appearances, he was fairly young, in his early twenties, but one could never tell when dealing with a Lycan. A camera hung loosely around his neck. I snickered, grinding my teeth, wondering what damage had he done tonight. Was he a watcher of death or a doer also? From the smell of the blood on him, I'd say he had a part in someone's death tonight.

Two weeks ago, Siön Baptiste had brought me photographs from a murder scene. A vampire had been tortured beyond recognition. The photographer had been careful to record every last detail down to the charred remains. Oh yeah, Derk enjoyed his work. I shook my head controlling the anger that was building. This was more than just a job at this point. He had to be punished. The Lycan's were killing vampires and humans alike, they all had to be stopped and I was willing to stop them.

Backing around a second tree, I ran quickly to the opposite side of the path. I was now positioned directly behind him and the breeze was blowing in my direction. Moving like the wind, I shortened the distance to within fifty yards. I started to choke silently on the stench from the smoke. How anyone could subject their bodies to smoking was beyond me. Even if we are unable to get cancer as immortals, the smell alone was enough to gag a maggot.

Using the darkness as my cover, I stepped around the trunk and stalked toward him when my body was yanked back. A hand covered my mouth before I could scream.

Fighting and cursing my stupidity, I silently struggled with my assailant, watching from the corner of my eye as the Lycan stood and started down the walk. My prey was getting away.

Growling deep in my throat at the man who held me, I slowly turned to face him. When the werewolf was out of hearing range my captor whispered in my ear, "What are you doing, my sweet?"

The stubble from his face scraped my cheek gently. He was barely touching me, yet a delicious tingle raced through my body as he exhaled. My eyes widened in surprise. After all this time away, he was way too close for comfort. My body wasn't prepared for the attack upon my senses.

How did I not feel his presence? Bloody graves, he was good. "Get off me, Siön Baptiste, I'm busy."

He laughed that deep, masculine, I'm-a-hottie kind of laugh and it touched the most intimate of parts of my body. He moved his head back enough so that the light from the moon illuminated his face. He had an afternoon shadow, and on most men it would turn me off, but with Siön Baptiste it had the opposite effect. My stomach lurched as if I was falling from the sky. My heart beat dangerously close to breaking out of my chest.

He slowly lifted his hand, brushing strands of wild curls out of my face. His eyes touched my soul, expanding inside as he whispered something unheard through my thoughts. My breath caught as every living cell in my body throbbed in time with my pulse. Shocked, I stood there in the middle of the park, my feet welded to the ground as trails of promised ecstasy sped through my veins from his nearness. His finger, so graceful and strong, slipped down my face leaving with it a trail of heated sensations. My eyes widened and breath quickened as an unexpected need inundated my very being. Everything around us grew still and quiet. We were alone, both entranced by our desire. He placed his hand over my heart and held it there as he watched me. "Admit to me and yourself, Samantha, that you care."

His intense gaze almost forced me to look away but I held strong, never wavering. *Well, maybe I was wavering just a tad.* With all my strength, I managed to bring my hand to his. He watched quietly as I placed it gently over his and tried to pry it loose. "Get your head out of the sky, you just frightened me." My senses coming back, as my power and anger flared to life.

His own power pulsed over me in response. My mouth opened as a sensuous smile crossed his face. He expertly maneuvered one finger over my chest, brushing against my nipple. I gasped, my back arching in response. There wasn't a hint of sarcasm in his voice when he said, "You forget I can smell a lie. Someday, Samantha, you will admit what I already know."

I looked away from him, turning my head in disgust. He was right, but I would never admit it like this. The thought of caring for him beyond being just friends scared me. Everyone I'd ever loved had been taken from me, and I never wanted to experience that type of heart wrenching loss again. I blocked his mind probes that were so evidently attempting to read my thoughts.

Opening and closing my mouth, I hesitated, shaking my head. *Why me?* Lifting my eyes, I forced myself to meet his heated gaze. "What do you already know?"

His hips shifted against me as my legs spread involuntarily welcoming him closer. The heat from his body pressed firmly against me, a quiet whimper escaped from between gritted teeth. "Stop doing that," I warned.

His nearness rocketed my blood in an inferno-like reaction to his power. If my temperature was running high before, it was now boiling with him so near. My whole body exploded in a heated excitement from his closeness. I couldn't fight how good he felt finally allowing myself to relax into his hold.

"What do you know?" My voice rose up over my thumping pulse.

"In due time, my sweet. All shall be revealed."

His answer was vague, just as I expected it to be, and that just fueled my anger enough to shove his hand off my chest. I shifted, putting more space between us. Anger always seemed to

bring me to my senses.

“Busy getting yourself into trouble I see.” He slid his hand to my throat, gently, but firmly, pinning me back against the tree with his body. He was trying to show his dominance, and just as I always did, I bucked against any authority. His dominant act was just the slap in the face I needed to get my body under control and figure out what needed to be done.

Put as much space between us possible.

“I need to go, Derk is getting away,” I growled breathlessly through my clenched jaw, irritated with him and myself for reacting to his closeness. Siön Baptiste moved his face nearer. My eyes adjusted to the shadow and light that hid his eyes, and now I could see him perfectly.

“I heard you were doing some investigating on your own. I had to see it to believe it.”

If I didn’t know any better, I would say I heard annoyance in his voice. Either that or jealousy. I could never tell with him.

“You are not my boss, Siön Baptiste. Nobody controls me, but me. You hear me?” I warned.

“Oh, I hear you all too clearly, Samantha, but how does that saying go?” he asked, smiling wide enough to show his fangs.

“What saying?”

“In one ear and out the other.” He chuckled, his accent not at all fitting the phrase or giving it any weight.

My mouth opened and closed, and then opened again, ready to attack him with a smart remark but nothing came out.

“You look like a fish, Samantha. I am not certain I have ever seen you speechless before.”

I started to laugh and I knew from Siön Baptiste’s sideways glance that it wasn’t at all sane sounding. I had never heard him use slang or American phrases. Two weeks ago, we had done the nasty and I’d avoided him like the plague, successfully I might add, until tonight. I sighed out loud. Well, it was far from nasty, it was incredible.

He shrugged. “I agree it was far from nasty. Actually it was quite amazing and I would...”

I cut him off before he could finish, covering his mouth with my hand. “Don’t bring it up again, Siön Baptiste, ever. I swear on my mother’s grave that it will never happen again, as long as I live. And stop reading my mind,” I added. How did he get by my barricade to my thoughts? *Grrrrr!*

I could feel a smile form across his luscious lips. “You should never make threats you cannot, and will not, keep.” He mumbled against my hand, still grinning with the same lips that had kissed every inch of my body. I let out another sigh, blowing more curly ringlets out of my face. The look he was giving me was the look of a man with intimate knowledge of a lover’s body. Knowledge of what he could and would make me do if he had the opportunity. He was undressing me with his mind and power, leaving me vulnerable to him. I didn’t like the helpless attraction I had for him when he was around.

I couldn’t seem to control my emotions or reactions in his presence and I wasn’t used to being played like a well-oiled machine. I tried to pull my gaze from his, but was lost in the fathomless expanse of his soul. Those beautiful, sea-green eyes swirled wildly, coaxing me to fall under their spell. They were filled with desire and ownership. His hair was blowing in the wind and his legs were rock hard against mine. I fumbled with my other hand to slip it between us to get some space, but he moved closer as if spurred on by my struggles.

My knees buckled beneath the heat that glowed in his eyes, the warmth, and the love. He

watched my eyes and smiled more broadly against the palm of my hand. His gaze moved from my eyes to my mouth. Then, like a blow to my heart, he softly flicked his tongue over my palm. Time stopped, freezing me in the feel of his warm luxurious tongue on the palm of my hand. I wanted him. Wanted him to savagely pin me to the tree, to force my body to comply and finally bring us the satisfaction we both craved.

His arms reached around my waist bringing us closer together as our auras mingled. My hand slid down his face, withdrawing from the magic his tongue was casting over me. Chills spread over my skin as the shock of the power he held over what I had become settled in my thoughts. One look, one taste, and I was putty in his arms. His fingers bit into my back, forcing me to arch, my chest flattening against him.

Groaning loudly, I tried to remember what my mission was, but my mind was clouded with the memory of his body wrapped around mine. The knowledge of just how wonderful he was as a lover. I was lost in his thoughts and memories. His eyes filled with pain, anger, lust and love. Love, he had said he loved me. Tears welled in my eyes. My heart lodged in my throat, thumping so rapidly it made it hard to breathe.

He leaned in, his mouth hovering dangerously over mine. "I have missed you, Samantha." The stubble on his chin tickled my face as he waited for me to move. Liquid fire pulsed and vibrated my very core. His own blood had mingled with mine to make me what I was today. That same blood electrified and came to life in his presence.

Before seeing him tonight, I hadn't realized just how much I'd missed him. He stayed just mere centimeters from my mouth, breathing me in. As if afraid to scare me away, he waited. Our breath blended in a heated exchange. I licked my lip as I moved closer. He stood completely motionless, waiting to meet me halfway. All I had to do was give in to the attraction, the promises of untold ecstasy.

Closing my eyes, intoxicated with his power, I moved into his kiss. *I love you*. His voice chimed through me. Our lips met with tenderness, even as our bodies ached to be released in a torrent of lust. His tongue slid across my lower lip and slipped inside my mouth. We both moaned in unison. Surrounded by his love, my need shifted to anticipation as his lower body moved in a slow deliberate rhythm. I had to fight the urge to drape my legs around him. Our mouths opened and the kiss deepened, tongues moving together seductively to the music of our hearts beating. For a brief moment in the last few weeks, I had felt at peace in his arms. Once again, I was warm and content, enveloped in his scent, tracing my hands up and down his sculpted body.

A scream brought me rushing reluctantly back to reality. Startling us both back from our little dream world. His mouth moved from my lips to my neck.

"No," he whispered in my ear, holding me to him. "Let nothing ruin this moment."

I sighed, wanting nothing more than to curl up in the comfort of his arms. Another scream pierced the night.

Siön Baptiste reluctantly released me and looked toward the noise, head tilted, nostrils flaring. "The man you were following was a werewolf?"

An immediate chill replaced his warmth as he we separated. I moved away from him so I could think clearly, my mind still a bowl of jello from the aftereffects of his kiss. "Ummmm, what?"

"It is a simple question. Was the man you were following a werewolf?"

"No need to get snooty," I grumbled.

Another scream pierced the cool autumn night, and without even a look in my direction,

Siön Baptiste stalked toward the sound.

Back to your old arrogant self. But gorgeous, arrogant self, that is for sure.

“Wow,” was the only word that came out of my mouth when I saw his backside. *Why do I let myself get so distracted by him?* I scolded myself. He was wearing jeans. I had never seen him in jeans. Come to think about it, I’ve never seen any vampire in jeans. He was stretching out his arms as he put his long black leather jacket on. He had a swagger to his walk. His shoulders were muscled and bulging as he moved, and yet he had the face of an angel. *God almighty, help me resist the devil.* My mouth was watering at the sight of him.

He called back, “Are you going to stare at my butt all night or help?” I could hear him chuckling quietly as he strutted away.

Cocky son of a gun ... I ran to catch up. I was far from short but I had to take two strides for every one of his. “I wasn’t...” Before I could finish, a third spine-chilling scream pierced the night. We took off running full-speed toward the noise.

“What is...?” I stopped only when Siön Baptiste grabbed me, twirling us both around a large tree. He placed his finger over his mouth and motioned me to keep quiet.

I mouthed, “What is it?”

He pointed in the direction of the cemetery. There were large pillars and massive gravestones. One area was partially fenced off with wrought iron posts. Part of the wall was torn down, leaning against a large service building. Just inside the wall, there was a building and right outside that building was a large stone casket. I gasped at what I saw on the casket from beyond the fence.

A woman was lying on the casket, clothes torn and bloodied, held down by three men. She was partially naked and a fourth man was working his way onto the casket to straddle her.

Derk the photographer was smiling and laughing while taking pictures of the whole grizzly scene as it unfolded.

“I’m going to kill him.” I removed my guns and started forward.

Siön Baptiste had a firm hold on my shoulder. He jerked me back and said, “Let me.” The look on his face was set in stone, blank other than a slight twitch in the corner of his right eye. It took a second to register I was seeing something in Siön Baptiste I had never seen before. His power. I’m not sure if he held his aura in check to appear less dangerous to me, but before this moment, I had never seen anything like it. He was a deadly assassin, bred for battle according to Sebastian. None of which had I known prior to sleeping with him. His father had trained him and his brother to destroy the Lycans. There was still much for me to learn about Siön Baptiste and I was going to find out everything I needed to know one way or another.

The wind began to blow wildly and the woman screamed louder as the man on top of her started to kiss her neck. She could do nothing other than scream, powerless against the supernatural strength of the Lycans who attacked her. I followed Siön Baptiste’s lead as he circled around and held up for just a second before leaping onto the building above them.

Turning back to me, he knelt, offering me his hand. I took it and he swung me effortlessly onto the roof.

I followed him, alarmed as his power flowed over me. My fear was that if I could sense the energy, so could the werewolves. We both crouched on top of the roof overlooking the group below. I grabbed his arm and instantly heat spread throughout my body. I could feel his muscles twitching and flexing. We were at their backs. *What are we going to do?*

You will go for the photographer. I will deal with the Lycans and the woman. He turned toward me, face still blank. *You must not continue on this path, Samantha, someday I will not be*

here to protect you. A scowl formed across his brow as he shook a finger at me.

Oh, drop the protective act. I've managed to survive on my own without YOUR help just fine, I grumbled. He flinched as I screamed the last part, anger flaring in his mind. *And remember I was hired to protect you, not the other way around.*

You are fired. He growled, and without warning, Siön Baptiste jumped to the ground.

Wait for me you son of a....

His jacket flared out majestically in the air. He landed silently. I huffed, annoyed at his "I'm better than you so I must protect you" act. Falling in behind him, I followed his lead, holding my guns to my side. Sweat beaded on my forehead despite the cool autumn air. I would take up my issues with him later, but right now we had to save this woman.

The moon wasn't full, but it illuminated the whole sky. Something about the night air invigorated immortals. We can function in the day but after dark was our time. The light from the moon acted as if someone had lit a flare over the cemetery. Shadows and darkness hid behind every crypt and building. We used the darkness as a screen.

Standing in the shadow of the building, we watched in complete silence. Before I could move, Siön Baptiste pushed me further behind him, and with deadly precision, he leaped into the air grabbing the werewolf on top of the woman. The Lycan screamed, flailing his arms and legs, startled at the sudden intrusion. Siön Baptiste lifted him above his head. The Lycan was naked from the waist down, dangling helplessly in the air. My mouth dropped at this display of Siön Baptiste's strength, not sure why I hadn't noticed it before. With his fingers wrapped around the man's neck, Siön Baptiste tossed him easily into the air. The man hit the wrought iron fence, sliding to the ground. He shook his head back and forth, dazed at the swift attack.

A flash of bright light blinded us for just a moment. Derk was backed up against the building taking pictures. The bright light was throwing off Siön Baptiste as he took a step back covering his eyes.

Black dots clouded my view as I stalked in the direction of the flashing light. I aimed my gun and shot. The camera exploded into hundreds of pieces. Derk fell to the ground stunned and confused as the glass and plastic shattered all around him. Satisfied that he was too scared to move, I turned to help Siön Baptiste.

I heard the men shouting. Siön Baptiste had one Lycan on his back and two in front wielding knives, slashing at him as he dodged and weaved back and forth to avoid their strikes. He flipped the Lycan off his back and threw him against the grave. The girl had scrambled off just in time, huddling on the ground crying. The grave buckled and broke under the impact, sending pieces flying through the air. The naked Lycan had scrambled up and yanked a rod out of the ground, tearing it from the fence effortlessly. At the end, there was a sharp pointed spearhead. He was moving up on Siön Baptiste's back.

I screamed, "Watch your back!"

He just smiled confidently, eyebrow raised. With one swift motion he reached behind, and without looking, took the pole in his hand. With his inhuman speed, he plunged the tip of the homemade spear into the gut of an attacker in front. Using the force of his momentum, he circled, knocking the wolf at his side back to the ground and spearing the man from behind with the dull end of the weapon.

It was barbaric ... and wonderful. I was impressed beyond belief and stood in utter awe of this sexy, spear-wielding vampire. His face was empty of emotion other than his eyes glowing in the darkness.

The woman had scooted further away, screaming as she ran from the bloody scene.

Despite their injuries, the werewolves still attacked. The naked werewolf tumbled around on the ground but wasn't dead. He crawled away from us, staggered to his feet and made his way toward the woman. His wound already healing as he stumbled off.

I started to give chase when something hard hit me in the back of the head. I fell to the ground instantly but held onto my guns.

I only had time to turn and see Derk raising a spear over me. Rolling to the side, I sprung to my feet aiming my gun at him. He hit my arm before I could shoot.

Run, Samantha, more will arrive shortly, Siön Baptiste warned.

I won't leave you.

I can handle these werewolves, but it is my worry for your well being that distracts me. Attend to the girl's safety.

The cameraman came at me a second time and I shot him in the leg. I needed him alive. He fell to the ground, howling in pain. I grabbed the gun I'd dropped and pointed it at his skull. "These guns are filled with silver bullets. You will survive a wound to the leg, but three rounds in the skull and you will die. Do you understand?" My voice was distant and cold.

"Yes," he whispered, tears streaming down his face. His permanent smirk wiped clean.

Sniffing the air, I smiled, realizing then that he had messed himself. *Good, you deserve everything you get, scumbag.* "Stay here and you will not be killed. Run and I'll kill you, your family and everyone you have ever loved. Is that clear?"

"Yes." He cowered, folding up into a ball on his knees.

"Don't disappoint me, Derk." A tremor went through his body as his eyes met mine.

"You know my name." He was puzzled and afraid of how and why I knew him.

"I know a lot about you, Derk, and if you know what is good for you, you'll cooperate." I gave him my back and walked toward the opening in the fence where the girl had escaped. Sevastian had told me a week ago that to give someone your back in the supernatural world was an insult. It showed a lack of respect or healthy fear. I had neither for Derk Augusta, he didn't deserve my respect, and to fear him would show only weakness. He was vermin, doing the bidding of a larger vermin. I was determined to find out who was responsible for the park murders and eradicate their rat arses from our town.

Focusing on what was going on around me, putting Derk in the back of my mind, I watched in awe as Siön Baptiste had one werewolf by the neck, shoving it against the fence. "You will tell me who your master is." His voice was eerily calm and inviting. He was using his vampire mojo on the guy. I stepped through the opening, confident Siön Baptiste was in total control of the situation. Maybe it wasn't so bad having him tag along.

The girl screamed again and I didn't hesitate as I took off running. Leaping over gravestones, I raced in her direction. When the screams got closer, I slowed, listening for her. The moon shone brightly over the cemetery, casting shadows all around me as I weaved in and out of the mausoleums. Around every corner, I raised my guns ready to fire.

Another high-pitched scream acted as a homing beacon as I rounded one large tomb. The naked werewolf was on top of her, grunting as he attempted to rape her. She was fighting furiously kicking and screaming until he hit her hard enough to knock her unconscious. I hoped I was in time to save her. "Stop," I screamed.

The woman hit him in the face distracting him, but before I could reach them his claws lengthened and slashed through the woman's neck. The awful scream had me covering my ears in pain.

Shooting him wasn't an option, the risk of hitting the woman was just too great. He was

transforming before my very eyes. Unaware of my presence and only aware of his prey, the scent of blood enhanced his attack until I placed my hand on his shoulder. Anger boiled through my veins fueling my attack. I yanked him away from her, tossing him up behind me. He banged against the tomb, my eyes widening as the tomb crunched and gave way under the pressure of the impact. His neck flopped to the side, twisted in an abnormal direction. *Wow, who would have known I had it in me!* Soft painful whimpers quickly brought me back down to earth, my attention drawn fully on the lady lying in the grass. She was bleeding from several places. Her hair was dark and wavy, face peaceful, as she lay unconscious. He had torn her throat out and with each beat of her heart the blood shot from her body.

I could feel myself giving way to tears as I knelt, placing my hand over her gaping wound. "I'm so sorry," I choked. She hadn't asked to be attacked. I closed my eyes, sending my power through her, reading her mind, coaxing her to awaken. "Karen, it will be okay," I whispered, willing her to wake.

The blood spilled from between my fingers, seeping into the ground below us. Her eyes fluttered open and she coughed, blood oozing from her lips. "What happened?" she gargled, her eyes wide with fear and pain.

I felt her pain the moment I scanned her mind. It was excruciating. I wanted to back away and run from it but knew she needed me. "Let me take your pain," I cried, tears now running steadily down my face as I dropped my guns, kneeling on the ground beside her. While one hand held her gaping wound, the other hovered over her forehead sending my power into her mind. Her eyes were wide open with fear, but soon relaxed, giving way to the compulsion to let go of her pain. I took her pain into my body and sighed as it almost overwhelmed me to the point of collapsing.

Slamming my fist into the ground, I cursed, searching for knowledge that could help her. "Elders help me," I cried, but nobody answered my plea.

"Am I going to die?" she asked and started to sob. With each cry, more blood seeped from her wound. Even now the amount of blood was too much to be saved. She was at death's door, maybe it was possible to give her a peaceful death.

I didn't answer, just watched as her aura slowly dimmed. I froze in fear from my body's reaction to so much blood. I shook as thirst like I had never felt before came over me.

My fangs lengthened and horror crossed her face as the realization she was dying hit her and death now knelt before her.

Let her drink from you, ma petite. Siön Baptiste answered my call. *Turn her lest she die.*

Her eyes were glazing over as the bleeding slowed. I had no time to waste. Her heartbeat was fading as I bit into my wrist. Blood dripped from the wound. Picking her head up from the ground, I placed my wrist to her mouth, brushing a strand of hair from her face. She was covered in her own blood.

She choked on my blood, spitting it out. "Drink," I compelled her. "DRINK." She coughed again and her body shook. I moved my wrist over her wound, my blood dripping slowly into the gaping hole. It sizzled and moved under the healing power of my lifeline. Her beautiful blue eyes widened and in their reflection, I could see something behind me.

I couldn't get away from the spear this time. As I slowly turned to face the werewolf, he struck me across the shoulder flinging me into the air. I crashed into a gravestone that buckled beneath the impact as I hit the ground with a thud. Something in my back gave way under the impact but I ignored it, struggling to get up to face the Lycan. Tearing pain shot through my body. I gasped for breath as I looked down to see the spear shoved cleanly through my chest

pinning my body to the grave under me.

The pain was instant as I struggled against the sturdy pole that ran right through my body. He smiled at me, still naked from the waist down. He cocked his head, bones crackling under the movement. I hadn't killed him. What a pity.

"You should have let us have her. Now I will have you," he growled.

Chapter 3

Oh, the messes I get myself into!

“Werewolves must take a class on cheesy lines because all I’m hearing from you guys is, I will have you ... You will be mine ... If we can’t have you nobody will ... You should try a word of the month calendar, or better yet, read the dictionary. It will expand your vocabulary and I won’t have to listen to the same old lame phrases over and over again.” I mumbled through the pain in my chest. Every effort to speak made it hard to breathe as I tried to distract him. *Maybe I could talk him to death.* Now that would be a vampire power I wouldn’t mind possessing. “You should really brush those canines they look filthy,” I scolded, grimacing at the horrid smell coming from his mouth.

He hesitated, his eyes focusing on my face. He looked at me as if I were sprouting horns, shaking his head to dispel my voice. “Shut up ... Just shut up now!” he hollered, raising his hands to his head trying to block me out.

“Listen, buddy, you won’t live to see tomorrow if you touch me.” I tried to sound menacing, but lying pinned to the ground with a big pole sticking out of you kind of deflated a lot of the *grrr* behind what I was saying. I managed to kick him in the shin and he doubled over, leaning down against the pole.

He growled, “You bitc....” Before he could finish, I kicked him a second time.

Crap, this really hurts!

My legs had a mind of their own. Kicking him with all the strength I could muster, he fell to the ground howling in pain. “Nobody calls me a bitch.”

He crawled over, kneeling on the ground before me. I gagged from the sight of his naked bloodied body. “Get some clothes on, you freak,” I screamed, as nausea from both the pain and the sight of him overwhelmed my senses.

He sniffed the air, his body trembling. “You smell of pack.” He shook his head, smiling wickedly. “You are Lycan?” he asked, cocking his head to one side still sniffing the air. Too bad I hadn’t hit him hard enough to knock that head right off his body. It would have done him a favor. His jaw was too big for his face, jutting out like a pinecone. His nose too small. He was just all wrong, as though he had stayed in werewolf form too long and had actually taken on characteristics of the beast.

“You disgust me, swine.” I growled as he leaned down closer. He kissed my neck and face, his tongue flicking over my skin.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I whispered, as I fought the nausea. I wriggled under the pressure of his body and fought him off with my legs, kicking and screaming. I got a good kick to his jaw before he took the pole and twisted it back and forth. I hollered into the night, writhing in pain. I often thought vampires were immune to pain. *Boy* was I wrong.

Choking on my own blood as it welled in the back of my mouth, I gagged. Turning my head, I threw up half blood and half the donut I had tried eating earlier on the ground. At least it freed my airway enough that I could breathe again.

He held onto the pole so I couldn’t move and shoved my legs apart with his own. His bloodied fingers tore at my leather, ripping my pants down the center.

“Oh just great,” I complained lying my head back against the ground looking up at the sky. The fight literally knocked out of me. The body I like to call my own, was giving up. My mind was still fighting, but the blood that one needed to survive was seeping into the ground. At least maybe fighting him off would give me satisfaction in death. *Make him hurt a little, Sam, don't make it easy.* Mind blowing weakness crept into my bones as I forced numb arms to lift myself up off the ground. Shoulder on fire with pain, chest bubbling with blood, I soon realized my body wouldn't cooperate. “Crap!” I whispered through gritted teeth. Breathing was beginning to take its toll. All I could manage was short shallow bursts of oxygen to my flooding lungs as I tried to relax. The stars peeked through the clouds. It was a beautiful night to die. A dark calming abyss drifted over my body. Pain began to disappear all together as I relaxed into the shadows of my mind, separating from the hurt and the horror of what was about to happen. I willed myself to survive long enough for one last fight.

The man grunted and slid further between my legs, his naked body pressed against mine. He licked the blood on my neck and cheek. Then he sat up, his arms at his side as he tried to position himself.

What happened next was too quick for the human eye to catch. In a blur of light and dark, two hands wrapped around the werewolf's head. I blinked once and when my eyes opened, the head was gone. It was there one moment and gone the next.

The body fell on me, limp and lifeless. His blood spurted into my face. I screamed choking on the beast's fluids, “Get it off me. Get it off!” I never thought I would be a good vampire. I'm a little claustrophobic and it was kicking in big time. “OFF NOW!”

Siön Baptiste loomed over us and tore the man off me, launching what was left of the corpse across the cemetery. The body landed with a splat.

“I don't think I have ever been so happy to see someone,” I croaked, struggling to breathe through all the blood.

Siön Baptiste didn't say a word, he just took his jacket off and ripped the shirt from his body. I guess being attracted to someone when you're dying is a pretty morbid idea, but the look on his face, the beauty of his eyes and now his bare glistening muscular chest staring me in the face all had me panting. Or maybe the pole in my chest caused the panting. Either way it felt nice to have my last moments thinking about him.

“My angel,” I whispered, feeling myself slip into darkness. My head was spinning, the whole world was spiraling down ... down ...

“No, stay awake.” Power and light flowed through me, forcing my eyes open. Siön Baptiste knelt before me and he was glowing. “Am I dead?” I asked. “Is this heaven? Because if it is--” I took a breath and felt pain shooting through my lungs. “Man, that hurt. Wow, you look great, did you know that?” My mouth had a mind of its own and obviously it didn't want to give up and die.

“Don't talk, Samantha.” He knelt down and wiped the blood from my face with his shirt, careful to not jar my head. I wanted to run my hands down his chest and further, but they wouldn't budge. “You are not dead.”

I lifted my hands to his face. “Hold still, Samantha.” His voice washed over me, calming every nerve in my body. I felt no pain only the thrill of being so close to him.

“I will remove this spear and when I do you must take my blood,” he ordered.

“I'm not the least bit hungry right now,” I mumbled, coughing up more blood, deliriously high on his power pulsing through me. I wondered how much blood had I lost.

“Too much.” He answered my thought. A flash of fear crossed his face for just a moment

then he quickly tucked it away behind the emotionless stare of the vampire. "If you do not drink, you will die."

"I guess this isn't heaven then and I'm still pinned to the ground in a cemetery by a big stick?" I asked, on the verge of laughing. *Wow, he felt good.*

"It's a rod, and you must be quiet while I work."

"What are you doing to me? I feel so good." My head swam, a warm pleasurable feeling moving up and down my body. A euphoric high swirled around every nerve.

"I am taking your pain. Now quiet, Samantha, you are losing too much blood and you will die if you keep talking. When I remove this pole you must take my blood."

"Ahhh, I see what is happening. This is a conspiracy to keep me from talking." I giggled, high as a kite.

"No, but every time you talk you lose more blood. So please stop!"

Well, I didn't want to die now, did I? Any sane person would do what they needed to do to survive! How was I different than anyone else? I felt so good, how could this be considered dying? If this was what it was like to die, I could get addicted.

Siön Baptiste chuckled. "I can tell you are thinking too much, Samantha."

"How?"

"Your eyebrow goes up when you talk to yourself." He wrapped his hands around the spear. "I will try to stop the bleeding but my power will only hold you together for so long. Then you must help."

I could feel the pressure of his hands on the pole and his power pulsing through me. He dulled my pain and kept my blood from spilling out. It felt fabulous.

"Now, hold still, this will hurt, I can only dull the pain for a little longer." Beads of sweat formed across his furrowed brow. He focused all his power on me, and it was obvious even to a half drunk on power vampire that he wasn't going to last much longer.

His brows furrowed further together as he concentrated. Hesitating for a moment, he moved his hands to get a better grip on the pole. He took a deep breath and then stopped.

"What? Don't worry about hurting me. I don't think it's possible to have been in any more pain than I was before you used your mojo on me."

"I cannot remove it this way. The top of this post has a pointed arch, it will tear you even more." He stood, cursing. "I need to lift you."

Not giving me any time to argue, he scooped me up into his arms and slid me up the pole. I felt nothing other than the cold metal move inside the gaping hole in my body.

When I reached the top of the pole, he lifted me over his head and brought me to his chest, cradling me as he dropped to the ground. Kneeling, he held me off the frozen hard earth. Nudging my face gently toward his bare chest, he urged me to stay awake and feed.

"Please, Samantha, do not sleep," he whispered, as he rocked me gently, safely wrapped in his arms.

My eyes fluttered shut and then opened back up to see a tear slide down his face. Raising my hand to wipe the tear away, I whispered, "You are so wonderful." I giggled as his power flared to life, riveting my mind. It felt so good as it wrapped around my mind. *Drink, Samantha, my love.*

I hesitated for only a moment. His mind covered my thoughts, hugging me to him as he forced me to hear what he heard. I listened as the slow methodical beat of his heart sang its sweet melody in my ear. My indecision on whether to feed was brief. I had made up my mind living was more important than my fear of blood for my survival. I fought the weakness drifting over

me and sank my fangs into his chest. It was so sudden, he threw back his head in response. I drank greedily as the sweet metallic blood filled my veins. White heat coursed through me, containing such warmth and power. Old power.

Siön Baptiste bucked while I fed, his arousal pressed against my buttocks. My body began to heal itself immediately. He was strong enough for both of us. One hand pressed against my head bringing me closer. When I could drink no more, I released my grip and licked his wound softly. He fell back against the soft grass still holding me in his arms.

We lay there together while my body healed. "You are amazing." My fingers played with the dark hair covering his chest. "So soft and yet so strong." I laughed and then hiccupped as he held me. I've never felt this good in all my short life.

He kissed the top of my head whispering, "We need to get you home."

My thoughts cleared enough to ask, "What about the girl?" I turned to look for her and realized her body was missing. Whatever effect Siön Baptiste's power had on me was dimmed by the realization she was gone.

"The girl is gone." My chest closed completely and when the bleeding stopped altogether, Siön Baptiste levitated to his feet with me still held in his arms.

"Gone?" I questioned. He didn't answer me. He walked through the park without saying another word lost in thought still holding me tightly. Siön Baptiste didn't stop until we reached his car parked in an alley behind Carl's Laundromat.

"You can put me down now, I'm fine," I complained, the high of his power wearing off a bit. Ignoring me, he opened the car door and set me gently into the seat. He leaned in, buckling my seatbelt. "I really am okay. Why don't you go home or go do something vampirish?" I pleaded, feeling a little awkward about what just happened.

Still silent, he opened his door and slid in beside me. For several minutes, he stared into the darkness of the alley. The tension filled the small space around us. I fiddled with my torn clothing and stared out into the alleyway. I was in trouble.

I flicked the drying blood off my pants and pried at the globs of coagulating blood still stuck in my hair. Torn between hunger and nausea, I fought the tears that threatened to break loose. My torn pants were covered by Siön Baptiste's jacket. Sickened by the blood, my hands began to fidget with the hole in my shirt. The fact I needed a shower was only part of the reason I wanted to get on the road. "Are we going to sit here all night?"

I was greeted with more deafening silence. The car was filled with static energy causing the hair on my neck to stand on end. I started to get worried. He was zoned out. "Siön, are you okay?"

He reached over, grabbing my hand and squeezed it tenderly. "The werewolves outnumber us five to one. I am afraid we might need help."

"What happened to the photographer?"

"I killed him." His voice was casual and calculating. I shuddered at his deadly precision and lack of remorse.

"I wanted to ask him a few questions. We still have several murders to solve. He could have helped us find out who is behind all of this." I was aggravated that he killed him so easily. I was learning the talk of a vampire and how to sound tough, but when it came down to slaughtering a whole race of people, I wasn't sure I was up for the fight. Then again, watching them kill that woman and knowing they were out to kill me, helped ease my worries just a wee bit.

"Why ask when you can probe?" He chuckled, turning toward me. "You have so much to

learn, and so little time.”

Chapter 4

I nodded, for once I agreed with him. I needed to learn so I could fight these buggers. “Teach me then.”

His sudden smile actually took my breath away. Remembering his power flowing through me, the feel of his blood merging with mine, I began to sway in my seat. The heady scent of him filled my nostrils. I suddenly found the car claustrophobic with sexual energy. “My sweet Samantha, you do not know what you ask of me.” He lifted his hand and ran it down my cheek. I found myself leaning into him as he ran his thumb lightly over my bottom lip. “You know I love you and would do anything to protect you.”

I heard his words, but his thumb was too busy causing havoc on my body. Leaning back into the seat, I relaxed into the soft leather interior. All the tension eased from me. Being so close to Siön Baptiste was enough to catch the car, and my hair, on fire.

“Do you really want my help?” He waited patiently for me to answer.

Samantha Houston actually asking for help was amazing. I sighed loudly, knowing that I did indeed need him, and shrugged my shoulders. “Yes, I do.” I took a deep breath there, I gave in, and it didn’t feel that badly.

His eyebrows shot up in disbelief. “You do?”

“If I said it, I mean it. Will you help me?” I turned away to avoid his smug conquering smile.

He slid a finger to my chin turning my face to him. “It will cost you dearly.” There was no sarcasm or smugness in his look, just concern.

I didn’t like that cost-you-dearly mumbo jumbo, but what could I do? I really did need his help. I shrugged my shoulders. “Enough with the theatrics. Seriously, Siön Baptiste, vampires and werewolves need to realize everything isn’t so serious.”

He sat back, pulling away from me. My lips and face immediately missed the warmth of his touch. “Everything in our lives is serious, Samantha. We fight everyday to survive, always watching our backs for the next round of attacks. It is not a joke but something to fear. My concern is you do not take the power you have seriously enough.”

Blah... Blah... “Okay, so what now?”

His brows furrowed together, an angry look in his eyes. *I heard that*, he whispered in my mind.

“Oh, come on, it’s not the end of the world. All this gloom and doom crap gets old. You act as if we are all going to die at any--” I stopped mid sentence and then realized what almost happened to me tonight. Siön Baptiste’s eyebrows rose as he recognized my thoughts. “Crap.” I cursed, slamming my fist down on my thigh.

Winning from the pain shooting up my leg and my wrist, I gave up my stubbornness. *Guinness Book of World Records* would probably want an interview since it is the first time I’ve given in to anyone. I took a deep breath. “Tell me what to do, I’ll do it.” I hated feeling guilty for making light of the war that he had faced for all of his life. I’d only been involved for a few weeks and it was already causing my head to spin. I watched his face, wondering how he kept so cool and collected through all of this. His family forever fought, trying to survive both human

and Lycan attacks. Always fighting someone to survive. His eyes held pain and suffering I wasn't sure I'd ever understand, but I would try. My own heart ached with his pain. I lowered my eyes from his to hide from the sorrow they held.

"We follow Sevastian's plan. It is the only way we can defeat our enemies."

I noted the phrasing of "enemies" instead of enemy, but let it slide for now.

"There is only one way to defeat them," he said solemnly.

"What is his plan?" I was anxious to get started so I could take some freaking wolves down.

Siön Baptiste shrugged. "I do not know but whatever he decides it will work."

All sympathy thrown aside, I stared at him, opened mouthed.

"He has not revealed his plan to me," Siön Baptiste said defensively, shrugging his shoulders.

I threw up my hands, exasperated. "Oh my word, you don't know what he is planning? You are kidding right?"

"Listen to me for once, Samantha, please," he pleaded. "The werewolves we ran into tonight are but children. They are infecting more than we can kill. Their numbers increase, while ours decrease. Without proper training and nurturing they become rogue killers. Dangerous animals with no moral awareness and we must stop them."

It felt as though he was hiding something from me. I could sense it.

I hated werewolves more now than ever before. The death of the woman tonight would haunt me. Her eyes pleaded to survive and there was nothing I could do. "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it," I assured him.

He stared, one eyebrow rose, questioning me. His eyes took on a hint of humor as he laughed. I mean knee-slapping, adorable, sexy laughter that filled the car and the alley. "It isn't funny. I was being serious, but if you don't want me to...."

"Oh no, no ... I never in my wildest dreams thought you would comply with our wishes. I will have Sevastian explain everything."

I nodded. "I need to know why that werewolf was killing vampires and humans, or at least why he was taking pictures."

"His master is not a werewolf, but a vampire."

I gasped, shaking my head in disbelief as the revelation that the one behind the recent vampire deaths was a vampire sunk in slowly. "How do you know for sure?"

"His mind was shielded and it was a strong barrier. No werewolf could create a bond like that with his or her pack. A master vampire did this, and if I am right about whom, then we are in for the fight of our lives. I was just breaking through when I felt your pain."

He hesitated as if trying to figure out what to say next. "I believe this vampire is using the werewolves to destroy his competition. They have been documenting their work and sending it to my sect for months now. The first murder was the one that brought me to you. I almost felt guilty for my thankfulness because without his death we might never have met. But the most recent attacks have all had warnings." Turning, he whispered, "They will come for you next." His head dropped. "But I will not let them win." His whole body shook in anger as he let out his frustration, slamming his fist into the dashboard of the car. I flinched at the sudden sharp noise of the dashboard crumbling under pressure, his fist leaving a mark in the dashboard. "They will not have you, nor will they hurt you, Samantha. The queen must be warned of their plans."

"I was following you when you talked about the shield and the murders. You even had me when you started in about the wolves coming after me. But the queen? Do you mean of

England?”

“You have so much to learn about our history. We are talking about the king and queen of our realm.”

“You mean of the vampires?”

“Yes. We will need to seek their counsel. I will leave tomorrow and you will do what Sevastian asks of you.”

“Sure, but who is the queenie and kingie?”

He chuckled. “Is everything always a game to you?”

“Why not make life interesting, right?”

“Tazmaine and her consort, whoever that will be.”

“WHAT?” I shouted, and in the small confines of the car, it actually caused Siön Baptiste to flinch. It even hurt my sensitive hearing. “That beotch, excuse my language, is *your queen*?” Again, I was shouting.

He hesitated sensing my anger. “She has been our queen for hundreds of years. Despite her odd ways, she still deserves our loyalty.” He paused, and took a deep breath. “You cannot kill her, Samantha.”

I twisted his jacket in my hands. I wanted to ring that little wench’s neck.

“Why can’t I kill her? She caused Trevor’s death, she deserves some type of punishment.” My ears were still ringing from my first outburst. I still had to get used to the hypersensitive senses of a vampire.

“One does not simply kill the king or queen.” He stopped for a second tapping his chin. “Despite the fact we did kill her consort.” He sighed loudly.

“You mean Alistair was *the king*?”

“I know what you are thinking but she was not responsible for Trevor’s death.” I could feel him tense when I flinched.

I growled my anger threatening to explode. “She didn’t kill him with her own hands but she could have stopped it all.”

He rubbed his chin lost in thought. “You will not kill her, I cannot allow it. To do so would only condemn you and all you love.”

“Do not tell me what I can or cannot do. She killed the only thing I had left to love.”

His fingers dug into his chin, leaving white marks as if he was trying to hold back from strangling me. I started to realize that every time he had bad news or was upset, he played with his chin. He tapped a long finger on his lips before speaking and then calmly answered. “So you have no others you love?”

I shot a glance at him, trying to hide my confusion. “What does loving someone have to do with anything?”

He opened the car door, jumping out before giving me an answer. I squealed as my door popped open, the whole car shaking. *Oh great, he’s blown a gasket.* He grabbed my arm and hoisted me out into the alley. “What are you doing? Let me go,” I hollered.

“You are....” Before he could finish, he covered my open mouth with his. His kiss was far from gentle. Lips bruised mine while his tongue demanded entrance into my mouth. I fought the urge to give into his assault on my senses as he pressed me up against the car.

Let go of me, I pleaded in his mind.

Never! he groaned.

His brush against my mind triggered something deep inside. The wave of pleasure pulsing inside broke free of the barrier I had erected. My body gave in despite my mind-

screaming, *no*. I parted my lips and his tongue darted in effortlessly. His hold relaxed as I moved into the kiss.

Why do you resist that which you cannot control? The whisper of his voice in my head made me shiver with pleasure as his hips pressed sharply against mine.

Because I refuse to lose someone else I love. And with that, I gave him a shove, knocking him back. His eyes were almost black as he took a step back.

"Get in the car," he ordered, moving away from me without even looking back.

Bossy son of a gun.

"I heard that."

My legs buckled slightly, still affected by his kiss, but I had made up my mind. I could resist this devil! If it were the last thing I ever did, I would not love again.

"So, where were we?" I plopped back into the car slamming the door, trying to act like he didn't just rock my world. "Oh yes, we were talking about Alistair. He was the queen's consort slash king?" I slashed my hand across the car, accidentally hitting Siön Baptiste. "Oops. Sorry." Still trembling from our brief encounter, his blood was now coursing through me, burning my insides with pleasure. *Just great!*

"Yes, he was the king until we killed him."

Duh!

He continued, "Now, Tazmaine will be looking to replace him."

I smirked to myself imagining her majesty alone for the rest of her life. She deserved whatever she got. "How will she replace him?"

"She will choose one of her liking."

"Who? When? Where? How?"

He smiled the tension easing a bit in the car. "She has 'til three moons from the death of her king to choose a new consort."

"Well, that answers the when, now, what about who?"

"It could be anyone. She has always favored Sevastian, but she also craves power."

I hesitated, only briefly, before asking, "Would she choose you?"

He turned, facing me, taking my hand in his. "Quite possibly, she has the right to choose anyone in her territory."

"Oh." A sharp pain shot through my chest. My heart leaped into my throat. I guess it bothered me to think of him in her arms.

As if realizing my thoughts Siön Baptiste continued, "However, I would refuse."

I absently stroked his fingers with mine. They were so warm. "You can refuse the pain-in-the-arse queen?"

Siön Baptiste eyes were practically glowing. His fingers teased with mine, making it hard to concentrate on the topic at hand, which was saving my life and revenge. *What's new?*

He smiled. "I will do whatever it takes to ensure your safety."

I shook my head. "Oh no, you don't. You will not sleep with that ninny. Promise me," I demanded, getting a little irritated at queen ugly getting her fangs into him.

"Ninny?" he questioned, trying to hide the amusement in his voice. Siön Baptiste's smile broadened. "Does it make you jealous to think of me in her arms?"

I stiffened at his remark. *It did bother me, but I'd never admit to it.* "No, I am not jealous. I just think you shouldn't settle for someone's sloppy seconds, and who knows where that creepy witch has been." He moved closer and I kept rambling. "You might catch some vampire disease. Yuck, how can you even suggest it at all? That woman has probably been with every vampire

from here to....”

He cut off my words with a kiss to end all kisses. His hands slid into my hair, holding me in place. Not that I would have backed away from that kiss, not in this lifetime, or my next, or the next ... *Stop thinking and kiss me!* he demanded, his voice grazing my mind. I surrendered to his kiss. My whole body went up in flames as his tongue played dirty tricks on my mouth, exploring and melting away any resolve to resist him. A deep growl resonated from his chest as his fingers tightened their grip on my hair, forcing me to lean closer to him. Our kiss was hungry and filled with need.

He started to pull away. I reached up to keep him from escaping but he snapped back, leaving my head spinning and my breathing uneasy. “I will not be with her. You have no worries of me leaving you. I have eyes for only one future queen.”

My mouth fell open, lips still trembling. I lifted my hand and touched my lip, the taste and smell of him still filling my senses. “Wow.”

He gave me a crooked grin with that masculine, sexy face and I couldn’t help but smile back. “Is *wow* all you can say?”

I shook my head up and down in an over exaggerated, *yes* motion while my mind was clearing and then whispered. “Wow.” A devious grin formed across my still-tingling lips.

“I will have to remember to use this method of shutting you up in the future.” He chuckled, his tongue licking the bottom of his lip as if still tasting me.

I watched the incredibly sexy motion and stammered as I replied. “You...you know you could be her king if you wanted too. Do ... don’t hold back on my account.” God, I felt like a bumbling idiot around him. He made me feel like a woman and I wasn’t sure if I liked it, or despised him for it. My body enjoyed the humming sensations he gave me but my mind screamed with rebellion.

“Ah, my sweet Samantha, what will we do with you.” He leaned back in the seat stretching out his long legs, jeans fitting perfectly around his sculpted muscular thighs. He shifted his weight and the whole car moved with him. “You still do not realize the role you will play in my life and the lives of all vampires and werewolves.” He sighed, his eyes holding a deep sorrow. “I wish I could bear your burden, but you alone must realize your destiny. However, if I can change your fate it will be done.”

“I’m not sure I believe in destiny or fate.” The buzzing disappearing with his words like a slap to the face. *Reality check, this is all business with him.*

“Everyone has a destiny they fulfill and even Samantha Houston cannot hide from hers.”

“So then, big guy, if you know so much, what is my fate? Tell me, I want the truth,” I asked, suddenly very aware of the emotion on his face. He was afraid, but quickly masked it when he noticed my concern. “And just to let you know, no matter what you tell me, its not going to sway how I live or think.”

He smiled, obviously trying to ease the sudden panic that swept over me.

I shifted in the seat, feeling the weight of his eyes on me. “Just tell me. I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

“The elders speak of a woman who will end the war between the Lycans and vampires, saving the world from being destroyed. She will have a son who will annihilate the Dracomeres, demons of the underworld. It is only through her death that the gate between hell and earth will be closed.”

“Ummmm, okay, maybe I shouldn’t have asked. Why hasn’t anyone mentioned me dying ... and dying ... and, oh yeah, me DYING. Or better yet, having a baby? Why didn’t you tell me

this before tonight?”

“Would you have met me at the Silver Fang if I had told you this before?”

“Heck no, I would have kicked your bloodsucking arse out of the building.”

He grinned. “Need I say more?”

I mumbled a few choice words under my breath, knowing full well he heard everything I said. He reached for my hand and I pulled back, wallowing in my anger.

“The prophecy is unclear about a lot of things, Samantha. There is always room to change and alter your destiny.”

Then I decided to simply change the subject of me dying, having a baby, saving the world and closing a gate between heaven and hell, and did I mention dying? I was tired and now wasn't the time to dwell on the trouble I'd be in one day. I needed to concentrate on the trouble I was in right at this moment with Mr. Sexy himself watching me as if I were wearing a prize ribbon around my neck.

“So, the vampires behind these murders led us to believe it was the werewolves, didn't they?” I had suspected someone backing them, prodding the wolves on, but still couldn't believe we had been so thoroughly fooled. They'd first attacked *The Silver Fang* and then other locations.

“I will not let anyone harm you, Samantha, I promise.” And with that, Siön Baptiste started the car, taking the hint I was done with the discussion of my saving the world. “We need outside help, Samantha, and Sevastian knows exactly how to get that help. I will have him call you tomorrow. Whatever we can do to save your life must be done now.”

“Two things I'd like to mention,” I said thirty minutes later as I was getting out of his car heading to my house. “First, you drive like a maniac.” He laughed, watching me as I headed to the door of my house. “And secondly, tell Sevastian to be at my office tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Samantha.”

I kept walking without turning around and hollered over my shoulder, “Why are you thanking me? I haven't done anything yet.”

“Thank you for trusting me enough to allow our help,” he answered as I turned to enter the house.

I waved and slipped into my house, shutting the door behind me. Leaning up against the frame, I closed my eyes and waited patiently for his car to speed away, but he was still outside.

I love you Samantha. It was just a faint whisper in my head and on my mouth, and then he sped down the road blocking my mind before I could reply.

Chapter 5

“Ma’am the library closes at midnight on weekends.” The lady’s voice was exactly how you would imagine a librarian to sound. Nasally and smart, neither of which I was.

“Okay, how do I get there?” I held the receiver away from my head so Sevastian could hear.

He leaned into the phone forcing his body to touch mine. His breath against my ear made me want to run my fingers through his long auburn hair, but I resisted the temptation. It wasn’t a sexual desire, just something pretty and soft to be admired and touched.

“Are you coming from St. Charles Avenue?”

I watched Sevastian nod, the light from the lamp in the corner highlighting his hair. “Yes, we are,” I answered.

His pants brushed up against my leg, sending butterflies fluttering in my stomach. I wanted to smack myself at the moment but decided to ignore my traitorous body’s reaction to being this close to Sevastian. Both him and his brother would be the death of me someday.

The woman continued. “You need to turn north onto Broadway and keep going until the second stoplight, which is Willow Street. Turn uptown onto Willow and drive two blocks. At the second block intersection you will come to a street called Newcomb. Enter at the main entrance to the campus and drive three more blocks until you get to Freret. It is the second building on the right. The library is an old three-story, red brick building. You can’t miss it.”

“Enter through the campus entrance. Got it! Thank you for your help.” I hung up the phone. Sevastian stayed pressed against me and smiled.

“Back up.” I pushed his chest and got up off the desk. “What next?” I asked, attempting to distract him and myself. Being in the same room so close to each other was a recipe for disaster. As my need for blood awakened, it seemed to control my passionate side. My hormones were rogue and disobedient little rascals. I had to force myself to hold my reactions in check before I got a reputation of being a floozy. I chuckled. Samantha Houston, a slut? The same Samantha who wouldn’t give any man the time of day because I was fixated on my carrier. Guess things do change.

“So what next?” I asked, irritation growing.

“We break in.” His emerald eyes sparkled with mischief. “I will drive.” He snatched the keys he’d placed on my desk earlier and started toward the door.

“A lot of help you are, Sevastian. Is this Siön Baptiste’s idea of a sick joke?” I laughed, trying not to believe his insane idea.

He grinned. “No, it is not a joke.”

“It’s almost midnight now, we won’t make it in time before it closes.”

“We do not want to make it in time. Nobody at the library will give just anyone access to the special collection. It is too valuable an asset for the library to trust in just anyone’s hands.” He cocked his head to one side, smiling even more mischievously.

“Are you insane?” My eyebrows shot up, realizing what he was planning. “Oh no, we aren’t going to break in, you can forget it!”

“It is a public library. And we are the public, therefore it is ours, is it not?”

“No, it’s a private library owned by the college. I am going to live a very long time, Sevastian, and during that time I do not plan on spending any of it in jail.”

“Siön Baptiste said you would cooperate,” he mumbled.

“Listen, your brother coerced me into agreeing to a plan that I now find has me breaking the law.”

He shook his head. “My brother said you made the choice of your own free will.”

I ground my teeth. “He fooled me like always.”

“Just like he fooled you into sleeping with him? Just like he fooled you into drinking his blood? Do not take this lightly, Samantha. I read your thoughts, your dreams. Have you forgotten so soon?”

I sighed, resigned to the fact he was right. Siön Baptiste had warned me, begged me, not to bite him, yet the instinct to do so took over. It wasn’t his fault I was a bloodsucker. Sevastian and Siön Baptiste had been raised as brothers, but they only found out later in life they were not blood brothers. I found myself attracted to both men for different reasons. Sevastian had explained once that because they both had taken my blood, we were all connected and my attraction was but a normal response for a vampire. Only time would tell what was normal anymore. I got up to grab my jacket and he swung me into his arms, holding me firmly against his chest. I resisted the urge to wrap my body around him and instead, stubbornly, let my gaze meet him straight on, chin held high. He was smirking down at me. “I will make sure to visit you in jail.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. We both laughed. “Let me go, before I kick you,” I scolded.

He took a deep breath and held me as if he might never let me go. “You need to feed, Samantha.” I tried to pull away but his grip tightened.

Just the mention of food set my stomach growling. I knew the hunger was there but had been successfully ignoring the pain. Being so close to Sevastian and his warmth, stirred my need for blood, brought it back ten-fold. I licked my lips looking at his neck as he spoke.

He cocked his head to one side revealing the long muscled line of his neck. “Feed, Samantha, keep up your strength.”

I pulled away from the lull of his heartbeat and body. “Let’s go before it gets too late.”

“Siön Baptiste was right, you are a very stubborn woman.” Sevastian grabbed his leather jacket and stormed from the room.

“Siön Baptiste can kiss my....” I hollered after him.

I could hear his laughter echo through the building. “He would love to *ma cheri*.”

I stuck my black leather book into my jacket and left the office, locking the door behind me. “He calls me stubborn and he’s the one who wants to break into a library.” I followed, screaming down the darkened hallway, “I might be stubborn but you are a criminal!”

And soon you will be too. His voice was just a feather in my mind.

Ignoring his comment, I snuggled into my jacket, stepping out into the cool October breeze. Sevastian had pulled his car up to the curve. He owned a beautiful, black 1967 Mustang, fully refurbished. It was gorgeous, just like the owner.

He leaned over to open the door and I hopped in. My decision-making abilities had diminished lately. I wasn’t certain his concocted plan was going to work. With my recent luck, I’d be caught and end up in jail. Sevastian gunned the engine and jerked us out onto the highway. I quickly fastened my seatbelt for peace of mind more than safety. Getting in the car wasn’t one of my brightest moments, and as he took a curve on two wheels, I knew the night was only going to get crazier.

Chapter 6

“Have I ever told you how crazy you are?” Sevastian grumbled.

“This was not my idea. You are the crazy fool who decided breaking in was better than just visiting during normal working hours.”

Another decision I wasn't proud of, I thought to myself as I dangled from the third story of the library. Figuring I could make the jump onto the fire exit, I found out only too soon that my vampire powers were limited by wardrobe selection.

“If I had known we were going to be acting as professional cat burglars tonight I would have worn something more criminal-like.” I grunted, struggling to grasp onto the nearby railing when I missed my target. I actually overshot by about a foot. Luckily, my martial arts training allowed me to turn enough to reach for something. Sevastian just stood watching me, silently laughing. Oh wait, he was just downright laughing. The alley below filled with the echo of his laughter as I repeatedly shushed him. If anyone was on the ground, all they had to do was look up and get a nice view of my rear dangling three stories up.

“What?” Sevastian leaped with ease onto the platform, the same target I had missed. He casually leaned down and offered me his hand. Not a worry or care in the world. He was trying hard not to show his amusement but failed miserably. The smirk across his face was enough to make a grown woman have a tantrum.

Would I die if I fell? I wondered if my pride was worth the chance of falling, versus accepting Sevastian's help.

“Just take my hand, you stubborn girl.”

“Oh, that does it!” I refused his hand, and with all my might swung myself nearly onto the platform. Dragging my leg up first and then reaching for Sevastian's ankle as support. As I rolled, I heard something tear. “Crap, my skirt!” My head was smashed against his leg as I cursed repeatedly.

My skirt had ripped up the seam and a frigid breeze now cascaded over my rump.

“Are you going to kiss my feet all night or are we going to continue on our escape? We have wasted enough time.” Sevastian pulled me up and started walking down the fire escape.

“The second floor window is open.”

I scrambled to my feet. “Kiss your feet? Oh, don't start with me, you smart aleck. I've never asked for your help nor do I need anything from you.” He ignored me and moved down the stairs. “Wait, what window.” I turned to look over the edge and saw nothing. “I don't see a window....” When I turned back around, he was gone. Just like that, he'd disappeared without a trace. There was an exit door but it was locked. A wee little patter of panic fluttered through me when I realized he was gone. There was no window. “Sevastian?” I whispered, kneeling down to cover my exposed bum with my jacket. “Sevastian!”

There was a distant howl in the background. I stilled immediately, holding my breath. “Crap. Crap.” The howling was closer this time.

Something grabbed my arm, yanking me aside. Sevastian's hand went over my mouth. He barely managed to stifle my scream in time. He pointed below. Not more than fifty yards down the alley, a group of college students headed in our direction. They were hooting and

hollering. I inhaled deeply, relieved that my fears were unfounded. No werewolves, just a bunch of bratty kids having fun.

Sebastian pulled me against him into the shadows. We waited as the kids drew closer. He pressed his face against my cheek, slid his arms around my waist and down my back, bringing me even closer.

I could feel heat rushing to my face as I felt him begin to thicken and harden against my hip. "I'm sorry for all that has happened," he whispered in my ear.

I squirmed in his embrace, nuzzling my face into his neck. "It's okay," I growled. "It isn't your fault." Pausing, I inhaled the sweet sent of his blood. "It's really okay," I said as if trying to convince myself everything would be okay. "It wasn't your fault your brother is a pain in the neck."

He chuckled. "Literally."

How I was attracted to the two most annoying men I've ever met, I'll never know. I couldn't totally blame them, at least they'd warned me that my senses would be heightened, even my sexual energy. Just last week I was rummaging through the grocery store trying to live a normal life, but finding it hard to concentrate, when the men gawked and followed me throughout the store. The vampire mojo had made me irresistible to humans. Siön Baptiste had warned that my hunger for blood and intimacy would increase the more I resisted. I was fine with handling the bloodlust but was still getting used to paying more attention to men. Until I found a mate or life partner, I was at the mercy of pheromones according to the books I'd read. Despite all my worries, I knew my life would never be exactly the same. I looked at Sebastian and smiled.

Everybody has that one defining moment in their life when what they are and where they are going becomes so clear. As I clung to my partner in crime while hiding from a bunch of college students, I had an epiphany. Sebastian, in all his glory, was not the man or vampire for me. I had an overwhelming attraction to him but I was not in love with him. I wanted to bite him, not love him.

With that sudden realization, my body relaxed even further into him. His pulse quickened under my mouth, beckoning for sweet release. He pressed his hands to my head and pressed my mouth almost painfully against his neck.

"Drink." He beckoned to me. "Drink."

It wasn't all about sex, it was the need to taste his life force, his blood. "No," I croaked, pulling away. The last shred of my humanity was hanging on for dear life. Giving in at this point felt like losing the battle for my soul. The kids had safely rounded the corner of the building exiting the alley. "I'm fine let's get this over with."

He moved from the shadow, his eyes glowing softly. If I weren't mistaken, he wanted me to feed from him almost as much as I wanted to feed. It hit me that biting me would be a real turn on for him. I knew how good it felt when Siön Baptiste sunk his teeth into me, so I wondered if I could return the feeling when I fed.

Shaking my head, I took the thought and pushed it to the back of my mind. "Oh gross, get it together. Jeesh, I'm not going to drink from you now if you are going to get all googly-eyed on me."

Shrugging his shoulders in annoyance at my reaction, he turned away. "Follow me." He swung himself over the edge of the fire escape railing as if nothing had happened and only stood for a moment before leaping onto the edge of the building.

I watched him as he inched across the edge of the building. He leaned in and opened a

window, disappearing from my sight completely.

“Great, we are breaking into a library. Of all things, we couldn’t break into something worthwhile like a bank,” I complained, as I hauled myself over and followed his path along the small ledge. Despite being immortal, I was still not comfortable with heights. I inched along until I reached the window. Taking one foot, I wrapped it around the corner and onto the windowsill.

Just about the time I got one leg into the open window, I lost the footing of my other leg, slipping from the ledge. I didn’t even have time to scream. Sevastian had a hold of me before I even had a chance to fall. He dragged me inside, taking my hand as he began to yank me down the darkened corridor.

“You make enough noise to wake the dead,” he mumbled.

“Oh, whatever. Wait, I dropped my book.” I had shoved my little black book into the inside pocket of my jacket and now it was gone. It had numbers of contacts that were willing to help me find Ty. I couldn’t lose it. I struggled to get him to stop but he was far too strong.

“You mean this book?” Sevastian held my black leather-bound book in front of my face. His eyebrow shot up questioning me.

I snatched it from him and stuffed it into my jacket pocket. “How did you get that?”

He just smiled and continued on his way.

“You turd!” I cried, slightly embarrassed by my lack of concentration and angry at his thieving manipulative kisses. He had slipped his hand inside my coat while we kissed and snagged it. “You are a thief and now you are corrupting me,” I accused him. He ignored me, which only fueled my annoyance even more. “Where are we going?”

I had to jog to catch up to his long legs. He was walking and I was forced to skip, nearly running to keep up. “Which way? How do you know if this is the right way?”

There were offices on either side of the hallway. One office had an electric clock. It was 1:30 in the morning. I was grateful to still enjoy the sunlight while many vampires were forced to retreat. Only three vampires in the country could walk in the light and all three were located in New Orleans, thanks to Nicholi. Despite a pang of pain in the morning as the sun rose and some weakness throughout the day, I was able to keep my job and function like any other tax-paying citizen. This strutting around at night was ruining my schedule. Although more alert at night, I still needed my rest. “Great, another night of no sleep,” I whined, ramming myself into an apparently very sturdy wall. “Ouch, watch where you are going.” Stars flashed across my eyes and I looked up to find Sevastian scowling down at me. “What? It’s not my fault you are a bully.”

“You are the worst criminal I have ever seen.” His eyebrows drew together as his scowl deepened. Obviously trying to frighten me into submission. “If you insist on this constant rambling I will leave you here to fend for yourself. Remember, we do this for your benefit.”

“Go ahead, leave me. I am fine without any of you bat-brains,” I retorted angrily. “But before you leave me, why are we here again?”

He growled, I mean he actually growled at me then walked away, leaving me in the hall by myself. “You’re a wonderful bodyguard by the way, leaving me in the dark alone where any werewolf or murderer might attack me.” Not that I was really worried, but in some sick way I wanted him to feel bad. So much for me being part of this big prophecy crapola.

He stopped suddenly, swinging around. “Right now I am tempted to give you over to the werewolves.” His eyes were actually glowing, and then without warning, he strutted off. “It might make all our lives easier,” he called out over his shoulder.

Chapter 7

"I'll make your life easier," I mocked to myself. "Turn you over to the werewolves," I repeated sarcastically. "I'll tell you what I need, a vacation from all of you."

"This way." Sevastian ignored my complaining and headed down a long set of stairs.

"This is so typical of a horror movie." Every nerve in my body told me something was wrong with this picture. In the movies, the good guys were always killed going into some darkened stairwell leading down to hell. Without doubt, the whole scenario was leading up to a perfect horror flick death. "We should be smarter than this, Sevastian. Everyone always dies heading down into some dark forbidden place." I could feel the blood rush to my face as I cursed quietly behind his back. He was getting good at ignoring me and that just aggravated me even more. Nobody ignores me and gets away with it, nobody. I felt like a child whining about everything, but somehow, talking aloud seemed to calm my rapidly beating heart. "It's like spidey senses, they warn you ahead of time not to do something," I continued, trying to get his attention. "Didn't you ever see Spider Man?"

He grunted.

"I hate being ignored," I grumbled. He answered with another grunt.

"You can grunt all you want but I can ignore you just as easily as you ignore me, if not better."

He grunted his answer again.

"Growling and grunting gets you nowhere with me." Sighing loudly for him to hear my annoyance, I sped up. "My spidey senses are tingling, this is bad, very bad."

I followed carefully, ignoring the nagging feeling that a monster hid behind every corner. Lucky for me my sight had definitely improved over the last few weeks, so following him down the winding dark staircase was easy. I continued trailing behind him, using my nearly impeccable vision to bring every shadow to life. As I followed, my inhuman super night vision guided my way, but my spidey senses were ringing off the hook. Something wasn't right. I just couldn't put my finger on it. My gift of sight in darkness was turning out to be quite a blessing. The gift of knowing some impending doom would occur. You'd have to ask me tomorrow, I'm not even certain if the doom ticker is working.

"Here." He pointed to a second set of stairs as we began to descend them.

"Oh, the growling, grunting ninny actually does speak."

He smirked.

I lost track of my annoyance for a minute and it dawned on me just how big the library was. "I thought this building was only three stories."

"The special collections of books are stored in the basement."

"Great! The basement!" I mumbled. "All monsters are kept in the basement."

"You are a monster, should you be kept in a basement?" he added.

"What is so special about the books?" I asked, brushing off his comment about my monsterhood.

"Samantha Houston," his voice bellowed in my ear. "Enough with questions. I have dealt with all I can stand for in one night. Any normal being would have strangled you after five

minutes of your constant rambling.”

I backed away from him, giving me enough of a head start if he tried anything funny. “I’m just trying to learn the ropes here. I mean, toss me a bone, will you?”

“Toss you a what?”

“Forget it. You vampires need to get out more often in the real world.” We reached the bottom of the stairs much quicker than I thought. One single light in the far corner showed a locked gate. “I guess we need to break into that room?”

“That was a question you already knew the answer to, so why ask it at all?”

“You are such a grouchy vampire. To think I thought you were the nice brother.”

He pushed me aside and walked up to the cage. Behind the fence-like structure there were tons of books stacked in dusty piles on shelves and tables. He took the lock in his hand and yanked it. With that one swift motion, the lock broke. The gate squeaked as it opened and I was hurriedly ushered into the room.

“Will you tell me what we are doing here?”

Sebastian grabbed my hand, pulling me to the back of the cage. Dusty books covered the shelves and racks. He maneuvered skillfully through all the dirt and grime without getting a drop of dust on himself. I, however, was dragged behind him, helplessly banging into shelves and books. When we finally made it to an old wooden door, I was covered in dirt and he was spotless. With one quick kick, the door splintered into pieces as the remaining half crashed to the floor.

“You didn’t have to make a mess. We could have picked the lock.”

He shoved me through the door into a darkened room. The basement window was high and close to the ceiling but it let in enough moonlight so that we could see what we were doing. Sebastian pulled out a flashlight and started searching in a pile of books.

“If you would tell me what we are looking for, I could help you find it,” I complained, none too happy about the situation.

“We need to find the *Livre de Sang*.”

“Okay, let’s pretend I don’t speak French,” I reminded him.

“It translates as the *Book of Blood*, the guide of our people.” He continued rifling through the stack of old books.

“Why would it be here?” I asked.

“The original books of our people have been guarded by the elders themselves for thousands of years. They are written in many different languages. It would take weeks, if not months, to get permission to see the originals and even longer to translate the information. The books we seek now are copies translated from the original texts. They will be the most accurate of all copies. Most elders thought these copies were destroyed in the Chicago Fire. However, it is rumored some had survived, or at least we hope they survived.”

“The Chicago Fire?”

“Yes, the great fire of Chicago in eighteen seventy-one.” He cocked his eyebrow, questioning my response.

I shrugged. “I thought that was started by a cow.”

He chuckled, continuing to search among the dust bunnies. “That story was made up to protect our kind. The fire started in the home of our vampire king.”

“Wow, so all the history books are wrong?” I was shocked. It actually was somewhat cool that I could finally say I knew something most people didn’t know. The little piece of knowledge gave me a sense of intelligence. It would make a great Jeopardy question.

“*Oui*,” he sighed, waving his hand around the room. “You can start searching anytime you feel like it.”

I snorted, walking to the far corner of the room. “You vampires and your royalty. Do you at least get to vote who becomes your royal pains in the arses?” I asked, brushing off dirt from my torn skirt. The shelves were old and rotted. I swept a cobweb away and grabbed the biggest book on the shelf. It was ornately decorated with snakeheads, bats and wolf.

“Our king and queens are brought into power by destroying their predecessors,” he answered from behind a pile of books.

“Isn’t that a little old school?” The book was heavy. I brought it to a small table under the window and set it down. It was locked. “I mean, come on, queen and king?” I laughed. “I told Siön Baptiste it was ridiculous, and of all people, Tazmaine?”

“Tazmaine has been in rule for over a thousand years. It is how we pass our knowledge down from generation to generation. The elders create our rules and the queen and king ensure we abide by them.”

“I don’t even think Tazmaine follows the rules, so how can she enforce them?”

He rambled on about respect and honor as I ran my fingers gently over the worn, cracked leather of the book. I blew on the cover and the dust flew everywhere. Coughing, I took the sleeve of my jacket and wiped the rest of the dirt away.

The print was burned into the hide of the book. “*Liver de sung*.” I read the words carefully.

“What did you say?” Sevastian had already abandoned his pile of dust and was heading toward me.

“I don’t know what it says, I can’t read French.”

He leaned over the table using the flashlight to read the cover. “*Livre de Sang*.” He laughed. “This is it. I cannot believe you found it so quickly.”

“I’m not totally helpless,” I grumbled.

He chuckled. “Sometimes I wonder.”

He took the book and turned it toward him. His hand disappeared inside the neckline of his shirt and reappeared with a key. Taking the key off the thick chain, he inserted it into the lock and with one click, the book opened.

My adrenaline was in hyperactive drive. Breaking into the library had been successful and now we had what we needed.

I peeked over Sevastian’s shoulder while he turned the pages. The first page of the book was all in French. Nothing I could decipher. Sevastian flipped through the pages until he got to a section with a picture of a werewolf. I moved closer to look at the picture. There was a man in a cape, and behind him, a werewolf. In the corner of the drawing was a woman in white.

Sevastian started to read the inscription. “*À ceux qui m'appellent j'aide de volonté*.” He paused. “To those who summon me I will aide. *Un sacrifice de sang est exigé*. A blood sacrifice is required. *Un doit être fait de lycan et vampire décents pour appeler le fléau*.”

He paused, looking up at me then repeated what he’d read. “One must be made of Lycan and vampire descent to invoke the scourge.”

“The scourge?”

“To summon the punisher.” He flipped through a few more pages. “It is not here. The spell is not here.” He slammed the book shut.

I opened it back up, flipping through the pages. “Are you sure?” The last page in the book was ripped out. Only half of it remained. “What about this?” It had a picture of a man in

black and a woman in white holding hands.

“Le Livre de la Douleur.” He read the heading, which hadn’t been torn. “Of course, the Book of Pain. Look for a book with a skeleton on it,” he commanded.

I walked back over to the shelf where I found the Book of Blood. On the top shelf there was a book covered in cobwebs. “Oh gross.” I stepped up on the bottom shelf and carefully reached up, barely getting my fingers around the binding. I took another step onto the next shelf and nearly lost my footing. The whole shelf began to wobble and shift under the pressure of my weight. “Crap!” Sevastian was too busy tossing books here and there to notice my predicament as I began to tumble backwards.

I fell to the ground with a thud and froze, watching the whole shelf move back and forth threatening to topple over on me. Thank goodness, it stopped moving. I sat up and flipped through the pages. The book was torn and shredded. It almost looked as if a huge claw mark had torn through some of the pages. I could barely make out the skull on the cover.

Standing, I brushed off my blouse and skirt and fixed my hair. “Maybe this is it.”

Sevastian looked up from where he was surrounded by a pile of books, cobwebs hanging from his hair and face. He sighed. “Could it be the bumbling thief struck gold again?”

“At least this bumbling idiot....” I stopped laughing at the look on his face. He was a mess, an adorable, dangerous mess. I almost started to laugh again until his eyebrows shot up, angrily warning me I had crossed the line.

He stalked around the decaying books and leaped over the table taking me into his arms. My heart was doing a full onset of somersaults at the look in his eyes and what it promised. I started to say something but never got the chance as he covered my mouth with his.

My mind became a big pile of mush. I melted into his arms while his tongue explored my mouth. It was like an immediate fire roared inside me and the only way to put out the flames was to blanket myself in the feel of him. He pulled away and I jerked him back. His lips hovered dangerously close, stopping short of kissing me again. I wanted to feel those silky lips and taste his breath. “I think it is best if you try not to talk the rest of the evening,” he whispered.

I started to say something but he put a finger to my mouth. Even as his finger scorched my skin, my legs buckled. “Do not speak,” he warned. “You need to learn to control your ardor.”

“My ardor?” My eyebrow shot up questioning him. “Why is it my fault? You are the oldest here and should show more control. I’m just a baby vampire,” I scolded. “Siön Baptiste said I couldn’t control my emotions like an ancient.”

He bowed his head. I could feel him on the verge of losing complete control over the situation. All resolve was slowly seeping away. His head slowly lifted. I squirmed against him, trying to put distance between us, but it only brightened his fiery gaze. “Do not struggle,” he growled, laying his head on my shoulder. “If you know what is good for you, hold still.” His grip was tightening even as he spoke. “In over three centuries I have not lost control and I will not begin tonight.” He spoke aloud as if to convince himself, not me.

I stilled against him, whispering, “Don’t speak and don’t struggle, what *can* I do?”

He jerked away from me taking the book with him. “Amazing.”

“It’s not my fault you have no control.”

He glared at me shaking his head. “It does not matter whose fault it is.”

“But you would be the first to blame me if it was my fault,” I argued.

“Samantha, we do not have time to argue.”

“Fine, then don’t argue.” Taking a deep breath, I stood beside him. “It looks like part of it has been torn to shreds by a werewolf or something.”

He was looking at me, not the book. “Yes, it does.”

“And right here, look.” I turned the cover and pointed out the picture. “It is the same as the Book of Blood.” He took a step forward but never took his eyes off me.

“Isn’t this the same?” My finger traced the form of a man with a hood. “This must be the Punisher.”

Sevastian shook his head and directed his attention back to the book. He blinked, following the movement of my finger. Whatever trance he’d been in, had passed. I had a feeling that was good for me. He had gotten a grip over his emotions once again. *Very good.*

He traced a path over my finger and then grabbed the book. He ripped out the page and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Well, what did it say?” I probed.

“Let’s go.” His mood suddenly became very serious. The drastic change in his features had me more than a little worried. He started for the door. “We need to get out of here now.”

“What is wrong?”

“Do you not feel it? Something is out there.” He nodded to the basement window.

I stood for a moment concentrating on my surroundings when it hit me and I started moving. Leaping over the table I shouted, “How did they find us?”

Sevastian didn’t pause to answer. “After you.” He pointed to the door and didn’t have to ask twice for me to obey this time.

Whatever was stalking us outside was big, bad and ugly, and I knew we had to get out of there in a hurry.

I hesitated as a deafening howl pierced the night. It was a loud resonating noise, filled with demonic power, and nobody in his or her right mind would want to stick around to find out what was behind that cry. We had almost reached the top of the stairs leading to the first floor when whatever was outside the building crashed through a window and met us head on. Shards of glass hit the wall and floor.

Of all the nights to be without a weapon, this just had to be one of them. Siön Baptiste and Sevastian had both explained that when I became powerful enough, weapons would hold no value. But right now, I couldn’t help the fact that they made me feel safe.

And staring into the demonic eyes before me, a gun filled with silver bullets would have definitely come in handy.

Chapter 8

The creature crouched, its glowing eyes watching our every move. Its massive body was blocking the only way out of the building. Sevastian shoved me behind his tall 6'4" frame, protecting me. The werewolf, once in human shape, now had no evidence of being a man. Its fangs were in multiple sharp rows, dripping with saliva. The red eyes bore down on us with hatred. You could feel the creature's anger and fear seeping into our very souls.

Eyeing up the creature then Sevastian, I wasn't certain he would be able to best the monster in a fight. I had to turn away from all that rage and anger. Sevastian reached into his jacket as the giant began to rise to a full eight feet of monster. Slowly, it stood to its full height, large enough that its ears were pressed back against the ceiling.

It completely blocked the hall. It took a step forward and Sevastian took one step back. I had to move down a step to keep from falling. The hatred this creature had for us pounded at my mind. I wanted to scream over the rage it so easily wielded.

When I shoot, you run. Sevastian's message was silent and in our thoughts. He had a gun in hand. At least one of us was prepared.

I won't leave without you, so don't even ask.

So stubborn. I often wonder why my brother still loves you. Now move or I will shove you into the path of this oncoming creature, he snarled in my mind.

Fine, but you are coming too.

I will follow.

Without even a second to react, the creature lunged at us, as if it sensed that we were going to flee. Sevastian got off two shots by the time I was halfway down the stairs, running full force with inhuman vampire speed.

I couldn't hear him or the creature over the sound of the gun, but I felt them both at my heel. I tore through the cage, managing to glance back toward Sevastian. He slammed into me, dragging me along with him to the back of the cage. The beast banged into the cage, toppling shelves of books over. Its large frame could not fit through the door.

We had only a few seconds to figure a way out. Sevastian grabbed the Book of the Blood and broke the basement window. He removed his jacket and cleared the glass and debris lining the inside of the window.

I wasn't sure whether I could make it through the window or not and I was nearly positive Sevastian would not fit. Managing to lift myself up on the ledge of the window, I slid through, immediately turning to give Sevastian my hand.

"There is no way I will fit through this window. You must get to the car. I will meet you out-front."

"You can make it. Shimmy yourself through," I cried out.

"I will not fit, now go. *Go*, Samantha, you do me more harm than good!"

Emerald eyes pleaded with me as he grabbed hold of my hand. "You will need these." He handed me the keys to his car.

Smiling, he turned to face the creature, which by that time had wedged its way through the gate and entered the room. The werewolf screamed and Sevastian hissed as their bodies

clashed together in a flurry of claws and fangs

“Go, Samantha!” As Sevastian turned to look at me, he was slashed in the chest by the monster.

I hesitated for just a moment before turning away from the fight. I ran down the dark alley looking in vain behind me for any sign of Sevastian.

As I rounded the corner, my body and neck crashed into an outstretched claw. I was staring death in the face and it had wrapped its long leathery fingers around my neck, cutting off my air supply. My lungs gave way as I coughed and kicked frantically. It raised me higher into the air so I was looking down into its distorted face. The werewolf slammed me against the wall repeatedly until I felt something give in my back. The pain pulsed up and down my spine.

This can’t be happening again, I thought. Its muzzle drew close, stopping short of touching my nose. It pulled back, sniffing the air, and then moved closer, inhaling my scent as it stood before me. Its wet, slimy nose streaked across my neck. It whined softly as its tongue licked my cheek. My breathing ceased as my lungs burned, unable to grasp what the creature was doing to me. My sight glazed over as I began to struggle. The monster’s fingers tightened.

Willing myself to calm down, I let my power fill me. I worked my energy through my body, forcing it into a zone of calmness. Its lips peeled back, revealing the elongated fangs. I smirked, been there done that. The thing yanked me away from the wall, only to slam me back into it when I didn’t respond. Something crunched in my head and neck. *That was going to leave a mark.* Stars began to flash rapidly before my eyes. My keys dropped onto the ground, which only seemed to anger the beast even more.

“You know--” I coughed, blood spurting down my chin. “You really should try brushing your teeth once in a while.” I hacked again as it continued to slam my head and body into the brick. “You have the worst breath,” I gasped. “And you are starting to piss me off.” I screamed in its face. I was more powerful than this. I bottled the pain and anger and channeled it back through my body, concentrating on fueling my own hatred of the monsters so my power could be transformed.

The Lycan stopped, cocking its ugly deformed head to the side as it sensed my growing power. With a burst of adrenaline and power, I lifted my hand. The werewolf’s hesitation gave me enough time to funnel my power down my arm to my fist. I concentrated on the creature’s heart and shoved my fist through its chest, burying it until my knuckles hit bone. Once my hand stopped moving, I pushed further, breaking apart its chest cavity. Its grip tightened around my throat and my eyes started to fade in and out. I needed air or I wasn’t going to last much longer.

I screamed and lashed out as my hand inched forward through muscle and bone to grasp its chest cavity. The creature shrieked, struggling against my attack. With more power than I realized I had, I ripped the still beating heart out of its chest. With a loud suctioning sound, my hand exited the werewolf’s body. It slowly released its chokehold on my neck and stumbled back. Air rushed into my starving lungs.

It fell on all fours, choking on its own blood, trying to howl. No sound escaped its lips as it died. I tossed the heart against the pavement and shook the remnants of bone and flesh off my hand as I walked over to the keys. Picking them up, I headed gingerly to the car. This time I watched more carefully for another would-be attacker, but none came.

I slid into the vehicle, turned the engine purred to life. The front of the building was empty. “Where are you, Sevastian?” I whispered, praying he would come rushing through the doors.

I sat in silence, waiting. Glass crashed above me. I peered up through the window to see

where it had come from. Before I could move, a huge mass fell from the sky. The werewolf hit the ground and the sidewalk buckled under its weight. It twitched and jerked as it died. A second later, Sevastian landed on the road in a crouched position. Standing in one smooth motion, he walked to where I sat.

“Move over,” he commanded.

“Oh, and its nice to see you too.” He slid into the seat and winced. “You are hurt,” I cried.

“Not enough for you to drive.”

“Sarcasm, good, then you aren’t hurt that bad.” I hit him in the arm and he flinched. “Don’t ever leave me alone again. You could have been killed, or worse I could have been killed.” He chuckled and then coughed. “Are you really okay?” He was covered in blood. It looked as if we both taken baths in the stuff.

“Yes, I will be fine until Siön Baptiste sees his car. He takes great pride in keeping his car blood-free.”

“I thought this was your car.”

He ignored me. “We have one more stop tonight.”

“I am so tired, can’t it wait until tomorrow?” I fumbled with my jacket pulling out my leather-bound book and placing it on the dash. At least it hadn’t been lost in the ruckus.

“We do not have the luxury of time. The Lycans grow stronger as we speak.”

Chapter 9

“Stick my hand with that? Are you crazy?” I screeched. Something about sharp objects slicing through my skin, vampire or not, freaked me out. Everyone else’s blood fine, but my own? Gross!

“Don’t be such a baby. It is not as bad as you make it sound. A simple prick to the finger.”

“Listen, batboy, I’m not about to make myself bleed just so that you and she....” I glared at the older lady, “... can summon some demonic force to help me.”

Sevastian grabbed my hand tight in his. “Just cut her,” he commanded.

“It’s just creepy, I don’t like messing with demons. It’s not only creepy, but wrong.”

The old woman was halfway hunched over her table, leaning in with a machete. Her eyes twinkled dangerously. “It will only hurt for a moment.”

“The heck it will. She is going to cut my finger off with that thing.” I pointed at the machete.

“Samantha, if you want help, then this is the only way.” Sevastian rumbled his anger, nearly knocking me off my feet.

So, fine. I hated the sight of my own blood. I knew this vampire thing wouldn’t be good for me. “Marianna, isn’t there another way?” I pleaded, trying to escape Sevastian’s grip. “You are hurting me,” I whined, trying to put a guilt trip on someone, but all my theatrics fell on deaf ears.

“Stop being a baby.” Sevastian loosened his hold on me, but not by much.

The old shop was dirty, stinky and crowded with potions and lotions. When I’d asked Sevastian for help, I hadn’t expected him to bring me to this ratty hole in the ground. The lady who had come out from the back room looked to be in her late eighty’s. She’d hobbled out, chicken in hand. It appeared that we had interrupted some type of ritual. *Yuck!* Marianna, Mary for short, was a psychic healer who specialized in raising the dead.

It was 7:30 in the morning and I was starting to crumble under the strain of the last few days. We had driven around for nearly two hours, trying to lose the scent of the wolves. The sun peeked through the shades and in each sunbeam shooting across the room, you could see hundreds of dust particles floating effortlessly through the air. My head ached, my back ached, and I needed blood in the worst way. As the sun rose, the headache only worsened. I needed time to heal and yet here they were ready to take more blood. I couldn’t admit to Sevastian that I hadn’t fed and thus the loss of blood would weaken me further. He would just lecture me about his brother and feeding and I wasn’t in the mood.

“You asked for my help, now take it,” Sevastian pleaded.

Just a few hours ago we were breaking into one of the oldest libraries in New Orleans. Now, somehow, he had talked me into visiting a crazy old biddy that wanted to cut me into pieces. Siön Baptiste’s brilliant plan was to follow Sevastian’s plan and neither was telling me what I wanted to hear. And in my opinion both plans sucked. The breaking and entering was one thing, but when it came down to actually cutting me, that was an altogether different story. As a vampire, I knew I would heal quickly, but something about the sensitivity of my fingers had me

freaked. Now I hated eighty-year-old machete-wielding ladies too.

Sebastian grabbed my shoulders and shook me. "Listen to me. If we can summon the Punisher, he will not only protect you but will also destroy your enemies. It is one of the only ways to save you."

I was still healing from the werewolf slamming me against the wall, so Sebastian man-handling me like that brought me back to my senses. "I don't need help."

"Yes, you do." He squeezed me to the point of making me wince.

"Okay, just let go. Make sure it's a quick cut and not too deep. Is that thing sterilized?"

Mary smiled sweetly, amused by my charade no doubt. She very gently took my hand and held it over a bowl. With one quick motion, she sliced my finger. I jumped back, crying out in pain as the blade hit bone.

The blood poured out in a steady stream into a bowl. When the bowl was full, she walked away. "You are a vampire, my dear. Healing will only take moments," she scoffed, the Italian accent making it hard to understand her.

"Why you little...." She was still smirking as Sebastian held me. I wasn't in the right state of mind to be hassled by anyone's grandmother.

She gathered the ointments and equipment needed for the spell and sat on the floor. "Sit in a circle."

We all sat facing each other. She took her finger and dipped it in my blood, drawing part of a circle on the floor. Taking Sebastian's finger, she had him follow her lead and continue the circle. Once it reached me, she prodded me to do the same.

"This is gross you know."

Sebastian gave me a murderous look and I shut up.

Mary placed two candles in the circle and lit them. "*Le convocamos avenger. Por las energías de tres y la sangre de nuestros enemigos llamamos. Haga nuestro hacer una oferta y fije su libre. Protéjala con estos días oscuros. Le convocamos nuestro avenger oscuro.*"

Sebastian explained what she was doing. "She is summoning the dark avenger to protect you."

Mary began to sing and hum. She closed her eyes. "Use your powers to call to him. Open yourself."

I closed my eyes and opened my mind. I could feel Sebastian's power and strength mingling with mine. The room began to move and shake. Papers and books flew through the air. It felt like the very air around us was alive.

And as suddenly as it began, it stopped. Mary opened her eyes slowly. "It is finished."

"Where is he? The avenger dude," I asked.

Nobody answered me. They all looked dazed. "He will come," Sebastian answered.

"Yes, he will," Mary echoed.

"Okay, he's coming, but when?"

Mary seemed to snap out of her trance to glare at me. "You need to learn to hold your tongue, young one."

Sebastian laughed. "I think she needs *su lengüeta cortó de su boca.*"

The old lady bent over laughing at his remark. He just smirked and helped her up. "*Sí, ella es una bola de fuego que una.*" She pointed in my direction.

I sent my power through the old lady and she stopped in her tracks. I read her mind. "My tongue cut out? I'm a little fireball?"

"Stop, Samantha." Sebastian pulled me aside whispering, "It is rude."

I hissed back. “It is rude to talk about me in another language.”

I turned, stalking out of the shop, leaving both Mary and Sevastian in the dust, literally. I was heading home to shower and then get to work. The hunger pains were almost unbearable. I didn’t even wait for Sevastian to come after me. I just took off, walking home. I hailed a cab on 32nd street. No avenger appeared on the way home or at home. I was relieved. I wasn’t sure I could handle any more men in my life right now.

Chapter 10

48 hours later....

"I am going to file a restraining order if you don't get off my back, Siön Baptiste," I growled into the phone. "And your brother too. You are both crazy, not to mention a detriment to my health and well being."

Beep. The answering machine hollered in my ear. "If you would like to continue your message, press one, if you would like to end this call, press two, if you would like to talk to an operator, press zero."

"I'd like to continue this message right up your--" I hung up, slamming the phone down on my desk.

"Why me?" I complained, rubbing my aching temples. The craving for blood was making me irritable and food just wasn't cutting it anymore. It didn't help that ever since our little escapade at the library both Siön and Sevastian were hounding me about the Punisher and how I needed his and their protection. If it wasn't the constant calls in the middle of the night, it was the flowers. If it wasn't flowers, it was threats on my life. I wasn't sure what I wanted, the werewolves to get me or keep the two bloodsucking vamps on my arse 24/7.

I bent over my desk as my stomach growled. If I wasn't so hungry all the time, I don't think any of this would seem so bad. A full stomach did wonders to calm my nerves, but lately food didn't quench my thirst or my hunger pains. I used to be nice until turning all fang-like. Oh, who was I kidding? I was only able to *act* nice. I was never really friendly but could fake a good smile and schmooze with the best of them. Now all I wanted to do was to bite everyone I met.

I growled, aggravated that nobody answered my calls. Whatever happened to customer service? I wanted to talk to a live person, not a recording. If I wasn't careful, I might tear another phone from the wall, only the second this week. I was getting better at controlling the sudden urges to be violent. I couldn't have power over the ups and downs of being a vampire, but I could at least control everyone around me, maybe. I wasn't used to my newfound strength or my newly renovated temper.

Grinding my teeth in anger, I pushed the phone away from me and snatched the black leather book from my purse. I hadn't seen Siön Baptiste for a few days, since the night he saved my life, but his gifts were getting on my last nerve. *On the other hand, maybe I missed him?* No, no, I wouldn't go there.

I tried to refuse the third set of red roses but the delivery guy refused to accept my refusal. He wouldn't even take a bribe. *The nerve of him.* Amazing how much influence Siön Baptiste wielded in town and the New Orleans suburbs. Maybe I was just ignorant, but since his father had died, he grew in stature, taking on many of his family's businesses. Word on the street said he was named the clan leader. I guess if I ever shut up and listened once in a while, I would have realized all the changes that were happening around me. But I was so wrapped up in my own little saga that I wasn't keeping track of my surroundings. Unfortunately, those surroundings included Siön Baptiste and his brother. And the latest escapade with his brother fueled my anger even further over the edge.

"I'm not going to count on this avenger. I really need to be strong enough to take care of myself," I whispered, opening to the page that was worn with my scribbling and notes. It did seem funny that when I actually did want to talk to Siön Baptiste, he was nowhere to be found. So I threatened a restraining order a few weeks ago, big deal. Never stopped him from showing up a few nights later and coming to my rescue. And it wasn't like the law could prevent him from doing what he wanted to do. He was a vampire, and in the last few years, they seemed to get away with murder, literally.

I grabbed a pen and started to write but it was out of ink. Tossing it across the room, it hit the window with a loud crack. Maybe he was avoiding me, who knows. Our last encounter was a bit steamy and heated. Wonder if he was finally sick of me yet? A small pang of fear filtered through my chest. *Jeesh, get a grip, Samantha, he ruined your life, remember.* But then again it had only been two days since speaking with him, so why was I having a sudden craving to hear his voice?

I'd come to realize over the last few weeks that there were worse things than death. Becoming a vampire with a vampire stalker was getting pretty darn close. Guess you can't completely stalk the willing, and right now I would be more than willing to have him come traipsing through my office door. Wow, admitting that to myself was a big step. *A step in the wrong direction, Sam.* The pencil I had picked up, snapped while I tried to write. I was getting stronger with every passing day despite my craving for blood, and according to the bat brothers I was just a baby with years yet to develop fully. I tossed the pencil and watched in awe as it stuck into the drywall. I was still getting used to the idea I had superhuman strength and forget about my own power from time to time. I looked around the room at all the pencils sticking in the drywall.

I had Siön Baptiste to thank for turning me to the dark side. I sighed, wondering if his words of love were true, or did he just want me to fulfill this stupid prophecy to save the world. I gasped ... or worse ... just gain control of the vampire empire. I spotted my purple and pink pen under the reams of paper on my desk. I pulled it out, eyeing it carefully. Being introduced to the world of the undead was a shock. The rules and formalities were enough to drive anyone insane. Putting the pen to my nose, I inhaled deeply. Right now, my sexy maker Siön Baptiste was bugging the boogers out of me to be his and only his. I could still smell his scent on the fluffy part of the pen. Oh, who am I kidding? He was the best sex of my life, not to mention the hottest man on earth, and he could kiss like a god. Just thinking about it made my toes curl unnaturally in my high heels.

I moaned, wondering how I was going to make a decision regarding my feelings for him when I still didn't really know him. Sure we had sex, survived a horrific experience together and maybe even had feelings for each other, but to make a commitment seemed wrong. He had been pressuring me to date him and I just wasn't ready yet. I slammed the book down, aggravated I couldn't concentrate enough to write. Well, actually his exact words went like this. "Be mine and only mine." He was often so dramatic I wanted to stuff a sock down his throat. Hello! Who did he think he was, or better yet, where did he think he was?

This was the 21st century and women were their own people. Nobody owned me or controlled me. I was starting to wonder if it was a curse or a blessing to be so stubborn. If I only knew whether his motivation to be with me was real and not spurred on by some grand scheme to have everything he ever wanted in life and more. A kingdom. His motives could be pure and maybe he really did care about saving the world from the Dracomeres. Not that saving the world was bad in itself, its just I really don't want to give someone my heart when it was plain to see he

had ulterior motives. Maybe he was behind everything, manipulating my every move. Or maybe I was just being paranoid. I guess only time would tell.

I sighed, re-opening the little, black leather-bound book on my desk to check off another mark. In the three weeks of knowing Siön Baptiste, I've thought about staking him over a hundred and fifty times. The marks on the page were in various colors. Each mark represented a time I thought about killing someone. My therapist thinks my behavior was a direct result of some repressed traumatic experience from my childhood. Right after he made the comment, I drew him without his head and then started to laugh. He did not find it humorous when he sneaked a peek. All I know is that my normal violent tendencies had doubled since becoming a vampire. One minute I'm as sharp as a cucumber, the next I'm as dull as a spoon. It's as if my body was fighting the change. At times I'm in control and at others I lose all control.

"Wait, is a cucumber even sharp?" I asked myself aloud.

Have I become a monster? Maybe. Was one a monster just because he or she wanted to bite everyone? Who knew? All I knew was that I was hungry and the pain was getting worse. And I blamed Siön Baptiste. *Blameshifter!*

I only experienced a slight pang of guilt when I left a variety of messages at the clubs he owned. They varied from "I hate you" to "Bug off, bat breath" to "Kiss my arse." After the night in the cemetery, I should have been thankful to him for saving my life. Yet again, he'd risked himself to save me from certain death, or at the very least, dismemberment and rape.

Okay, so maybe I went a little overboard. Tough titty, he would get over it, I hope.

"Hi, Betty." I scribbled down another check mark and looked up slowly from my desk. I knew she was in my office before she had spoken. Prior to being transformed into a vampire, her sudden appearance would have startled me, now it just annoyed me. Plus, my senses were more alert since drinking Siön Baptiste's blood in the cemetery. It was his powerful mojo blood. I shivered, still remembering the high I felt after taking his life force. Since then, everything seemed brighter and smelled stronger. Now I could hear a pin drop over a hundred yards away, so Betty trying to sneak up to see what I was doing just wasn't going to happen. The thought of her nosiness made my brow wrinkle. I smiled at the scribbled marks next to Betty's name in the book. There had to be at least twenty marks in the last two days.

"How did you know I was here?" Betty eyes were as wide as saucers.

Thinking quickly, I responded, "Your heels." I really wanted to tell her I could smell her cheap perfume from the minute she'd walked into the building over an hour ago and that it made me gag every time she came within five yards of me. No, make that less than a foot. She leaned over my desk peeking at my book.

I slammed the book shut, causing her to jump back, leaving my finger as a bookmark on her special page.

"Oh." She didn't sound convinced.

She was on my hit list because little innocent Betty had conspired to aide Siön Baptiste with winning my heart. I slid the book wide enough for her not to see, but open enough so I could still write. I jotted down another mark next to her name with a little smiley face. Ever since his massive check arrived, thanking Elden Agency for a job well done, John and Betty were both on the vampire kick. I found myself drawing another face next to John's list for good measure.

The humans happened to all be on the same page. There really were only two humans that I hung around with anymore. After my father's death and the death of Trevor, I became a bit of a loner. I thought of John as a father figure but even our relationship had been strained lately. I was gradually pulling away from my previous life. The only constant in my life now was work. I

loved my job and nobody would interfere with all the hard work I'd put in over the years. Getting into the business as a female detective and bodyguard was not an easy task. I wasn't about to give up years of digging myself into the community. Developing a reliable and trustworthy reputation took most of my younger years and I wasn't going to throw it all by the wayside.

Right now, my biggest problem stemmed from two sources, Lycans and the vamp brothers. I still had this nagging feeling that both Sevastian and Siön Baptiste were using me. Siön Baptiste had worked hard at wiggling his way back into my life. He'd placed everyone except me under his spell of wealth and fame. Funny how money can work wonders for motivating humans, but then again, all he had to do was look at me and I was under a different kind of spell.

I stopped writing when I realized what I had done. It was ironic how I had been referring to people as just humans. I laughed bitterly. Betty shifted from one leg to the other nervously. I continued chuckling, shut my book, and watched Betty carefully as she cringed to avoid eye contact. Maybe I would miss my humanity as it, little by little, slipped from me with each passing day. But then again, there were some benefits. For instance, now I could embrace my anger and blame my condition. My scapegoat was vampirism.

It was just a few days ago that I'd wanted to tear a drunk's throat out. The hunger had been almost unbearable. He was sitting there in the pale moonlight, leaning up against a trashcan. The overwhelming stench of alcohol and trash was in the air. The cool fall breeze swirled debris around me as I moved from the shadows. For a brief moment, I thought it might be better for him to be dead than alive.

Not to mention I wanted to kill Derk the photographer, and didn't, because of Siön Baptiste's interference. Don't get me wrong, if Siön Baptiste hadn't interfered I wouldn't be here right now, but I needed my revenge on my own terms. Of course, he did save my life and the werewolf ended up dead at his hands. But what disturbed me most was that I wanted to kill him, I thought bitterly.

"Sam?"

Betty's voice brought me back from the vision.

"John wants to meet with you." Her lower lip was trembling.

I watched her suspiciously. Betty, the cute little blonde secretary who was always happy, seemed worried. "And why did you come to tell me in person?" I asked. "You could have used the intercom." Betty only came into my office when she wanted something or to pry into my business. She was always sneaking into my office and watching me carefully. So I watched her carefully. There was something more to Betty than met the eye and I'd only just realized it now. John had probably put her up to snooping attempting to have her monitor my every action. I wouldn't put anything past him at this point.

Either way, for the most part she was harmless to me as a vampire, other than being nosey. I smiled and could feel her relax as the fake, plastered smile seemed to ease her rattled nerves. I give her an inch and she takes a mile. Her own smile broadened in response and she immediately returned to being her annoying, jolly self, eyes bright and smiling sweetly. She cheerfully took a seat across from my desk.

Yep, she wanted something.

She casually blew a strand of long blonde hair out of her face. She was really beautiful. Her pale skin accentuated her bright, round, blue eyes. I've never seen eyes that shade of blue. They almost appeared to be turquoise in color. She tucked another loose strand of hair behind an

ear and continued to smile. She had some lipstick on her teeth but I wasn't about to tell her. This time I kept the laughter to myself.

"I am worried about you, Samantha." She paused, taking a deep breath as I glared at her. "You act depressed." Pausing again, she started wringing her hands nervously in her lap.

"And...?" I prodded her to finish. I knew it was a mistake to let her continue but curiosity got the better of me.

"I know a great shrink. I can give you her name."

I would have mentioned I was already seeing someone but my pride wouldn't allow me to. I huffed loudly, showing my growing annoyance. "I don't need a shrink," I lied, reopening my black book pretending to be busy deep in thought.

She didn't take the hint and continued on her merry way. And I thought I rambled? "Does it have to do with the guy who sends all the flowers?"

Ouch! She was definitely prying into my business again. My knuckles turned white as I gripped the soft leather edges of the book. No doubt she had read the cards that he'd sent professing his undying love. I was going to break this book in half if I wasn't careful. The leather began to stretch under the pressure of my hands. Better to break the book than Betty.

Inhaling deeply, I let out a long sigh trying to relax the building tension in my neck and shoulders. I set the book down on my desk, not willing to destroy the one thing that kept me sane lately. "Listen, Betty-poo, I truly appreciate your concern but I am fine." Hunching over my desk, I trapped my shaking hands between the desktop and my knees. Jumping over and strangling Betty might not be such a good idea, so keeping my hands under control was my only option. Not to mention the hunger that was gnawing at my stomach right now. Her heartbeat was thumping teasingly in my ear.

I could take her with ease, drink from her and make it so she'd never remember. Or at least I thought I could. Random memories from both Siön Baptiste and the elders had guided me this far, and now they were coming more frequently. Sebastian had made it clear that the longer I was a vampire the more knowledge I would gain from my master. I didn't like the word "master". He'd tried to backtrack but it was too late. I haven't seen him since we'd broken into the library and he'd allowed a little grandma to stab me. I looked down at my finger, the wound now completely healed with no scarring at all.

Despite all this knowledge, the thought of me sucking on some woman's neck still made me want to vomit. Sucking on anyone's neck still frightened me. It meant I wasn't human. I hated what I was becoming.

"Siön Baptiste, that's his name." She startled me right out of my trance. Forcing my eyes from the pulse in her neck, I shook my head, wondering how long this torture would continue.

Siön Baptiste had been relentless in his efforts to see me. Three weeks ago my life changed forever. I was a gun for hire, minding my own business until he walked into my life. His family hired our company but had ulterior motives. I was a good detective and bodyguard so I thought they were hiring me based on my resume. WRONG! His master had plans to use his sons to impregnate me, making an invincible vampire race.

You name it, and it has happened to me. Kidnapped, killed and now the walking dead, or undead. Despite all the rumors, I still had a heartbeat, and according to every book Sebastian gave to me, even a soul. Not to mention the lycanthrope disease coursing through my body. Contrary to popular belief, werewolves are not furry, cuddly little creatures. They are evil, destructive monsters. I chuckled. I guess vampires could also be evil and destructive, but right now my beef was with the Lycans who'd insisted on my capture and turning me. I had the

unfortunate luck of running into a couple of werewolves myself.

Actually, the first meeting with a werewolf didn't go so well. *Tyler*. It ran into me and tore my throat out. Now I have to find a cure before the first full moon or I will die. Oh, but there is one catch. I won't die if I find the werewolf who infected me and drift with him. I still have to find out what drifting means exactly. Who am I kidding? I still need to find Tyler who seemed to disappear off the face of the earth. I was hoping he would show up on my radar soon before I kicked the bucket for good.

According to Siön Baptiste, to "drift" meant to become one with the Lycan who infected you. It's a very intimate ceremony that the werewolves had to complete or they would die. There was a rumor that if a male werewolf attacks a man, the man would die from the attack. Only a female can infect a male, and only a male can infect a female.

Despite all that happened, I managed to complicate it by getting semi-attached to Siön Baptiste, and that, my friends, was my first mistake. Well, maybe not my first, but by far the worst I've made so far. Attachments don't bode well for me. Everyone I love, dies.

Thank goodness I had been able to avoid contact with him up until two nights ago and even then, it pained me, bringing back memories of Trevor's death. My best friend died through all of the chaos a few weeks ago. The pain and guilt of Trevor's death tore me to shreds, and deep down I blamed Siön Baptiste and myself.

I knew that would change soon, since I only had two weeks before the full moon. I needed to find Tyler Walker, a.k.a. werewolf, drift with him, and then complete my well-designed plan for revenge, in less than fourteen days.

Hmmmm! Not too much to ask.

Needing Siön Baptiste's help drove me nuts. And for once Betty was right. I was depressed. My office was in shambles. Hong Kong Lui takeout boxes were littered over my desk and in the trashcan. Food didn't even satisfy the hunger I felt. The pillow and blanket on my couch reminded me of the uncomfortable sleeping arrangements over the last week. I just couldn't force myself to go home for very long without memories of Trevor haunting me. Depressed. That was an understatement.

Betty waited patiently for my reply. Her pulse still beating tantalizingly in my ear. I was hungry. Licking my lips, I could almost taste the sweet metallic flavor of her. My head swayed as my own pulse quickened with need. Every cell in my body screamed, *EAT HER*, or maybe just take a wee bit of blood. I couldn't tell if it was the Lycan infection making me want to taste warm flesh, or if I had waited so long to feed that I was delirious.

"Samantha ... Samantha..." Her voice interrupted my stupor of starvation. "Samantha, you don't look too good. Maybe you should go home."

"I am fine," I snapped. "Just a little hungry, that's all."

Betty visibly flinched, bowing her head. "I am just trying to help, Sam."

Immediately, the guilt forced me to backtrack. "I know, Betty. It's just been a rough few weeks. Now what does the old man want?"

She perked up in her seat. "He has a surprise in his office for you."

Oh, great, here we go again. "I don't like surprises." The last surprise I got from John was a 6'4" hunky, nothing-but-trouble vampire.

"You'll like this one. It will cheer you up, Samantha, I promise." She giggled, stood and literally skipped to my door. "Come on he's waiting."

Her smile was nauseating, but I had to admit the surprise thing peaked my curiosity. I followed her down the hall and as I started to enter John's office, Betty took my arm.

“Be nice, John isn’t in the best of moods,” she warned.

Me be nice? John better be nice if he knew what was good for him.

I watched Betty turn to leave, her hair bobbing around her shoulders, hips swaying. Blood thumped in my ear. Shaking my head, I blocked out the pumping blood. Why would John have a gift and be in a bad mood? Why ask why? He was always in a bad mood. Shrugging my shoulders, I turned the doorknob to his office stopping halfway before pushing the door all the way open. My new supersensitive hearing told me there was a man sitting to the right of John’s desk. They were talking quietly, but I heard every word.

“Samantha is a firecracker, so you have to be careful. She is a little under the weather lately, so if you can cheer her up do so. Welcome to the company....” John’s voice trailed off while I thought about the firecracker statement.

Last week, I went home after getting sick of sleeping on my couch at work. I stubbed my toe and almost set the house on fire. I was ticked off and the first thought that crossed my mind was taking my dresser out and burning it down to the ground. Big mistake. A spark flared to life, then a flame. I had willed the fire to start. So “firecracker” could apply in more than one way. My powers were increasing and my patience was diminishing. Not a good combination when everyone seems to think I might become the most powerful vampire of all time. I tend to be skeptical of prophecies, but so far everything they said would happen has indeed occurred.

Sebastian had mentioned that I should study more of the Book of Blood since our last fiasco. It had only been two days since we broke into the library. It’s not like I have had a ton of time to read this so-called vampire bible. But I’ll get around to it, eventually. The more my powers come to light, the more curious I become. Maybe it isn’t such a bad idea, but for now I needed to avoid the library. Not all vampires controlled minds or elements, but the ones who were that powerful usually ruled the clans. I didn’t want to rule, just wanted to live a semi-normal life. My mind snapped back into covert mode, listening to John speak.

“She is very stubborn, so you will have to try to control her temper,” John continued.

Clutching my hands in tight fists, I pushed the door open. I didn’t want him to know I had been listening, so I let the firecracker comment go, for now. “What do you want?” I avoided eye contact with our guest and glared angrily at John. I was trying to hold back my power. My emotions seemed to control it, so if I was angry it could get out of hand. I wouldn’t want anyone to burst into flames.

“Sam, this is Damien Ranwulf. He is joining our agency.” He paused a second, taking a deep breath. “He’s going to be your new partner.”

Okay, take that back about the flames. Maybe I did want someone to burn alive. New partner? Still avoiding eye contact with the germ in the chair, I argued my case. “John, I have never had a partner, nor do I want one now. I am fine on my own and always will be.”

“Sounds like a personal problem.” The germ’s voice was deep and masculine, forcing me to turn my anger toward him.

My fury was directed toward the voice. Some papers blew off John’s desk onto the floor. John looked around, mumbling under his breath about the draft in the office. I ignored everything and took aim at my newfound enemy. “I don’t need any....” I stopped short, all anger slipping away, a little shocked at what was before me. I expected some young punk or older gentleman. Instead, a man greeted me with a face like a god. *Darn!* It’s easier to stay angry with someone if they were not so breathtakingly handsome. He had long, jet-black hair with red auburn highlights. His eyes were deep blue and his face was chiseled to perfection. He wore a tee-shirt with blue jeans and had an integrated Celtic tattoo up his arm and over the right side of

his neck. The tattoo itself was gorgeous. "I don't need any help." I finished, face flushed from my obvious perusal of the germ. He was a very big, brawny germ that looked like he could lift a car with his pinky and toss it five hundred feet. I smirked to myself. Heck, I could pick up a car and throw it a hundred feet. Maybe more. I shook myself, trying to gather my thoughts. I should have stayed angry because somehow it helped me think more clearly.

John stood, walking around his desk. His fists were white from clenching them. "Sam, this is my nephew and I expect you to treat him with respect. He is your partner whether you want one or not. After the last disaster, I realize now you need help, especially if we expect to increase our supernatural clientele. So get over it or get out."

That last comment stung. "You are serious?"

"I am dead serious." His eyes never wavered. "Damien will be your new partner until I deem it no longer necessary, and at this rate that won't be happening anytime soon." He leaned up casually against his desk folding his arms over his chest. "Take a seat, Samantha."

"Fine." I sighed, plopping down in the chair across from him, staring at the two men before me.

"Now that we have that bit of unpleasantry behind us, let's start over. Damien just got into town and he needs to get familiar with the area. I want you to take him to dinner. I made reservations at that French restaurant you're always raving about."

I had no desire to take Damien around town. "The Galatoire's?" I asked, grinding my teeth at the thought of entering that restaurant. Nobody in the office knew what happened to Trevor and now I wished I had told John so that he would understand my reluctance. How could I explain that Trevor was nothing but ashes due to a psychotic vampire going on a killing rampage? Nope, I couldn't tell him a darn thing and I had to make sure no one found out. *Suck it up, Samantha, you'll get through this.*

"Yes, my treat." He smiled. John had effectively backed me into a corner. Right now, he'd better count his lucky stars I wasn't in the mood to bite back. Literally. He pulled a wad of money from his pocket and tossed it at Damien. "Show him a good time."

I was really pissed now. John was sporting a stupid grin the size of the Grand Canyon. "Your reservation is at 6:30, so you'd better hurry."

I stood, determined to show every bit of my frustration. I strolled out of his office and slammed the door behind me. A little childish I know, but better than the alternative. Setting the whole place on fire.

Chapter 11

Never looking back, I headed out to Betty. "Betty what is going on?"

She grinned. "Isn't he cute?"

I heard the two men walk up behind me. Betty was busying herself doodling on a pad of paper to avoid my angry glare. I swung around to face traitor John and the germ. Damien's presence towered over us all. He was tall and lean. I stepped back against Betty's desk attempting to look unaffected by his natural charisma.

He smiled, noticing my discomfort. "I guess we can go now if you'd like?"

"I would like nothing better than to go home and sleep the night away, but since John has made it apparent I have no choice in the matter, I guess I am stuck with you."

"Samantha," Betty gasped, covering her mouth with her hand.

John stalked over to me and grabbed my arm none too lightly, yanking me down the hall. He spun me around pushing me into the wall.

"Ouch, John." It didn't hurt but I wanted to make him feel bad.

Didn't work.

"Samantha, this is your final warning. You need to snap out of the funk you're in."

Funk?

He ignored the surprise in my face and continued speaking, releasing me with a jerk. "I am sick and tired of you moping around the office. You haven't been working since...." He paused. "Since our last client. Get over it, whatever happened is over and you need to work for a living."

Nobody realized that it wasn't over yet. Nothing from two weeks ago would be over for a very long time. I choked on the words in my throat as I looked away from his bitter gaze. I loved John and it wasn't his fault he didn't understand what had happened to me, but shouldn't I be the one bitter one? All he done was make a few bucks. I'd died in the process and my best friend had been killed.

"Samantha, I love you as a father loves a daughter. You know deep down that I only want what is best for you. Please, just do this for me." Shrugging his shoulders, he let out an exasperated sigh. He headed toward his office, never looking back. "Trust me, it is for your own good...." His voice trailed off as he disappeared into his office, slamming the door behind him.

Dropping my head into my hands, I fought back the tears. "Do not cry, Samantha," I coaxed myself. I had to do this for John. He was the only family I had left in this world. I wanted to tell him everything but that could endanger him. My feelings had to be put aside for now. Nothing was worth jeopardizing his life. It was no use fighting so I gave up, walking back down the hallway toward Betty and the germ. If they only knew it was for their own good not to be around me. I didn't trust my growing desire to rip out someone's throat.

Betty was flirting obnoxiously with Damien when I interrupted. She practically had her arms wrapped around him.

I coughed, drawing their attention to me. "Well, we'd better go if we're going to make 6:30. Do you have a car here or did you come with John?" I asked, watching Damien carefully for a response.

"I have a car with me. I would like to drive if you don't mind. I want to get to know the town."

"Suit yourself. You can follow me." I wasn't about to share a car in close quarters with a man I hardly knew. Awkward silence wasn't something I wanted to endure the entire trip.

We left the office together. He opened the door and smiled gracefully as I ducked under his arm to leave. He was tall, too tall for even my tastes.

"So what's your beef?" he asked.

I kept walking, pondering his question, wondering how I should answer. "Nothing, I just don't like being forced to spend my only night off in two weeks with a stranger. No offense."

"None taken, I understand."

"Really?" I asked sarcastically. "I'm not sure you really do understand."

"No, I do. It must be a pain to have some newbie forced on you. I apologize if I ruined any plans but John was very adamant about the whole thing."

Guilt wasn't something I was accustomed to. I had to remember it wasn't his fault John was acting like a butthead. We reached our cars. "Okay, follow me, it's only about ten minutes from here."

Fifteen minutes later, we reached Galatoires. I parked and waited for Damien. He walked slowly across the lot and took my arm in his. "Do you mind?"

I shook my head. "I don't mind, thanks." Damien was so much taller than me that I fit under his shoulder. I really had to look up to him. It had been a while since being this close to a normal man. I was very happy when my beast didn't rear its ugly head. I smiled to myself, relieved I didn't want to rip his head off.

We walked quietly until Damien broke the silence. "I saw a glimmer of hope back there."

"What do you mean?" I asked, a little confused.

"You actually smiled. I thought maybe it meant we had hope of having a nice, friendly evening together. Does it?"

I laughed. "Damien, there is one thing you will learn quickly. I am not friendly. I have very little interest in making friends." Little did anyone know it was for their own protection that I stayed away from them.

"John told me you were depressed after the last case. He commented on how you have been acting strangely."

"That really is none of your business, or his."

"Okay, that's fair enough. I can take a hint. So how long have you known John?"

My gaze fell to his neck watching his pulse beckoning to me. Shaking my head, I answered. "Too long."

He chuckled, a sexy low sound in his throat. "I know what you mean. He is an ornery coot sometimes."

I appreciated the fact Damien kept the conversation going because I just wasn't in the mood. He was also the first man in a long time not to hit on me the minute he met me. It was nice to talk about nothing. "I really love John, but if you ever tell him, I will deny any knowledge of this conversation."

He squeezed my arm. "Your secret is safe with me."

Damien had a great smile. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. I needed to get my mind off Siön Baptiste and this might just work. The evening was beautiful, the sky a pink and orange sunset. I took a deep breath of the cool air and relaxed into Damien's warmth.

The minute I relaxed, my power flared to life. I stopped walking, halting us in our tracks.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. We both stood motionless looking in front of us and behind us. Releasing his arm, I swiveled around searching for the power I felt. We were almost at the restaurant. There was a woman standing on the corner waving a taxi down and a man with her. Other than a few patrons, nothing seemed out of place. I shook the feeling off, laced my hand through Damien's arm and hurried away from the power lingering in the air.

"What was that about?"

"Oh nothing, just felt like someone was...." I stopped, wondering how idiotic I sounded. "Watching me."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I know the feeling."

Gazing up at the handsome man, I replied, "I bet you do."

His eyebrow rose as he cocked his head understanding exactly what I meant. "Women are hard to find where I come from." He laughed.

"So where are you from?"

His arm stiffened at the question. "I travel mostly. No set place to call home."

"A nomad? Bet you have a woman at every port."

His face went rigid with the last statement. I released his arm as we entered the restaurant. He opened the door and I brushed by him. I cringed as the memories of my last visit reminded me of Trevor. *I had to move on.*

The host seated us away from the crowd in a small candlelit corner of the restaurant. Too bad I wasn't in a romantic mood.

I was mulling over my choices for dinner when Damien interrupted my thoughts. "So what does a beautiful woman like you do for fun around here? Betty said you're into vampires."

"First off, Betty is a lunatic, and secondly, Betty is a lunatic and thirdly, I only have time for work." I averted my eyes from his smile and looked out over the crowded restaurant.

"You mentioned she was a lunatic twice," he commented, smiling.

"Yes, well, I wanted to get the point across."

He chuckled. "Point taken. She asked me out the second time I interviewed with John."

I frowned. "I am sorry. John needs to keep her on a leash."

He buckled over from laughing out loud. This guy was cool, maybe having a partner wasn't so bad after all. He seemed to understand my humor and he didn't talk too much. On the other hand, maybe it wasn't the fact he didn't talk much, but that his talking wasn't the normal boring drivel. He also didn't seem interested in me sexually, which was a big bonus because I couldn't handle that complication. Since becoming a vampire, men couldn't seem to leave me alone. Part of the vampire sex appeal. Damien seemed immune. *Cool!*

I tapped my hands lightly on the table, thoroughly annoyed at Betty's brazen behavior. Damien just smiled, placing his hands over mine in a friendly manner. "You have a lot on your mind, don't you?"

I couldn't explain the sensation that came over me if I tried. An overwhelming desire to tell him everything about my past inundated my mind. His eyes darkened. There was a sense of an untamed animal swallowing me down a darkened hole. I wanted to share the whole nightmarish experience from the last several weeks. The burning sensation of his hands over mine brought me back from the dark abyss of his gaze. I pulled my hands away and he smiled. He had no aura. Nothing, zippo, nada. Even humans had a faint glow about them. It was weak, but they had one. Damien was blank like a clean slate. Probably I hadn't noticed before because I was too busy having a tantrum. I tried not to use my newfound powers on anyone even though the temptation was always there. I sent my power over his body searching for any clue that

would explain the missing aura. His mind was blocked, no, dare I say, barricaded from my probing.

No human could place a shield with such intensity over his or her mind. I withdrew my power, opening my eyes. "What are you?"

He leaned into me, scooting his chair closer. "I should ask the same of you?" His breath was hot on my face. A woodsy, sensual smell that made me think of a forest filled with the creatures of the night. The scent floated over me, enveloping my senses, sending me spiraling into a pleasurable cavern. There was something in the dark with me, an angel with wings. I tried to say something, but I could only stare into his eyes. Biting my lip caused enough pain to bring me out of the cavern and back to the table.

"What just happened?" I whispered.

Damien didn't speak, only stared silently.

Intrigued by the possibility of someone with the abilities to block my probe helped me overcome any fear. I stared into his deep blue eyes. Sparks of electricity jolted through my body as something passed between us, unseen to those around us.

"Ahem ... Ahem ... " A nice looking waiter interrupted our stare-down. "Are you ready to order?" he asked politely.

"Yes...." My voice trailed off when Damien smiled. A shudder ran through me as I faced the waiter. "Yes, I will have the steak special."

"How would you like that cooked?" the waiter asked.

"Rare." I watched Damien carefully, wondering who and what he was.

"Rare?" the waiter asked again, waiting for my response.

"Yes, is that a problem?"

"We aren't supposed to cook meat rare anymore, ma'am, it's regulated," he whispered. The waiter appeared to be uneasy, shuffling his weight from one foot to another.

"Okay, how about medium rare?"

"That we can do." He faced Damien. "What will are you having tonight, sir?"

"Make that two steak specials, both medium rare," Damien answered, grinning.

The waiter trotted away happily as both Damien and I sat in silence eyeing each other up and down. Once we'd received our dinner, we continued in silence. The waiter returned to ask if we wanted dessert.

"No dessert for me tonight, thanks. What about you, Damien, would you like dessert?"

He grinned. "Are you on the menu?"

An immediate blush spread across my face as his comment took me by surprise. The waiter chuckled under his breath and excused himself. So much for him not hitting on me. Guess he wasn't immune to my powers after all.

"Well, are you?" he asked again, this time grabbing my leg under the table.

What happened to the nice guy I had just met? *Darn, and I thought this would be easy.* "Damien, I am flattered but not interested." I spoke the words even as his hand slid higher. The heat from his touch and audacity floored me.

"You have been hurt recently, Samantha. I can feel the pain. I can take the pain away. I need to take it away." His voice echoed in my mind tenderly, soothing all the horrible memories from the last few weeks. I wasn't sure what he was doing but it felt too good to stop.

"You two make such a lovely couple." I jumped at the angry voice. Sensual tones filled the air around us. Everyone seemed to stop what they were doing and all eyes were on our little party.

“Siön Baptiste.” I could barely speak. The shock of seeing him for the first time since the night in the park sent my heart into a tailspin. It fluttered with anticipation. I growled internally at my reaction. *Get a grip, Samantha, it has only been three days.* But he looked so yummy and dangerous. He wore a black sweater with black dress pants. His hair was back against his shoulders. Sage-green eyes, so cold and unfeeling, watched us as I searched for the words to say. He looked gorgeous, the epitome of male sexuality, and I’d missed him. *Darn!* None of that mattered right now because I had an unnerving feeling of impending disaster if I didn’t handle this properly.

Siön Baptiste held my gaze and then turned to Damien, finally settling back on me. “You are on a date?” His question held danger and anger. His stance was predatory, ready to pounce. His irritation was directed toward us both. I flinched at the jeopardy I’d put Damien in.

“Yes,” Damien answered before I could say anything.

“No,” I countered, annoyed at Damien’s sudden interest in more than just a friendship.

“It seems you are misleading this young man.” Siön Baptiste smiled but it wasn’t a friendly smile. You know, the kind you give someone when you want to strangle them but are in a crowded room.

Wow, was he beautiful in a manly way. I wanted to topple him to the ground and kiss him senseless. I smacked my forehead trying to figure out where that thought had come from and sighed at my sudden reaction to being so close. Both men watched me curiously, eyebrows raised in unison. As another scrumptious thought crossed my mind, Miss Blood Bank strutted to our table, spoiling the daydream and my dinner. The same gorgeous chick that I’d seen him with the night we met at *The Silver Fang*.

“Siön, what is taking you so long?” Her whiney voice grated on my nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. Okay, so maybe it wasn’t whiney but deep and husky, it seemed to purr from her oh-too-big lips. She rolled his name over her tongue sensually.

Siön Baptiste took her hand and kissed it gently, never taking his eyes off me. It took all the little control I had not to leap on them both. “Sorry, Monroe, I was just saying hello to an old friend.”

He was the freaking one on a real date! I had been conned into this meal with Damien but he was out with the blood bank on heels. Cheap, smutty heels I might add. I threw up a wall around my mind as I felt a brush of laughter from Siön Baptiste. He was reading my mind, darn him. My throat tightened at the thought of that woman hanging all over him. His face suddenly darkened and his eyes swam with emotion. I held back the tears, wrenching my eyes from Siön Baptiste.

Grabbing Damien’s hand, I bolted from the table. “Let’s go.” Brushing past Siön Baptiste and shoving his slut out of the way, I muttered, “Too claustrophobic in here.” Why the sudden panic attack that he could be with another woman? At the moment, I was more angry with myself for believing he loved me.

Damien threw a pile of money on the table and we hustled out of the restaurant, never looking back. We strolled silently to the parking lot. When we reached my car, Damien stopped me.

“I am sorry about the dessert comment. I am only here to help you and I thought it would cheer you up.”

I doubled over with laughter. After seeing Siön Baptiste and the slut, all Damien was concerned about was his comment. I leaned into him, placing my head on his chest and cried. Everything was so much more painful as a vampire. So many emotions I couldn’t control or was

losing control over. I cried at the loss of my humanity, at Siön Baptiste betrayal and over my guilt for what I was becoming. This emotional roller coaster was just too much to bear. His hands were at his sides and then slowly slid around my back pulling me closer. "I know you have had a tough few weeks, Samantha, but I can really help."

His warmth and tender words made me cry even harder. "No one can help me." I sobbed into his shirt. "No one."

We held each other silently, totally losing track of time until an angry voice startled us both.

"Get your hands off her." Siön Baptiste strode over to my car.

I backed away from Damien, leaving room for a possible attack. I had no idea what Siön Baptiste was capable of doing and it scared me to take the chance of finding out. I wished I had my guns. I didn't want to kill Siön Baptiste, just slow him down a bit. Actually, I wasn't even certain the guns would kill him. He hid his power from everyone, even me. I guess enough bullets in the head and it would kill even the strongest vampire eventually.

Would you use them against me, my love? he whispered in my mind.

If you try to harm Damien, yes, I answered.

Why do you fight your feelings for me? Leave this man and come with me.

Why don't you go back to your slut? I hissed the words, shooting them like darts into his thoughts.

Siön Baptiste held his hand out to me while he spoke softly in my head. *She means nothing.*

"Why don't you leave me and the lady alone, fellow? We don't want any trouble." Damien stepped between Siön Baptiste and me.

I will break his fingers if he lays another hand on you, my darling. Control him or it will be my undoing.

I knew Siön Baptiste was struggling with his monster. I could feel his thoughts and power threatening to lose control.

"Damien, you better go home. I can handle him." I nodded in Siön Baptiste's direction, acknowledging his lack of control.

What happened next was a total surprise. Damien turned his back to Siön Baptiste. Big mistake. He hugged me. Even bigger mistake. He then tilted my chin to his. "If you want this guy gone I can make it happen." He wasn't lying. The blue in his eyes went completely black as he stood before me.

"It's okay, you'd better get home. I'll see you at work," I stammered, lost in the black fathomless depths of his eyes and strength.

"What about dessert?" he asked smirking.

"Maybe some other time." I managed to smile but my power was holding Siön Baptiste at bay and it wouldn't hold for long.

Damien leaned down and kissed me. It was tender and quick. Thank goodness, because Siön Baptiste was fighting my hold on him. "See you tomorrow, Samantha. It was fun." He released me and strolled to his car glancing back only to give Siön Baptiste a satisfied grin.

As soon as Damien pulled out of the parking lot, I released my hold on Siön Baptiste. He took two steps and grabbed my arms. "Is this what you have been doing away from me? Spending your nights with that human," he growled.

He released my arms and ran his hands through his hair. Pacing around me, he knew he made a mistake and quickly apologized. "I am sorry, Samantha. I can not control my emotions

around you and seeing the two of you....” He turned away, face void of emotion. “Seeing you in the arms of another man makes me powerless to control my demon.”

I knew what demon he spoke of, for I myself had been fighting with my demon side. The same creature I fought that could use my anger and destroy everything around me. It buried itself deep inside, and at times I felt helpless against its raging hate. It was part of the vampire condition that made many vampires killers. But what made some weak, made others strong and I saw that strength in Siön Baptiste and his brother. Those who couldn’t handle being a vampire were destroyed. I wouldn’t become a bloodthirsty monster if I could help it.

Chapter 12

I lifted myself onto my trunk dangling my feet off the edge. “Look, you’re just going to have to get over it.” I sighed. “Do you think I was happy when I saw you with the bimbo?”

“The bimbo has a name, Samantha, and she is a friend of the family.” He moved closer, propping himself against my bumper. His shoulder and arm rubbed up against my skin causing me to tremble.

“I have seen how your family works. Your own father tried to kill you.”

“He was not my father,” he snapped.

Shaking my head, I said, “I guess I don’t understand who you are really.”

His hand slid over my skin, massaging me gently. I began to relax under his touch. “The clan is my family. There are thirteen clans throughout America. The leader of each clan makes up the council, which report directly to the elders. The king and queen rule us all. Would you like me to continue?” His hand slipped down to my neck continuing its gentle massage. I leaned back into the motion and released the breath that I had been holding.

“Yes, continue.” I wasn’t sure if that was a yes to him explaining his family or a yes to his hands. Either way it was a win win for me.

“Since the death of Nicholi our clan is leaderless. I have been designated temporary leader until the council and elders meet with the queen and king to discuss who will replace Nicholi.” He stopped. “At least they will meet with the queen.”

I nodded. We had already killed her consort. I couldn’t help my grin.

He continued, “The bloodline of any clan begins with an elder, there are thirteen elders and thirteen clans. Our clan originator is Marcus Xavier. He is the strongest and oldest elder, therefore our clan is very powerful. Our clan name is Xavier.”

I nodded, everything was finally coming into place. Thoughts and memories that were not my own but the clan’s, came to light.

“You took our blood and memories when you were turned.” He smiled, sliding his finger down my cheek. “You have my memories,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss my forehead. Heat pooled in my stomach, and further down, as his scent floated all around me.

“Our rules have been in place for thousands of years, enforced by our elders and council members. We cannot bring a new member into the clan until we clear it with the elders. Our numbers are kept low to maintain the peace. Each turning is taken very seriously. Normally, the queen and king are involved in the ceremony and the council controls the event. Our souls are never lost, we are not dead.” He touched my chest with his finger. “Your heart beats as mine does.”

He was answering every question running through my head. “Are you reading my mind?”

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “Not now.”

“We will continue this history lesson later. Right now we have to talk.”

Just being near him was a high. The butterflies in my stomach lurched and twisted. “We are talking.”

He pushed off the car and moved directly in front of me. Settling his tall frame between my thighs, pulling me into his arms. I didn’t fight him because I knew it was useless. I laid my

head on his shoulder, breathing in his wonderful scent.

"Why do you insist on avoiding me? Samantha, how I've missed you," he whispered in my ear.

His hands were warming my arms as he gently pushed me away to guide my face to his. His mouth hovered temptingly over my lips as he spoke. "I love you, Samantha, and will do anything for you."

Thinking wasn't an option and as I tried to reply with a sane answer, none came to me. I only felt his warm presence and power floating over my body. Living only for this one moment of peace I had found since my nightmare began. "I am sorry." My words were cut off when the sweet taste of his mouth covered mine.

For a second in time, life was perfect. Siön Baptiste's love and desire cascaded through my mind. Our mouths moved in unison as lightning energy pulsed around us. He drew me closer, moving his hands inside my jacket. A familiar ache between my legs begged for his touch. Nothing in the world mattered but his touch.

"Siön ... Siön...." A woman's whiny voice interrupted the magic. Siön Baptiste sighed, reluctantly releasing his grip.

I slid off the car shoving him out of my way and stood at his side watching the beautiful slut strut in our direction. Angry and frustrated at her timing, I took it all out on Siön Baptiste. "Here comes your pet now." Taking the keys out of my pocket, I unlocked my car, upset that I couldn't resist him. "I should have never...." I stopped and watched Monroe give Siön Baptiste a hug.

"Where have you been? I looked all over for you," Monroe whined, puffing out her lower lip.

I'd like to rip off that lip.

She spun to face me. "You can't have him."

Siön Baptiste was furious as he tossed her behind him. "Quiet, Monroe."

"But, Siön, she doesn't want you and I do." She grabbed his arm trying to pry him away from my side. She couldn't budge him even an inch and it looked like she was straining with all her might.

He stood completely still, ignoring her pleas.

"Please, Siön, come with me. She is a whore."

Something snapped. He jerked away, sending her sprawling to the ground. "Do not push me, Monroe."

She cried and sobbed as she crawled, hanging onto his pant legs. "I am sorry, master."

My mouth dropped open. *Master?* "Listen, Monroe, you can have him. I never want to see him again." Pain shot through my system at the thought of Monroe in his arms. "I will never be someone's lapdog, and since you are happy to be whatever he wants, don't let me hold you back?"

I opened my car door.

"No!" Siön Baptiste's power held me. I couldn't move.

Let me go you son of a bi... I screamed in his head.

I will not until you hear me out. Will you listen with an open mind? he asked.

Do I have a choice? I growled.

No you do not, my love. His laughter echoed in my thoughts. *You have only a short time before your system rejects the lycanthrope infection. As much as it bothers me to say so, you must drift with the werewolf. You need our help. Sevastian told me you performed the ceremony*

to summon the avenger but we are still awaiting his arrival.

You've made it very clear what kind of help you offer. You want to kill Ty and I am not sure I can allow that to happen. And if your crazy brother thinks he's going to cut me up again he has another thing coming.

I will kill that werewolf, my sweet, for endangering your life, he hissed.

"Master?" Monroe's squeaky, irritating voice interrupted our conversation.

"Shut up, Monroe, or I will punish you."

She started screaming. "Please no...."

"Silence." He waved his hand over her head and she fell limp to the ground.

I heard the girl drop to the ground with a thud. I winced, knowing she had hit her head. I despised her, yet still couldn't help feeling a pity for her as she lay helpless on the cold ground. I watched Siön Baptiste in horror, he was her master, he was a killer vampire, he was deadly, and deep down he scared me.

He continued as though nothing had happened. *I do not believe you understand to what lengths I will go to make you mine, Samantha,* he threatened.

I understand jack crap, except the fact you're prying into my life. What did you do to her? You aren't going to hurt her are you?

He ignored my rage and continued. *Do I look like I would hurt a woman?*

Yes.

I would never willingly hurt any woman to whom I've sworn my protection. Now listen to me. I have information we can use to save your life. We have made contact with an insider and will be meeting them Friday night at the Wolves Den.

Who is the contact?

A singer at the bar. He will help us find your werewolf.

Why didn't you tell me sooner?

I tried.

All the calls and messages I had been deleting off my machines. *Ooopsss!*

He smiled. *Yes, a big ooopsss.*

He released his hold over my body. "Stop reading my mind, Siön Baptiste." I wanted to hurt him, take him down a peg or two for his cocky obnoxious behavior. "Maybe I will take Damien and go find out what is up with the Wolves Den." I winked and slid into the vehicle. Slamming my door and locking it, I started the car and pulled out of the lot leaving Siön Baptiste to mull over my statement.

You will not see that man again, he barked.

I laughed in defiance. *Just try and stop me. I might go visit him tonight and keep him company.*

Siön Baptiste screamed in my head almost causing me to drive off the road. Antagonizing a master vampire wasn't smart but who said I was smart. I did want to check out the Wolves Den before heading home. I closed my mind off before Siön Baptiste could pry again.

His power beckoned me to let him in. Smiling to myself, I resisted.

Chapter 13

Two hours later, after stopping for directions twice, grabbing a change of clothes from home, I finally pulled into the packed-out Wolves Den. It was an old abandoned warehouse that had been turned into a bar. Two different gas station attendants told me that every night they had a live band and a rowdy crowd. I thought that maybe jeans and tee-shirt would fit the atmosphere better than work clothes.

I grabbed my leather jacket from the back seat of the car and shoved one of my twin Berettas in the inside holster. I'd had the holster sewn in for just an occasion like this. I still had the throwing stars Sebastian had given me. Awesome weapons! They injected holy water into their victim. Of course, it only worked on vampires, but it would slow a werewolf down if needed and would definitely hurt or kill a human adversary.

I shoved six stars in the inside pockets of my jacket and put it on. It was long, flowing past my knees and on a cold night, it kept me warm and safe. No one would be the wiser.

The parking lot was empty but the pulsing music could be heard from the street. I looked at the moon and estimated the time to be approximately 11:30ish. This was going to be a long night.

The hair on my neck stood up. Something didn't feel right. I had felt the same feeling walking with Damien to dinner. I scanned the parking lot with my power sending it out into the moonlit sky searching for danger. *Nothing!*

I tried shaking the feeling but it lingered in the back of my mind like a tight, leather glove in the dead of winter. I could feel power boring a hole into the wall I had erected around my thoughts. Something was scanning me. It felt like it was sizing me up. I picked up my pace and almost hit the entrance door head-on as I glanced over the empty lot. I shoved it open and was blasted with the heat from the building. It dawned on me at that moment that what I was detecting in the air wasn't normal. It was a powerful energy pulsating through the club. It was difficult to tell where human auras began and the supernatural dudes left off. The auras mingled above the entire bar. Once through the entrance, I hit a second wall of energy, stopping me dead in my tracks. The blockade was abnormally strong. It prevented me from determining who was scanning my mind. I tried shaking free of the invading force but all I managed to do was spread the slimy feel of filth all over me. It felt like it was dripping off me.

A wooden arched loft overlooked the dance floor but broke off into a cathedral ceiling. There was a stage in one corner of the building and the balcony was over the band. There weren't any windows, an obvious attempt to attract vampires. The band bellowed out a song, the beat thumping against my chest. Groups of people were on the balcony playing pool and sitting around drinking.

The place was overflowing, standing room only in the balcony and around the bar. As a first-timer, I decided immediately that I liked the atmosphere. The only problem was the power that continued to probe my mind. The scanning was getting seriously old, fast. I had learned from the best, Siön Baptiste, how to prevent mind scans from vampires by just watching his aura. But whoever was searching my energy was too strong to keep out for very long. I shoved a short burst of energy back into its supernatural face and it withered away, leaving me out of breath.

I hid my puzzled look and strutted to the bar acting as if nothing had happened. Once I got by the first table, it seemed as if everyone was staring at me. No, everyone was gawking except the gyrating ninnies on the dance floor. I ignored the sideways glances and walked up to the bar.

I sat on a stool overlooking the dance floor and waited patiently for the bartender. I swiveled my seat around and watched the band play, masking my power so I wouldn't bring any unwanted attention to myself. Siön Baptiste mentioned the singer would be able to help me find Tyler. I hadn't noticed anyone singing, just the eerie music of the band thumping in my head and chest. A cold hand touched mine and I swung around ready to attack. The bartender's friendly smile stopped me from swinging.

"What do you want?" he asked, eyebrows rising at my quick reaction.

"Just a diet Coke with lemon, please." He was handsome in a biker kind of way. His aura was distinctly colorful but I couldn't make out what he was. His long blond hair was tied in a ponytail that hung down his back. He had deep brown eyes, almost black. Tattoos littered his arm, neck and chest as he surveyed me.

He asked, "On official business, Samantha?"

What the heck? How did he know my name?

He laughed. "I'm paid a lot of money to know many different things."

"You're a psychic?"

"You could say that." His voice was deep. He leaned closer, staring into my eyes. "I hope we won't have any trouble here tonight. I would hate to see you get hurt." He winked and walked away before I could respond.

He was warning me to keep a low profile and that wasn't going to be easy. I was here to get answers and if I had to do it the old-fashioned way, so be it. I wouldn't cater to someone who couldn't handle the truth. Every supernatural being in New Orleans was aware of what I had become. I'd had two attempts on my life and consistent death threats. On the other side of the coin, I'd had proposition after proposition to donate my blood or have blood donated. I'd found out that news travels fast among monsters. Plus, it was widespread knowledge I was out for revenge. Anyone who had plotted against me would die, and especially anyone who would help the wolves. When the barman returned, he placed a diet Coke with lemon on a napkin, smiled, and walked away to the many customers waiting by the bar.

"So is this place always packed out?" I asked a gentleman sitting by me.

He shrugged, ignoring me and watching the gyrating bodies. The bartender returned to shoo-off someone who had had one too many drinks. He turned to me smiling warmly. "Since the new singer came to town, yes."

He had heard my question over the music and noise, impressive. I nodded. "So how long has he been singing here?"

He rubbed his chin in thought. "For two days."

"Two days and you have a crowd like this? Incredible. He must be talented."

"You could say that." He smiled, turning to fill another order for a pushy drunk at the corner of the bar.

I squeezed the lemon into my drink, lost in my thoughts. Screaming and clapping erupted around the bar. Everyone went quiet. A woman in the front of the dance floor dragged herself up onto the stage. Her skirt was all bunched up giving everyone in the building a full view of her naked butt. A burly bouncer gently pulled her back onto the floor and covered her in a blanket. The lights in the bar dimmed, and if it weren't for my own supernatural sight, I would not have

been able to see anything. A man donned in a long, black leather jacket slid through the crowd. A hood hid his face.

Mist poured from the ceiling as everyone held their breath in awe. The man swayed a seductive dance in and out of the crowd.

Something very powerful and invisible to most, held every human in a trance-like state. The band started playing a deep, thumping sound that vibrated in my chest. A low haunting music filled the air. I peered around the club. The music affected me, so I knew it was influencing the humans, and I needed to be careful in case there might be trouble. An uneasy feeling crept into the back of my mind as I watched the crowd huddle together. They looked like a herd of unaware cattle lining up for slaughter. My uneasy feeling grew as one of the band members started to lick his lips. I caught a glint of his eyes shining off the pulsating lights.

I started to get up. A finger tapped my shoulder and I slowly reached into my jacket wrapping my hand around the butt of my gun. I stood and turned to face the bar. The bartender was grinning. "What do you think about the show?"

"I'll tell you when it's over." I took a quick gulp of my drink. The cool liquid rushed down my throat, tickling and burning. I almost spat it back into the glass. It was bitter. I watched the bartender suspiciously over the rim of my drink.

"What is your name?" I asked him.

"Alex."

I leaned over the bar. "Nice to meet you, Alex. I hope we can be friends."

His eyes widened slightly. "At work I have no friends."

Smirking, I set the drink back down. "Alex, let's hope we are friends because you don't want to be my enemy," I warned, taking a step away from the bar.

Everyone was crowding around the band and leaving me alone. Tempted to follow, I fought the compulsion to look at the band. There was mind manipulation beyond my control being used in this place.

I leaned back and grabbed my drink for one last sip. My lemon bobbed up and down as I lifted it. A faint smell hit my senses as I gulped the cooling liquid.

"Alex, this drink is bitter." I glanced at him fidgeting with his apron from the corner of my eye.

He cocked his head sideways and laughed quietly. "Could be the lemon."

He took the drink from me before I could take another sip. I was about to argue when a beautiful harmonic voice floated over me. It was striking, masculine and memorizing. Something stirred within me, responding to the sound. My body shook as I lowered my head.

"What is happening?"

Come to me! A voice beckoned.

I twirled around in a full circle, trying to figure out where the voice was coming from. I felt disoriented. A dizzy nausea making me grab a barstool before I fell to the floor. Everyone was so busy watching the band they hadn't notice my near accident.

You called me, now come. The voice now demanded my attention.

I fell to the floor. Alex took my hand, helping me up to my feet. "Don't turn around. Here, drink more of this." He raised a glass to my shaking hands. I gulped it down greedily.

The bitterness was stronger, burning the back of my throat. My lips went numb and the strange sensation running amuck in my body ceased. "What's in the drink?"

I looked up only to notice Alex had gone. I was talking to nothing but air. The voice called to me in a low, sexy whisper. *Samantha, come to me.* The singer's haunting words

summoned me to him.

Before I knew what was happening, I pushed my way through the crowd heading for the stage. I didn't move on my own, an unseen force pulled me forward.

I woke from the spell when I hit the end of the stage. My gaze swept over the audience, scanning for the source of control. All eyes were watching the singer. Turning my eyes, I followed a pair of black boots and leather pants up a set of long legs. The singer wore a mesh tee-shirt, emphasizing a perfectly built body. My gaze swept over the man's body and then finally settled on his face. I took a step back only to be shoved forward into the stage, pinned by the rowdy crowd.

The singer held out his hand. "Take my hand, Samantha." Music thumped in the background as his voice tunneled into my head. "Come."

I placed my hand in his and he helped me onto the stage. I blinked in disbelief at who was before me. "Damien," I whispered.

Damien wrapped his arms around me pulling me closer, his hips swaying seductively to the music. Everything got quiet. The band stopped playing and the people stopped screaming. "Listen to me, Samantha. Your life is in danger. I am here to help you." His voice was spellbinding, holding me completely still. "You have been marked with a chemical that will make you traceable to werewolves. You must leave immediately. They can only trace you if you're within a mile of the den."

"How do you know I've been marked?"

"I can smell it on your breath. I did not know they would move this quickly. We all thought we had time. I should have warned you."

It was as if time had stopped while we spoke. "Should have warned me about what?" I had a million questions pop into my head. "What are you?" He was controlling the entire bar effortlessly. He wasn't human. How did he hide his aura from us, his strength? The thought swam through my mind and I needed an answer.

"I don't have time to explain. You must leave."

I met his gaze. His pupils were dilated, almost completely black. I couldn't feel any power flowing from his body. His hair cascaded around his face as he smiled. Leaning down, his lips brushed mine speaking against my mouth. "You must go but before you leave, kiss me."

His tongue followed his mouth, leaving a trace of fire in its wake.

"What are you doing to me?" I managed to whisper.

Barely removing his lips from mine, he mumbled against my mouth. "Removing as much of the tracer as possible."

His energy and force flew through me, making me feel more alive at that moment than in my entire life. I opened willingly as he drew me to himself. Only his mouth and our beating hearts could be heard over the hush of the bar. The kiss deepened as his body moved against mine. His hand slid up my arm to my neck, guiding me nearer. He explored with his tongue and lips, sending a wave of orgasmic energy through my body. He held me up when my knees threatened to give way to the pleasure and my world spun in sensations so foreign to me. We were traveling through time and space as he held me. Colors exploded all around, then darkness and then, just us. A peaceful wave of ecstasy helped calm and soothe my rapidly beating heart.

I waited for just one moment, taking in the refreshing cool breeze that brushed against my face. Only when it had chilled my body enough did I open my eyes. I was standing outside the Wolves Den, astonished and baffled as to what had happened, swaying just a bit as I got my bearings. The music was resonating through my heart, pounding loudly through every nerve. The

last thing I remembered was being told to go home immediately. Above all, whatever had happened tonight, I knew the warning was of utmost importance.

I took a step forward and was greeted with a flutter of dizziness making me gasp aloud. Home sounded good to me. My skull felt like it was splitting with every step I took toward my car. The parking lot was empty, void of patrons. I remember thinking how odd that was when a man's voice penetrated the silence.

"Get her," he screamed. Three men burst out from behind a van parked near my car. Their auras shone brightly. *Werewolves*.

I was immediately brought to my senses as they stalked closer. My power instantly surged through my bloodstream and shot from my hand, throwing the largest man back against a vehicle. The car shook and bent under his weight, but he stood, shaking my power away from him. Guess this was going to get messy. The other two continued advancing, growling low in their throats. They laughed hideously as they moved closer. The large man stopped, ripping his shirt open. His muscles and bones stretched, popping and bending. The noise was sickening as goop oozed from his skin.

"Just great!" I hollered as I sprinted away from my car hoping they would follow and indeed, they did. These things were big, bad and ugly and I wasn't sure if I could handle three attacking at once. The big guy was going to transform right here in the parking lot. Leaping into the air, I shot my power into the ground to lift me higher so that I cleared two cars. Reversing mid-air, I flipped, landing and facing the wolves, Berettas in hand.

I landed without a noise and looked up slowly. "If you don't want to die tonight I suggest you be on your way. This gun is filled with silver bullets," I warned, feeling my own monster respond to their presence.

They stopped advancing and glared at me suspiciously. I just smirked as the werewolf nearest shuffled nervously. "Just try me?" I laughed and it wasn't a totally sane noise coming out of me. "Nobody wants to take a chance? Come on, I want to find out first hand how painful silver is to you wolf boys."

The smallest of the group bolted for me, just a blur in my night vision. I didn't give him a chance to reach me before I shot three rounds into his head. He screamed, falling to the ground, fragments of his head scattered over the parking lot. I knew the gunshot would catch the attention of the cops or more wolves. I needed to get away from this place and fast.

I concentrated my power on the air around me. My body elevated off the pavement into the sky. I shot at the two wolves left standing below me. They dodged my bullets, diving over and behind cars. Glass shattered and fell all around them. I fired again, shattering windows on every car in their path. I hoped the flying debris would slow them down, or better yet, cut them to pieces. My guns clicked empty, I slid them back into the holster. They both stood completely unharmed, smiling through fang-filled mouths. They were changing and if they both got a hold of me, they might rip me to shreds. I landed on a nearby car. My energy had been drained by my flight. My knee pressed into the hood of the car as I crouched, I wasn't going to go down without a fight. Grabbing the throwing stars from my pocket, I jumped down, racing toward the Wolves Den. They followed hot on my heels. They were gaining on me and by now the third guy had completely transformed into his werewolf form. When I reached the side of the warehouse, I used my energy to sprint my momentum forward. Running up the wall, I pushed off the building, only to float through the air. My hair blew into my face as I twisted my body mid-air finally landing ten feet behind my attackers.

With a quick flick of my wrists and power, the stars whistled through the air hitting the

attacker in human form in the back of the head. He fell forward reaching for the weapon, screaming and hollering as the holy water injected into his bloodstream. It wouldn't kill him but it would slow him down a bit.

However, the werewolf avoided the star and continued to pursue. I ran for my car, my energy low from the use of my power. Fumbling with the door, I opened it and jumped in. The werewolf crashed over a nearby van and leaped onto the rear bumper, clawing its way onto the car. Its weight was tearing off large pieces of my trunk and bumper. I refused to look behind me as I peeled out of the parking lot. A crash of glass forced me to glance into my rearview mirror and what I saw had me screaming. Breaking through the window, it reached for me, long claws slashing and destroying the back of my seat. I swerved and hit a mailbox, only to pull back onto the road, yet it still held on.

I sped up trying to keep my eye on the road. I cried out as its claws slashed my neck and down my shoulder, tearing into my jacket. Fumbling with my holster, I removed the gun and tried to load it. Again, my car swerved, pushing the creature away from me and almost ramming me into a parked vehicle. The motion of the car gave me enough time to re-load the Beretta, and with one hand on the wheel, I blindly shot into the backseat. The creature screamed, released my shoulder and slid to the opposite side of the car, long legs still dangling out the window. I quickly adjusted the rearview mirror, moving it to the side so I could see the full length of the car. I could see the blood pouring from the gaping wound I'd left in the werewolf's side.

My fingers were shaking as I pulled my seatbelt across my chest, hastily securing it with a click. I braced myself for impact. I smiled wickedly at the creature through the rearview mirror. Its evil eyes widened as they moved from my face to my hand. Recognition crossed over its features as it struggled to retreat out of the window, pinned by large shards of glass digging into its pelvic region. I sped up, going over a hundred miles per hour before pulling the emergency break. The car jerked, spinning around in a one-eighty, the back of the vehicle slamming into the wall of a fishery. The werewolf howled, his lower torso pinned between the wall and my car.

The seat belt held me firmly in place as the car around me crunched with the impact. I quickly unbuckled myself, opened the door and jumped out, relieved to be alive but bothered by the lack of sensation in my body. The chemical they'd used was starting to affect my power. I had learned over the last few weeks how much stronger I was as a vampire. Now I felt drained, weak and pissed. I shoved a fresh clip into my Beretta and walked to the back of the car. The werewolf was in bad shape but still alive. Lifting my leg, I pushed its deformed head against the side of the building, my boot holding its overgrown muzzle in place. Blood was pooling all round me. The creature didn't begin to struggle until it saw my gun. The claws slashed at the car but it didn't move. It had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and it knew the end was near.

The anger and hatred built up to a boiling point. I felt no mercy toward this animal that was beginning to change back to its human form. "I told you to leave me alone but you wouldn't listen." I shot eight rounds into its face. The bullets exploded flesh and bone all over the wall, ground and my boot. I turned away from the gruesome sight, stomping my foot on the pavement to remove the gooey brain chunks. They slid down my boot falling to the street.

"I knew this would be messy," I complained.

The numb feeling that went through my body was better than the hate or pain I was feeling. The back of my car was destroyed but I had to make it home. I placed the gun on the passenger seat and pulled slowly away. With a thud, the creature fell into two goopy lumps. Its body severed from the impact, slowly changing back to its human state.

Killing every last one of them would be so rewarding and I'd feel no remorse. I drove

around town trying to throw off any possible attackers to my whereabouts. By the time I got home it was nearly dawn and I was exhausted. My car stuttered to a stop in front of my garage, steam and smoke rising from the rear and front. A body has a way of rebelling and mine was doing just that as I dragged its weary self out of the car. Every step hurt as my bruised and battered body moved. Blood would fully heal my wounds, but unless my cats were on the menu, I was plumb out of luck.

With every ounce of strength, I pushed my front door open. "What happened tonight?" It was a question I had to ask but knew there was no answer. Thoughts jumbled up amongst memories. I could only remember seeing Damien at the club, but not much after that. "What were you up to, Damien?" Mulling the whole day over in my head, I tried to remember each event leading up to the club and everything from there on. *Nothing!*

Shoving the door in both annoyance and anger I slammed it shut and locked it then headed to my bedroom. Being this tired was starting to seem like a broken record with me. Guess I just needed a bath and some sleep more than anything else in the world. My room had always been a haven for me to relax. I gingerly removed my jacket and tee-shirt, still sore from the slash down my neck and back. Legs wiggled back and forth and I managed to slip out my jeans without collapsing and threw them over the chair.

My cat, Koko, came out purring from under the bed. I picked him up and kissed him repeatedly. "I missed you, my little poo poo head," I cooed at him as he gave me head butts. I could feel the quiet beat of his heart in my palm and I placed him gently on the floor and backed away. "Get a grip, Samantha, you...."

I was hit from behind before I could finish my thought. If I had been more attuned to my surroundings I might have known there was someone in my house. Pre-occupied with what had occurred earlier I didn't realize there was someone at my back until they shoved me against the wall.

"Great, now what," I grumbled, turning to meet my assailant trying to place myself between Koko and the intruder. He held me firmly but I managed to take my foot and gently prodded my cat safely under the bed.

Chapter 14

Just when I thought the pressure of his hand on my arms would let up, I was slammed back into the wall with a bang. Stunned more than hurt, I screamed, fighting against the strong arms that wrapped around me. A hand grabbed my breast, fondling it roughly while the other hand seized my hair, snapping my head back against a firm chest.

“Why do you defy me, my love?”

I would recognize that accent anywhere. “Siön Baptiste, what are you doing here?” I cried out as his mouth kissed the wounds on my neck, claiming his right to me.

Heat washed over my body as his anger stimulated my senses. He was all over me, his hands moving up and down my body and over my breasts. Before I realized what was happening, he’d removed my bra and ripped my underwear off.

Nibbling my neck, he gently tugged at the skin over my pulse. “Do you want me?” he asked.

I rested against his chest, relaxing in his grip as the fear swept away, replaced by desire. His hands continued to probe, sending flames dancing across my skin. He was out of control. I was responsible for pushing him over the edge and the thought drove me wild with hunger for him.

His lips traced a path up my neck. He captured my chin, pulling it to meet his ravenous kiss. The magic his tongue played deadened any resolve of escape. My reasoning was now gone as he continued his assault, causing me to groan with pleasure.

He pulled away roughly, his fangs scraping my lip and drawing blood. “Do you want me?” he asked again, his eyes swirling, green globes.

The warm metallic taste of my own blood seeped into my mouth. The flavor and smell enhanced my pleasure. I was hungry for more than Siön Baptiste’s sex but craved his blood also. The power he wielded over me captivated my soul and I wanted him more than life itself.

“Answer me.” His voice was husky with need.

He pushed me up against the wall, spreading my legs wide, holding me with his power. His energy pushed inside, swarming over my own power trapping it beneath him. The room brightened as our auras mixed, touching and fondling the forces between us. He kissed the length of my neck, moving to my back. His hands held me still as I wiggled with pleasure. His tongue was velvety soft against my burning skin.

“Yes,” I whispered, barely able to control the hunger that ravished my body.

He shuddered, releasing his hold on me. The sudden emptiness I felt forced me to turn toward him.

He was staring at me as if he had seen a ghost. “What is wrong?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I cannot do this.”

“Why not?”

“It is not right. In your present state you could not resist me even if you tried.”

I didn’t understand what he was trying to say, but the more he talked the clearer my mind and body felt. “Get out, Siön Baptiste. I’m not in the mood for your games tonight.”

“You need to feed, Samantha. Starving yourself is going to make you dangerous.”

Ignoring his comment, I stepped past him, opened my closet door, grabbed my robe and started to head downstairs. "Shut up." Slipping into it was a bit painful but I wasn't going to have this conversation naked.

The living room was dark and welcoming as I sought to escape from Siön Baptiste and his preaching. I couldn't help but think back to the blood from the creature I killed tonight causing my stomach to churn. It wasn't churning because I thought it was gross.

"Samantha, please heed my warning before it is too late."

I headed toward the kitchen. Coffee sounded good. I leaned over the counter tuning it on. It came to life grinding away on the hazelnut beans I had placed there the day before. I normally would have waited until I was walking out the door for work to have a cup, but tonight I needed some hot decaf coffee loving since Siön Baptiste wasn't coming anywhere near me.

I jumped as his hand reached for the plug of the coffee maker and ripped it from the wall. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"You need blood, not coffee."

"I don't need anything from you, Siön Baptiste. I can make it on my own. I have for twenty-nine years."

His eyes searched mine and even in the dark I could see the beautiful sea of green. "It is my fault you are in this mess. Let me help you." With that, he took his ring and held it to his neck. With the tip of the snake's tail he made a small puncture wound. The tail slid into his skin with ease and the blood started to trickle from the cut.

"What are you doing?" I screamed.

Grabbing the towel on the counter, I moved to wipe and blot the wound. He grabbed my hand, snatched the towel and tossed it across the room.

Yanking me roughly into his arms, he forced me to look at the blood now dripping down his neck in long delicious strands. I felt something inside me stir, my stomach growling as I leaned closer.

"Yes, my love, drink until you are full."

The thumping of his heartbeat lulled my mind and body reacted. He gently brought my mouth to the blood as I tasted. The blood pulsed on my tongue as I moved my mouth slowly up his neck to the puncture. It was so much more than sex or lust, it was hunger. Something so real and deep it crawled inside of me fighting to be released. Siön Baptiste could fill the dull ache of my hunger. My fangs lengthened and stretched to their fullest as I scraped his skin.

Groaning, he fell back against the counter pulling me with him. He was under the spell I was now casting as my power wound tightly around him. Tonight, not even a master vampire could fight me off. I had waited too long. Way past reason and I was going to feed.

"Samantha," he pleaded, bringing me closer, moving his hands down my back.

I could play with him until he screamed my name out but I couldn't wait any longer. I sunk my fangs into his pulse. Heat slid down my throat as our bodies burst into ecstasy. It was the sweetest thing I had ever tasted. I sunk in deeper and Siön Baptiste cried out. His hips were now moving against me as I drank.

His blood was setting my body on fire. Igniting desires I never thought could be possible.

Everything was spinning out of control. A spiraling wave of pleasure engulfed us in the flames of our own desire. My body gave way to my need as it moved against him, orgasm after orgasm exploding as I drank. I collapsed, everything growing dark around me.

Chapter 15

Life has a crazy way of kicking you when you're down. I woke to find my bed empty and Siön Baptiste gone. The taste of his blood was still on my tongue. In a way, I was sad to find him gone. Sometimes you don't always get what you want and sometimes you get exactly what you convince yourself you don't want at all.

Right now, all I wanted was blood. Cravings were part of the problem when you were a vampire and I was struggling something fierce to come to terms with what I had become. I longed for blood and I had to learn to control the urge to rip people's throats open to get it. All things considered, I was a very controlled baby vampire. Most vampires in their first years kill more victims accidentally because that was when they had the least amount of control over their hunger. As time progresses they are able to control that inner demon but it never wholly disappears.

I was told they have self-help groups for new vampires. The thought made me laugh. I can see it now, Vampires Anonymous. Me standing in front of a bunch of mindless bloodsuckers declaring my addiction to drunk, helpless bums. I guess drinking from bums would be better than little, helpless children but the whole concept of a group was disturbing in itself. Besides, nobody notices if a bum disappears, do they? I could see it now. "Hi, my name is Samantha Houston and I'm a vampire."

I shivered under my covers, hiding my face in shame. Not wanting to face people with the fact I was a vampire was only half the problem. Unfortunately, I had no choice but to accept my new body and cravings. I just wanted to keep living as if nothing had ever happened at all. Maybe I could live like everything hadn't spiraled out of control and the change wasn't that bad. Resolved to have a day without self-pity, I crawled out from under my covers and slid to the edge of the bed, leaning on my hands. My watch told me it was 5:00am, my body told me the sun was about to come up. Knowing my super vampire senses were far keener to the sun rising than my watch, I knew that my clock was about three minutes slow.

At least I got some sleep last night. I haven't slept well since becoming a vampire and every little bit helped. Now, with the Lycan disease coursing through my body, I was perilously close to becoming that which I always hated. A monster.

A sharp hunger hit me again as my stomach tossed and turned. "Nobody told me it would be painful, son-of-a-gun," I mumbled, getting up from the bed.

I felt feral with hunger and it scared me because it reminded me just how inhuman I had become. Occasionally a raw cheeseburger would help but lately my appetite for blood was strengthening. Maybe Siön Baptiste was right about one thing, if I didn't start feeding regularly I was going to weaken. I needed all my strength to take on the werewolves and whatever else got in my way.

My legs wobbled under me and fell to the ground, more pain flowing through my body. Lungs burned as I gasped for air, heaving on the ground. Sweat was poured from me as my muscles clenched and twisted. Two weeks and look what I was reduced too. I pulled myself along the floor, crawling to the phone. Yanking on the cord, it crashed in front of me. I quickly started dialing the only person who could help me.

“What do you need?” Siön Baptiste walked across my room and took the phone from my hand, hanging it up. “Are you hungry, little one?” He placed his hand on my head patting it like I was a dog.

“That’s it,” I grumbled, forcing myself off the floor and grunting in pain. “Get out of my house,” I managed to spit out between clenched teeth. Even as I spoke, his heartbeat thumped noisily in my ear, drawing me closer. He smiled that knowingly smug, I got you right where I want you, smile.

He headed toward my door as if he was going to leave, and reaching out as far as my arm would allow, I snatched his hand. The hunger was too much for me to resist. “Why does it hurt?” I asked, tears streaming down my face.

“You haven’t fed properly in two weeks. Of course it’s going to hurt.” He smiled sympathetically.

I shivered. “What can I do?”

“You can feed. Nothing else will take the pain away.” He shrugged his shoulders. “You are just so stubborn, too stubborn for your own good. When you do not feed enough your body begins to break down your hemoglobin. You become anemic. In a sense, you begin to break down muscle. You are devouring your own power.”

“So I have to feed everyday?”

“For a while, yes. You have weakened yourself too much and must gain back strength.” He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Actually, to survive this long without eating is amazing.”

As he spoke, my stomach rolled again causing me to groan in pain. “Okay. Okay, you win.” The stinging burned my skin. “But I don’t want it to be sexual.”

He bent over, laughing aloud. The sound resonated inside my head. More burning blew through my mind. “My sweet child, you cannot force, nor prevent what comes naturally.”

“Stop.” I covered my head, not able to take the pain.

“I can minimize and control my desires, but you cannot,” he whispered, moving closer.

“Stay back!” I screamed.

Taking a step closer, he put his hands out. “I am not the enemy, Samantha. I only want to help.” Another step closer.

I backed up, almost tripping over the bed. “No, stay where you are.” My body was on fire and my mind was splitting apart from the pain. I wasn’t afraid of Siön Baptiste, I was afraid of how I felt for him. My stomach lurched again, chest tightening as I screamed in pain.

He inched nearer, taking my hand in his. I snapped back and fell onto the bed, then tumbled to the floor. He was on me before I could move, bringing me to his chest. “Everything will be okay, just take a deep breath.”

The air couldn’t come fast enough. He sat on the floor, leaning up against the bed and moving me in front of him. Holding out his arm, he pulled up his sleeve. “Just drink,” he coaxed, nuzzling up to my ear. “Drink.”

I felt compulsion and need take over my body as I took his arm and held it to my mouth. I licked his pulse once, twice, before sinking my fangs into his flesh. Lightning heat flowed into my body. Siön Baptiste groaned loudly. “You must hurry, my sweet, for I am unable to control my own urges.”

He was grinding slowly against my buttocks while I drank. With every swallow of his blood down my throat, I could feel the string of power flowing and pulling him to pleasure. The dull ache subsided and glowing heat took away all my pain. I groaned against his wrist and he shuddered against my back. My own pleasure was building to release, the hot fluid fusing my

cells, healing me completely. He gently stroked my hair and kissed my ear, whispering gentle caring words in French. Slowly I eased my drinking, not wanting to feed too greedily. Licking the puncture wounds, I watched them magically heal before my eyes. I felt regenerated. I released his arm and the death grip I had on him and sank back into him. I felt great! My breathing had gone quiet and there wasn't even a hint of pain left. I relaxed back into his arms and took in the feel of him.

Mmmmm, I could get used to this. Wow, where did that come from? I bolted up, scooting away from him and stood.

"Wow." He laughed, seemingly drunk on my power and his.

"Time to go, Siön Baptiste."

"I see how it is. Use and abuse me." He chuckled. "You have to give me a minute to recover, my darling."

"Recover?" The sun started to peek through my curtains, cascading around Siön Baptiste. My eyes widened in shock as I noticed what he had been talking about. I covered my mouth and started laughing as the wet spot in his pants grew. "Um, you have a problem." I giggled, pointing and trying not to stare.

I grabbed a towel and my clothes from the closet and walked into the bathroom. "I need to head to work." I continued laughing even while I showered and dressed.

I felt guilty leaving him alone on the floor after he'd fed me but I had things to do and my mind was kicking into high gear. A hot shower was exactly what I needed, or maybe a cold one.

Would you like me to join you?

No. Get out of my mind and house, Siön Baptiste. I really don't have time to mess around. I paused for a minute, then added. *But thank you!*

You are most welcome. Dare I say, anytime? He chuckled.

"Out!" I hollered from under the cascade of warm water.

The rest of my shower was filled with blissful silence. Dressed and ready for work, I stepped into my bedroom fully expecting Siön Baptiste to be gone. Part of me was happy to see him draped over my loveseat holding my cat, and another part wanted to run over and strangle him. He had changed into black dress pants and a blue, tight-fitting tee-shirt of some sort. His long legs barely fit onto the couch and the blue of his shirt highlighted his eyes. He cleaned up fast, and boy, did he look good. Where he got the clothes, who knew, but man, did he look hot.

"You do know that vampires do not need showers, my dear."

"I don't want to hear about your lack of hygiene, Siön Baptiste. Silence from the peanut gallery," I growled.

My eyes trailed over his body. "Wait, why don't you take showers?"

He snorted, looking offended that I'd asked. "I was joking, Samantha."

"Oh, so you're a pain in the neck vampire now, with a sense of humor?"

He waved his hand perilously close to knocking Koko in the head. I flinched. "Yes, you could say that. Since hanging around you I have developed that part of my mind again."

"Great. So you'll blame me for being a smart arse."

"The peanut gallery?" He looked puzzled.

I smirked, ignoring his puzzled look and walked into my closet to grab my boots. He sat up in the loveseat patting the spot beside him.

"We need to talk," he called out.

"You always want to talk." Returning from the closet, I tossed my boots onto the floor and huffed my annoyance, knowing he was right. "Talk or something else."

He smirked. "You seem to like the something else."

I plopped down beside him. "Don't touch me," I warned.

"As you wish."

My traitorous cat curled up in his lap, purring every time he stroked his coat. "I wish you would treat me as your cat treats me."

"He's too stupid to know any better." My cat looked at me as if he'd understood what I'd said. I felt guilty at the comment. I reached out and scratched under his chin. "So what am I going to do? I can't go around sucking everyone's neck and I absolutely will not use you in that way."

Scooting closer, he leaned into my hair, sniffing. His warm breath sent butterflies soaring in my stomach. Being close to Siön Baptiste felt way too good. Actually, waking up to him in my house felt way too right. Everything about this man felt way too good.

"You smell of fresh flowers. Such a feminine scent for such a tomboy."

"I'm not a tomboy. Oh, who cares? We aren't going to start fighting now. I need answers. How do I survive without drinking from someone off the street?"

"You drink from me."

"You know that isn't possible."

"Why not?"

"Because I shouldn't use you like that, or anyone else for that matter." I sighed.

"I do not see it as being used." He twirled my damp hair in between his fingers bringing it to his nose.

"But I do see it as using you. Can I survive with only drinking blood once in a while?"

He huffed. "If you want to remain sane you will drink daily for at least a year."

My hands flew up. "A year?"

"I am your humble servant, willing to sacrifice myself for your life."

"Oh, can the dramatics. We need to make an arrangement of some sort. It has to be clean and concise and not some sexual escapade every time I sink my teeth into you."

His whole body clenched when I mentioned teeth. "Samantha, you definitely are a master when it comes to feeding. Any human might be willing to fulfill this need."

He moved closer and the cat jumped from his lap. "You must find a donor. Someone who will willingly allow you to feed." He hesitated, watching my eyes. "But I will not allow that. You have no need for a feeder. You have me."

I wasn't sure I fully trusted him yet. He could have been behind all my troubles. What if Siön Baptiste had orchestrated this whole deal? I had to guard my heart where Siön Baptiste was concerned until I found out what was really going on. "I really don't want to feed off anyone, let alone you. If you haven't noticed, sometimes you irritate me." He held things back from me. Before I could start to truly trust him, I needed to know every little detail of his sordid past and life.

"I think half your problem is pride. If you just admitted you wanted me, then this," he waved his hand pointing at himself and then me, "would be easy." Before I could respond, he leaned in, pressing his lips to mine, stealing my breath away.

His hand gently caressed my face as the heat rose around us. His masterful tongue stroked and maneuvered its way into my mouth. My thoughts jelled as our kiss deepened. He pulled me into his lap, forcing my legs to straddle him as he tortured me with his mouth. Our hands roamed while our tongues explored. His lips released mine, moving over my chin and down my neck. His tongue danced teasingly over my skin as his lips hummed pure energy into

my body. I wanted him. My hips began to grind slowly of their own accord against the growing bulge in his pants.

My alarm clock came to life, sending the spiraling out of control attraction back into check. Siön Baptiste pulled away long enough for me to jump up and run to my nightstand, turning the alarm off.

I was panting when I turned back to him, lips swollen and red from our passionate embrace. "I ... I really have to go. We will talk about this later."

He nodded. "Over dinner Friday night."

I faced him, sure of my answer, but before I could say a word he was standing before me. Even the cat hissed at his sudden appearance. His muscles moved under the tightly formed shirt and his long legs looked fabulous outlined in the soft, black material of his pants. Leaning in, he pressed his body against me. I was angry that the control of my body and how it reacted to him was non-existent.

"Friday night?" he asked again, this time leaning his head down as if he was going to kiss me.

I bolted, backing right up against my nightstand. "Friday night's fine." Smiling weakly, I fumbled around on my nightstand for my car keys. They flipped out of my hand and fell to the ground.

Siön Baptiste just watched, obviously pleased with my reaction to him. Kneeling down, I grabbed my keys ignoring his smirk. When I turned back, he was gone. Poof, nothing ... "You think you're cool, don't you?" I yelled out behind him. Okay, maybe it was cool he could disappear into thin air. Maybe I was just jealous that I couldn't do it.

Chapter 16

Cold leftover Chinese food was fabulous when you're depressed. Why I was eating so soon after feeding off Siön Baptiste I had no idea. Comfort food ... hmm...?

My office was surprisingly tidy this morning. Betty had worked all morning cleaning and was very happy at my short, but sweet, thank you. I must be getting soft around the gills if I'm trying to please Betty.

She smiled sweetly, walking into my office. "So whatcha eating?"

"Leftovers."

"It actually smells good." She sat down across from my desk in her cute little sunshine outfit. "So how was he?"

"Who."

"Damien, silly, who else. Was he a good kisser?"

Damien was the last thing on my mind. Siön Baptiste must have spiked my coffee because he was all I could think of for the last hour. The man kissed like a god.

I shook my head and straightened my blouse. "Betty, I did not kiss Damien, nor do I see the need to tell you every detail of my life," I growled, still remembering Sion's hands caressing my back.

"Okay, I'll drop it." She was angry.

"Listen, I had a long night and I'm not feeling well."

"You look great, better than you have in weeks. You actually have color."

I smirked. "I had a delicious breakfast."

"Oh, well that sounds good." She stood, holding a large envelope out to me. "Here, this came for you yesterday after you'd left."

The package was covered in a brown paper bag and felt heavy. No address anywhere. "Betty, who dropped this off?"

"I'm not sure, it was just on my desk. I figured it was left by Bob the delivery guy."

I ripped it open, throwing caution to the wind and dumped the contents onto my desk. Betty moved closer as I grabbed the black CD case that fell out of the package. No notes, but a picture of a darkened room and a man hunched over. Removing the CD from the case, I inserted it into my computer. It started without even prompting, opening up directly into my DVD software.

An eerie voice came over the speakers. *"Tyler will die if you do not cooperate. His whole family will die and we will hunt you and your loved ones until extinction."*

It had a similar accent to Adeem but I couldn't be sure. It continued.

"We will punish those you love and those who work with you."

The camera turned from darkness to light. A man was sitting on a chair, completely hunched over and held down by silver chains. Shadows fell around the room. The only light was a single beam, spilling over the man in the chair. I knew immediately it was Ty.

Betty gasped as the voice continued.

"He will die, and when he does, so shall you."

A hand moved from the shadows to hold onto Ty's arm, the other forcing his chin up to

the light. I cringed as I realized the silver chains were driven into the side of his neck and bolted to the chair.

I had seen this work before. Several weeks ago, Siön Baptiste had shown me pictures of a vampire tortured in such a way. And since then, several bodies had been found killed in a similar fashion. I thought I had killed the murderer, now I was convinced of Adeem's involvement even from the beginning. He had set a trap and we'd fallen for it.

"Come to the Wolves Den tonight, 8:00pm, if you want to see him alive."

A third hand reached out from the shadows holding a sharpened silver spike. On the middle finger was a ring of a snake eating its head. The hand dragged the spike along Ty's cheek, leaving behind a trail of blood. Betty screamed. As if hearing her scream, the spike was slowly inserted into Ty's cheek.

I cringed and Betty screamed even louder as Ty shook, controlling his own urge to cry out. After what seemed an eternity of removing and inserting the spike into Ty's body, the tape came to an end. Ty drooped further down in the chair, unconscious from either drugs or the pain.

"Get out," I barked, needing time to digest what I was seeing.

Betty ran out of the room, tears streaming down her face.

I stalked and paced my office. The ring was the same as Siön Baptiste. Was he double-crossing me? Was he in on everything? "Crap," I whispered. "I'll kill him."

"Kill who?" I was startled by the deep masculine voice.

Damien walked in, casually leaning up against my desk. "So what's the problem?"

I had to endure five minutes of silence after showing him the video and it just about drove me batty.

He moved to the window, looking outside and inhaling deeply as if he was sniffing something in the air. "This is the werewolf who infected you." It wasn't a question, he was just simply pointing out something he knew.

"How did you know?" I wondered if my face showed the confusion and puzzlement that I felt.

"I know a lot about you, Samantha. I will explain but it is too early for you to know the whole truth."

"Oh, don't give me that crap. I am so sick of everyone pussyfooting around. I'm not a child and I definitely won't crumble. Just tell me what is going on?"

He moved around the room, rubbing his chin in deep thought. Halting dead in his tracks, he looked up, eyes dark and bottomless. "I will tell you in time but now we need to save this werewolf so that you will survive. Do you know who these men are?"

"Yes, I know at least one of them. I might...." I stopped, not wanting to reveal my suspicions that Siön Baptiste might be behind it all. If he was involved, I wanted deal with him myself.

Damien hesitated, moving closer. Laying his hands on my shoulders, he pulled me to him. "You think Siön Baptiste is involved." His eyes swirled dangerously. His hand dropped down my back, bringing me up against his hard body. "You trust no one." He leaned his head down, lips and mouth hovering over mine, the warm, sweet caress of his breath showering my face. My knees buckled and he held me firmly against him. "You can trust me, Samantha."

A warm breeze drifted over us as his power enflamed my senses. Liquid heat shot through me as his lips covered mine completely. Then, nothing but darkness.

Chapter 17

I was sitting at my desk when Betty walked in. A box of Chinese food sat open on my desk. I blinked, wondering why I hadn't thrown it away.

She smiled sweetly, walking into my office. "So whatcha eating?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, well it actually smells good." She sat down across from my desk in her cute little sunshine outfit. "So how was he?"

"Who?"

"Damien, silly, who else. Was he a good kisser?"

"Was Damien here?"

"No, last night you went to dinner with him."

"Has he been here at all today?"

"No, Samantha. What is the problem?"

Something was wrong. I was having a severe case of *déjà vu*. "Weren't you just in here?"

Betty shook her head, looking at me as if I had lost my mind. "No, I'm actually about to leave for the day. It is late and I have a dentist appointment. I was going to tell you something, but...."

"But ... you forget?"

"Yeah, come to think about it, I'm not sure why I'm still here."

I looked at my watch and my eyes widened in horror. It was 7:15pm. I plopped back down in my chair. How had I lost seven hours of the day? What just happened to us? My thoughts raced together, trying to put each piece of the puzzle together. There was a hole in my memory. A pretty significant hole. My mind probed Betty's mind and tried to read her thoughts but they were completely blank. The whole day was blurred. My own thoughts seemed foggy as I attempted to retrace my day.

My mind was blank. I felt as if I had to do something and it was eating me alive that I couldn't remember. "I guess I'd better head out. Is anyone in the office?"

"I'm not sure." Betty seemed even more confused than normal. That wasn't a good sign.

"Go home, Betty. Forget your dentist appointment and get home."

I had a bad feeling that things were going to get ugly. As the feeling worsened, I sent my powers out around the building searching for something unseen.

My heart slammed against my chest. "Betty, get down!" I leaped into the air across my desk and slammed Betty to the floor just as a rain of gunfire shattered the windows in my office, pelting us with shards of sharp glass. The automatic gunfire continued for an eternity as my desk and cabinets splintered and exploded around us. Betty was screaming in my ear, causing a blinding pain to shoot through my head.

"Shut up!" I hollered over the hellish noise.

I covered her mouth, my body lying across hers. Tears rolled down her cheeks as the attack continued. "We have to move," I mouthed. "You must keep your head down. Do you understand?" She nodded her head, acknowledging what I had told her. "And don't make a noise whatever you do."

I turned her over and crawled up beside her. Taking her hand in mine, I led her through my office. The whole building was being attacked. Once we reached the hallway, I scrambled to the back filing room. Betty hesitated as a loud popping noise followed by a thud behind us made her look back.

“No, keep moving.” Dragging her behind me, we crashed through the door of the file room and rolled under a nearby desk. “Down.” A loud explosion rocked the building, causing a second wave of blood-curdling screams to erupt from Betty.

I covered her mouth again and she bit me. “If you want to get out of here alive you will shut your mouth,” I growled. “Stay here.” I stood up, sliding between two cabinets in the far corner of the room. I slid across the empty filing cabinet that was against the wall and knelt, opening a trap door. Inside, I removed a pair of Berettas and some ammo, slid a holster over my shirt and strapped it on.

Just then, the door flew open. Three men entered, guns in hand, searching the room. I crawled silently along the floor, watching the desk and hoping Betty could keep her mouth shut.

Betty, don't move. Stay completely still. I'm coming. I spoke the words in her head as I maneuvered myself behind a cabinet with a clear view of Betty. Her tear-stained face watched in horror as one man moved to the front of the desk.

None of the men had supernatural auras. I only had seconds until they discovered Betty. Moving with inhuman speed, I willed myself behind the men.

“Ahem.” I cleared my throat and all three men faced me. “How can I help you today, boys?”

They looked at each other and before they had a chance to react, I sprinted through time, appearing behind the man furthest away. I put my hands around his head and with one quick snap, broke his neck. He fell lifeless to the ground. Everything I had learned from drinking the elders' blood had now blossomed in full force. My blood boiled as my pulse quickened. I hungered for the hunt, for the kill.

The second man began to fire at me and I leaped into the air bouncing off the wall. Everything slowed, including time and space as I extended my leg, kicking his weapon to the ground.

In the distance, I could hear Betty screaming. I couldn't stop as my hunger took control. The man shouted as my fangs sunk into his neck tearing his flesh. Lost in a world of color and warmth, the sweet taste of his life slipped down my throat.

Betty screamed again. “Sam! Sam!”

I looked up, blood dripping from my mouth. The only remaining attacker held a gun to Betty's head. He had an earpiece and was telling someone things were out of control. “She is killing everyone,” he hollered.

I stood slowly, my victim falling to the ground, blood spewing from his gaping wound. “I will kill you before you get a shot off.” The words came out of my mouth but they didn't feel like my own.

The man took a step back, leaning up against the desk. “Don't move or I'll...”

He didn't have a chance to finish his sentence, I was already upon him, gun tossed across the room. He dropped Betty as my hand wrapped around his neck, squeezing until he couldn't breathe. He gasped, trying to get air, and I tightened my grip. His eyes bulged as his life slowly slipped away.

Betty shrieked as his bones began to creak and splinter under the pressure of my fingers before her very eyes. “What are you? What are you?” she repeated.

I focused on her for a second, her heart beating in my ear. Slowly licking the blood from my mouth, I smiled.

She scooted away from me until the wall stopped her retreat. She slumped up against it bringing her legs under her and cried. I sensed her fear and it only fueled my hunger. The man tried to kick me off him but I held him firmly. He only managed to divert my attention from Betty back to him.

“Who did this?” My voice echoed in his mind and throughout the room. Power flooded his body as I pried and poked in his head.

He screamed, “Stop.” Gargling the word through his blood-soaked mouth.

I continued my reckless advances on his mind, knowing the damage would be permanent if not deadly. Something had changed inside of me. When I killed the men, it felt as if their souls were immersed with my own. For just a few seconds after they died, I felt a burst of energy sweep through me. As the energy pulsed, the men’s memories became mine.

“Adeem,” I whispered angrily. Adeem had sent these werewolf wannabes to kill me. They would do whatever it took to become a monster. They were Special Forces, a total of ten. A hit squad. Adeem wanted me dead.

I ground my teeth, furious that I hadn’t seen this coming. Before I could finish questioning the survivor, I jumped back, a sharp pain shooting through my body followed by a numbing sensation running up and down my spine. I turned and watched as the shooter in the doorway began to load a third shot. He raised the gun, aiming it at me. He fired it again, hitting me in the stomach this time, forcing me to my knees. I reached around my back, removing the object embedded in my skin and looked curiously at it. It was a dart filled with blue glowing liquid. It was some type of drug or tranquilizer.

My head began to swim as I fell to the floor. I could see Betty kicking and screaming, scrambling to get away from the approaching men. My eyes shut as the sounds became muffled, my body frozen, unable to move.

I released my grip on the man I held and he got up slowly. He began to kick me over and over. My ribs gave way to his onslaught and pain ravaged my body until finally I welcomed the growing darkness.

Chapter 18

“Samantha, wake up.”

My eyes fluttered, opening slowly. A bright light shining in my face blinded me. I tried to sit up and fell back down, head aching too much to move.

“Samantha, you’re alive. I thought you were dead.” No sooner had the words escaped her mouth, she started to sob and cry uncontrollably.

Eyes adjusting to the brightness, I propped myself up only to fall back down. The drug they had given me was blocking my power. The lack of energy scared me. Trying again, this time using all my brute force, I sat up. My ribs were broken. I wasn’t sure how many but the pain made it hard to breathe.

“We are in a van. They stopped a few minutes ago and we haven’t moved since,” Betty whispered. She wiped the sweat beading on her forehead. Blood was pooling around her feet.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, but you are.” She pointed at my head.

I rubbed my hair and then noticed the blood dripping onto the van floor. It was my blood all over the van.

“They hit you so hard I thought you were dead,” Betty sobbed. “They drank your blood ... They drank it.”

“It will be okay.” At least I hoped it would. Unable to stand, I shuffled along the van and placed my hand in hers. I wanted to comfort her. She was so young and scared. Every bad thought or word I had said about her made the guilt of her involvement even worse. “I’m sorry.” I was sorry. Sorry I wasn’t stronger and able to fight off our attackers. I was sorry for Trevor’s death. A tear slid down my cheek and Betty wiped it away. Sorry for the monster I had become.

“Everything will be okay, Samantha.”

I bit my lip. “Betty, we are going to die.” I was certain whoever had us would never let Betty live and I would die trying to save her life.

“No, the cops will find us.” She paused watching me carefully. “What is wrong with your eyes? They are glowing.”

I covered my eyes with my hands, hiding the now animal shine. She had no idea how strong my need for blood had become. I had lost too much of my own blood, and in order for us both to survive, I needed my strength. “Betty, I’m not human.”

“I figured that much, Samantha. I’m blonde but not completely clueless.” She bent her head and more tears fell from her own cheeks. “What are you?”

“I’m a vampire.”

“How?”

“Siön Baptiste.”

“Did he force you?” She looked up, her eyes wide with horror.

“No.”

“You did it willingly?”

“Betty, enough questions. My head kind of hurts and I need to figure a way out of here.” I wasn’t annoyed, just trying to think clearly. “I need ... blood.”

“Does it hurt the person when you take blood from them?” She was shaking as she spoke.

“I can make it feel good, I think.” I wasn’t really sure what I could do in my weakened condition.

“You can take my blood.”

I was astonished at her bravery. Despite her terror, she sat up determined to help me. I could almost taste her fear as it inundated my senses, bringing on the familiar pang of hunger. The van started moving causing me to sway. My head was pounding. Everything around me was spinning and blurring.

Betty unbuttoned her blouse and slid her hair away from her neck. A small burst of energy pulsed through me.

My fangs lengthened as her pulse sped up calling to me. I leaned in closer, sniffing the warm air around her. The scent of her sweat and blood just under pale skin beckoned, taunting me. My tongue flicked gently across the beat in her neck. She started to back away but the hunger was too great. My arm crashed around her, bringing her tightly against me.

She screamed as I sunk my fangs deep into her flesh, careful not to tear but only puncture. I swallowed greedily, the blood oozing down my throat as she fought against my superhuman strength.

“You are biting me and it hurts, Samantha, it hurts.”

I’d never fed on anyone but Siön Baptiste. He’d never fought against me. Betty’s struggles only heightened my desire for more blood.

I stopped sucking, blocking the blood flow with my tongue. Remembering knowledge given to me by the ancients, I concentrated on filling her with my energy. This time my power flared to life, pouring into her. When her cries ceased, I began to drink again. I was filling her with mind-numbing pleasure. She bucked and rocked against me, bliss replacing pain.

“Oh, my God,” she sighed out as the first wave of ecstasy hit her full force. A second soon followed by a third. “It feels so good,” she screamed, digging her nails into my back.

I could have drained her into a pleasurable death but I pulled back. She held me close, begging me to continue. “Don’t stop,” she pleaded.

I recoiled, turning away from her as I slid across the cold metal of the van. Hiding from her still bleeding throat. The wound on her neck would heal quickly and my body began to mend even as she lay drenched in her own blood.

Collapsing to the floor of the van, she began to shiver and shake uncontrollably. Had I taken too much? Her face had an ashen tint from the blood loss and shock.

“That was the best sex I’ve ever had,” she croaked.

“It isn’t sex,” I scolded, blushing in embarrassment.

Betty just smiled, relaxing into the aftershock of pleasure still flowing freely through her body. She tilted her head, looking over at me through her bloodstained hair. She seemed different. Peaceful. Smiling, she reached for my hand.

“Don’t touch me,” I whispered, fighting the urge to drain her dry.

I was a monster capable of things only nightmares held but there was nothing I could do to change what I had become. I only had one option. Embrace my future and get us out of this situation alive.

“Betty, lay down.” I felt what we were approaching. There were werewolves ahead and something else more powerful. I had to suppress my power so they wouldn’t know I was almost at full strength. I bowed my head, concentrating. Quickly erecting a blockade around Betty’s mind. They mustn’t know I had her blood. I knew they would use her against me. We were

connected and it was growing stronger with each passing moment.

My mind blacked out, taking me back to the moment of drinking the ancients' blood in my dream. I hadn't wanted to taste it and they'd forced me, yet now, years of their memories bombarded my thoughts. It was just a dream but each distinct thread of knowledge held its own danger and the more I delved into the past, the grimmer my future looked.

When I learned what I was looking for, I cursed under my breath. "What have I done?"

Betty was changing. When a vampire took blood from a human in the way that I had, it connects you to your victim. Another minute of taking her blood and she would have died unless I had given her my own blood. She was connected to my life force. If I died, she would. Now it all made sense. Whoever drank my blood was forever tied to me. I was forever tied to Siön Baptiste and anyone else's blood I had taken. That was why it was so hard to deny either man. Was the desire real or brought on by the connection?

Betty's words came to mind. *They drank your blood.* I smiled wickedly.

I dived further into the memories of the ancients. Pictures and scenery flashed through my mind as if it had all happened to me. "I can control them, the fools." I laughed silently as the back of the van swung open.

Chapter 19

Stifling my laugh, I lay motionless on the floor of the van. Betty followed my lead. I had to convince them I was still injured so swallowed my power back into myself.

Betty, just do whatever they want.

She nodded, acknowledging the message I sent to her thoughts.

Two men cautiously entered the van. The van dipped under the weight of us all.

"Be careful, they are alive," the man nearest me warned.

"This one was pumped so full of drugs she might never recover, so don't worry about it," the other man barked.

"Chad, you're crazy. The boss told us to give her more drugs."

"Ken, if we give her anymore drugs she will die. Look at her. She is probably already dead or dying."

The blood had dried to my hair and face. The sight of me would have made anyone sick. My wound had completely healed and my ribs were mending, but the blood caked to my body would convince even a doctor that I had kicked the bucket.

"We have to," Ken replied.

The van was covered in blood, and as the men inched closer, I peeked from behind almost closed lids. I almost gasped. Ken had a syringe in his hand and was moving toward me. If he drugged me again I would be helpless to fight. Concentrating on the blood beneath his feet, I pulled his legs out from under him. Once he fell, I sent a small jolt of power into the syringe causing it to break open.

"Be careful, idiot," Chad scolded.

"I'm not an idiot, you buffoon. It's slippery," Ken retorted, struggling to get up. "Oh crap."

They both looked down, realizing too late what I already knew. The needle lay sideways leaking its contents onto the floor.

Chad tried to scoop up the remaining fluid but it had mixed with my blood. "Forget it, we are screwed," he growled.

"No we aren't. Look at her. She's out of it. Nobody will know the difference."

I wanted to tell them both to shut up but held my breath waiting for their next move.

"You get that one. I'll take this one." Ken pointed to Betty and then me.

Chad picked Betty up by the arm and dragged her to the edge of the van. Betty suppressed a whimper as he yanked her around. Two other men came out of the shadows and helped him out of the vehicle, all taking an arm or a leg. They wore black outfits with black ski masks covering their faces. I couldn't make out anything about them other than voices.

Ken turned his attention back to me and I quickly shut my eyes.

"This is gross. What if she has a disease or something?" Ken mumbled, yanking my shoulder and wrist. He took an arm and then a leg, sliding me along until two other men helped him, grabbing my remaining limbs.

I was lifted into the cool night air, hair dragging along the ground. One of the men dropped his side of my body and I landed on the pavement with a thump. I fought back the desire

to kill them where they stood. My monster side envisioned ripping out their necks.

The sudden jolt to my body made me a little queasy as they yanked me around like a rag doll. Oh boy, were they going to get it.

Music echoed from ahead. The air smelled familiar. We were heading in the direction of the Wolves Den. But instead of continuing on our path toward the club, we veered down a darkened alley. Well, dark to any normal human.

Betty started to panic. I could feel her trembling. It wasn't the cold chill in the air, but fear. *Calm down Betty, I'll take care of you.* She believed me because her breathing relaxed.

I opened my eyes. The alley was littered with trash. A rat scurried across a railing above us. Nobody noticed but I could hear and smell it. The music was fading behind us as we moved. Up ahead was a gate. The fence ran up the length of the alley wall and was covered with barbed wire at the top. Nobody human could clear it without it tearing them apart or killing them.

When they reached the gate they all stopped and waited. Nobody said a word. If I didn't know better, it felt like they were holding their breath. I couldn't tell whose fear was more sickening, Betty's or the men who held us captive.

"What is taking them so long?" Ken asked. "They know we are here."

"Shhhh," Chad answered.

The breeze stopped. Nothing but deafening silence surrounded us. In spooky stillness, we waited. Waited for what I have no idea and I wasn't sure we wanted to find out.

"Here they come," Ken whispered.

Nobody moved. The temperature was getting warmer. One man started choking on some unforeseen force and fell to the ground. Everyone crashed to their knees, dropping me like a piece of meat.

The feeling of a million fire ants hit my mind and my body bucked. I swallowed my scream. Betty screamed. A roar in my ears drowned out Betty and the men. I could only hear my heart pounding away in my ear. The person probing us was powerful and it didn't care whether the sweep of our minds was painful or pleasurable. The onslaught of pain continued. One man began to weep. I was too busy fighting the urge to let my own energy fight or ward off its attack. I wanted to rip my clothes off and jump into a pool of ice water, but I stilled myself, concentrating on not moving.

As soon as the agony had started, it stopped. The men knelt on all fours, afraid to look at what was heading in our direction. All we heard were the echoes of shoes. The noise stopped and the gate opened.

The men stayed on the ground. I could sense what was going on even with my eyes shut.

"You damaged her." Whatever it was it sounded devilish. The voice sent chills up my spine.

"She was like that when we got her, Master." Chad replied.

"SILENCE!" the voice demanded.

"But, Master...." Chad's voice was choked off. He made a gargling noise and blood poured from his eyes and mouth. Blood surged from his body.

My clothes and hair were now drenched in his blood. A small part of me was happy to know he was dead. Anyway, if the freaky powerful dude hadn't killed him, I would have.

"We must clean her before presenting her to our king," a woman's voice hissed from behind the monster in front of us.

"What is this?" The woman's heels clicked on the pavement, finally stopping close to Betty. "I did not think there were two." She had a strong accent. Sounded middle world.

“Sasha, do not touch the unclean wench.” The man had a rich accent.

“Raven, she is not unclean,” the woman whispered as if not to wake the dead.

“Then bring her and leave the others,” Raven answered. “Sleep ... Sleep....” he repeated, his voice lowered. It no longer held the hatred or anger. The deep tone vibrated along my skin drawing me inside myself. I welcomed the darkness and the calm it held. No fighting. Not yet.

Chapter 20

I woke up with a start. The smell of rotten burning flesh seared my memory. I'd thought of fire and whoever it was in my dream had been engulfed in flames.

My hands were tied uncomfortably behind my back. The cords would not stop me from escaping. I could break them easily but my captor wasn't aware of that fact.

A tall figure strode in my direction. "You are awake."

Blinking to clear my sight, I focused on the man who now stood in front of me. We were in an arena. Steps led up, swallowed by the darkness that surrounded us. It was a cavernous, square, wooden coliseum. Four massive posts stood floor to ceiling in each corner of the building. Silver chains were strung through the posts leading to the center of the stage area and up into the ceiling.

"This was where our warriors battled and died when we fought our wars in hiding from humans." He circled me. "Now, we hide no more." He waved his hand and lanterns attached to the poles came to life.

"I really am not interested in a history lesson," I cracked. Normally I would have been impressed with the size of the building. Instead, my eyes drifted to where the silver chains ended. Following the chains to the ceiling, I became aware of a cage hanging from the rafters. The cage was slowly being lowered. A smile crept across the man's face.

His long, flowing, jet-black hair billowed around him like a cape. He was over six feet tall and his broad shoulders were big, even to me. He wore leather pants and a cape. The outfit was dramatic. He seemed the type to want to flash a little muscle and brawn. The only flesh exposed was his face and chest. He had a ring on his middle finger. The same beautifully crafted ring that Siön Baptiste wore. It was the crest of his lineage. Did that mean they were related?

"We have a surprise for you." His voice resonated all around me.

I managed to retort, "I don't like surprises, never have, never will."

"Oh, you will like this one, my dear." The cage began to descend rapidly, chains clinking loudly.

So, he was the man in the alley. I had never seen someone kill a man like he had. He was powerful, maybe too powerful for me to fight my way out. But then again, I was too stupid to care. I wasn't going to let someone kill me a second time around. I'd go down fighting and take as many out as possible.

As the cage lowered, people flooded in all around us to sit on the wooden benches. I watched as they filed in quietly. Nobody moved except to look at Raven.

I knew I was in big trouble when I sensed close to a hundred werewolves and vampires surrounding us.

He stood in front of me as the cage continued to descend. I could smell the energy, almost see it floating through the air in colorful waves of power.

I pulled against the ropes that held me. They didn't even budge. How could I not break rope?

"You will not escape, my lovely dove." His eyes darkened, swirling with power.

"You drugged me," I accused.

He moved closer. "Of course. Your reputation as a troublemaker precedes you. Why would I chance you escaping?"

My head was beginning to pound painfully. "Do you ever shut up? All this talk is giving me a headache. Just get on with it already."

The whole audience gasped.

"What? You all shut up too. I'm sick of this crap. BLAH, BLAH, BLAH ... I am going to dress up in black robes and obey his every whim. You mindless zombies are worse."

Raven's hand moved quickly and came down across my jaw. I thought I heard a crack but it was my head whipping back against the wooden post.

"Ouch. Oh, and he hits women. You picked a wonderful goon to follow," I mumbled, fighting the pain that shot through my head and neck. I tasted blood as it trickled down my nose and mouth, dripping down my chest. I licked it from my lips and started to laugh. "You will all die, mark my words." I continued to chuckle.

More gasps from the audience. *Good!*

Raven listened silently, his eyes darkening. "You will be mine to control." Admiration seemed to briefly cross his face. He moved so close to me, his jacket was sliding over my body.

Leaning into my ear, he whispered, "Of my blood, by my blood."

Something stirred in the air and everyone started chanting, "Of my blood, by my blood," over and over again.

He kissed my neck, running his tongue across my pulse. I shuddered as my fangs lengthened in response. One of his teeth scraped my skin and I groaned. The chanting grew louder as Raven grabbed my hair bringing my neck closer. My back arched as I struggled to break the ties, but a force held me in place. Movement was impossible I could only stare wide eyed at the group of chanting ninnies. A scream threatened to escape my lips as I clenched my fists wishing desperately I could throttle him. Yet the desire to have him bite me was stronger than anything I'd ever encountered.

"Do not fight me. You will surely lose." And with his last words, he sunk his fangs into my neck. Blinding white light and heat lifted me from my bondage. The ropes fell to the ground as we lifted off the floor. As we floated everyone disappeared. He wrapped his jacked around us, bringing me closer. It felt like a string was attached to his mouth, running the length of my body to every cell and nerve ending. Just when I thought the pleasure couldn't intensify, it did. I could get lost in his power. Addicted to how he made me feel.

We were in a bed of clouds as we clung to each other. It felt as if I might die from the pleasure, he released my pulse. "Of my blood, by my blood," he repeated, guiding my mouth to his neck, spurring me on to drink. He didn't have to ask twice. I sunk my fangs into him and began to swallow greedily. He cried out with every soft suckle of my mouth.

The pleasure never stopped. We shook in each other's arms, hardly able to control our bodies. When I could drink no more, I released his neck and we began to slowly return to reality.

I crumbled to the ground in a heap. The cage hit the floor with a large bang. I lifted my head off the ground high enough to see four men in long robes entering the arena. Everyone stood cheering. The robes covered their faces. Only their feral, glowing eyes showed.

"What is this?" I choked.

"Watch, my dear." Raven moved behind me and placed his hands on my shoulders.

I knelt, ready for the show. A man or creature, I wasn't sure which, held out a key to the cage and unfastened four large locks. They crashed to the floor. I was still trying to steady my breathing as I began to come back to earth after whatever Raven had done to me.

He seemed more under control than ever. Calm, cool and collected. Even happy. He watched the creatures move and smiled to himself.

Once the final lock had been released, the chains pulled tight and lifted the top of the cage.

I blinked, adjusting my sight. What I saw made me feel sick. I almost vomited as I cringed at what was before me.

Ty, or what was left of him, was hunched over in a decorative wooden chair. The wood was covered with blood seeping down the leg to the bottom of the cage where it pooled. Chains were imbedded in his flesh at both his neck and through his shoulders. I couldn't tell if he was still breathing.

"What did you do to him?" My anger overshadowed any fear I had for my own life.

"He is a traitor and was punished as one."

He laughed and everyone joined in unison, chanting, "Traitor, traitor, traitor," over and over.

"Shut up," I whispered as the chanting became louder. "Shut UP!" I tried to stand but Raven held me down.

Raven bent over and whispered in my ear. "He was given a drug to prevent his change. Unable to heal he will die. But first, his punishment."

"Are all vampires so dramatic?" I asked, bracing for a rebuttal.

He squeezed my shoulder so tightly I had to cover my mouth to hold back a scream. Do you remember when you were a kid and your parents would tell you no? I remember my father often saying, "No, Samantha, you might get hurt." I started to laugh, wondering if maybe I did have a death wish, but I wasn't going to sit here and let them use me. I owed it to my father to uphold my stubborn idiosyncrasy of not taking orders well.

I pushed up with all my might and could feel his grip twisting against me. He wasn't going to be able to hold me forever.

I stopped fighting against him when one of the robed creatures removed the chair Ty was sitting on and pushed him to the ground. Ty knelt, head bent, arms and hands resting on the floor.

I gathered my power holding it in check. I had to make my move at the perfect moment. I only had a few seconds to react and if I didn't time it right, both Ty and I would die.

Adeem strode confidently into the arena, his power engulfing my senses. Raven snorted behind me as Adeem made his way toward us. He had a large sword draped across his chest. The hilt of the weapon was wrapped in a red silk material. I watched in horror, knowing now what they planned to do with Ty.

When he reached us, he bowed slightly to Raven, never taking his eyes off him. I had a feeling he was keeping his eyes on him for a reason. Treating Raven like the dangerous predator he was, Adeem very carefully held the sword out to him.

Adeem stopped mid-stride, eyes wide with alarm. "What is she doing here?" he mumbled under his breath.

Raven took a step forward standing at my side. Adeem visibly flinched. Was Adeem that afraid of Raven?

"Adeem, not happy to see me?" I asked, practically spitting venom in his direction.

"Raven, I must ask respectfully for her to be removed from the arena. She could ruin our plan." He looked at me instead of Raven.

"She has taken of my blood." Raven's voice was calm, yet I could feel his body tense.

"That means nothing. She is beyond control." Adeem practically screeched the words.

Raven turned toward me. "Once he is killed she will be ours. It is his blood that has tainted her. The link must be broken." Just then, he ripped the sword from Adeem's outstretched hands.

I got a clear mental picture of what was about to happen. Adeem nodded to the crowd and six werewolves stepped down and surrounded me. I watched in agony as Raven stalked closer to Ty.

I willed my thoughts to Ty. *GET UP! Get up and fight.* I repeated it over and over.

He ignored me, still glued to the floor on his hands and knees. "Ty, it's Samantha, get up if you can," I pleaded. But he didn't budge an inch as Raven drew closer. I could feel a cold sweat at the impending doom that hung in the air like death itself was stalking toward him.

I started to struggle with the werewolves surrounding me. I pushed against them but they held, tightly packed around me. "Someone help him," I pleaded to the crowd. They just sat and watched like good little puppies. I struggled as my heart beat wildly in my chest. "I will kill you all," I screamed.

Adeem watched me nervously from behind the sea of werewolves surrounding me.

"How is the shoulder, Adeem?" I asked bitterly.

"Shut up, wench," he retorted angrily.

Raven removed the red silk pouch and began to swing it in large circles. "He does not even fight us." He laughed and everyone cheered.

I said a silent prayer, which I haven't done in years. If someone heard me, it would be a miracle.

Chapter 21

The crowd roared to life as Raven stood before Ty, cheering and taunting him on. I fought with all my power and managed to toss one of the werewolves aside, but two larger men replaced him and began beating me back with wooden planks. Someone clubbed me on the back of the head and I fell to the ground. Swing after swing, the hits smashed me to the ground. The pain became a dull, numbing sensation running from my spine to the middle of my back. Pulse after pulse of numbing nausea ran through my system.

I lay helpless. Held down on the ground as I watched Raven swing his sword up over his head, holding it there, ready for the deathblow. Closing my eyes, I said a silent prayer. We needed a miracle and we needed it now. "We need help," I whispered over and over.

The numbness was starting to wear off as pain shot through my head. I nearly screamed as it stabbed unmercifully throughout my body. I couldn't hear what was going on around me. A single tear slid down my face as I opened my eyes, hopelessness filling the void in my heart.

All the cheering had stopped, everyone was frozen in a trance.

Silence. A quiet so thick you could almost feel its treachery.

I grunted in pain as I pulled myself onto my elbows and scuffled away from my captors. Before collapsing, I made it just far enough to see what the crowd and everyone in the arena were looking at. A man wielding a sword was standing halfway up the steps in a hooded, leather jacket. Everyone watched as a glowing power seemed to cascade over the whole arena. Nobody dared move as he slowly raised the sword in a battle stance. They were held helpless, mesmerized by his power. I continued to scoot my limp body toward Ty, seemingly immune to the trance everyone else was in.

Raven took two steps away from Ty, ready for attack. The visitor lifted his head slowly. The hood slid back and everyone gasped in unison. He shrugged his shoulders and the jacket fell, revealing a perfectly sculpted body covered in a black mesh material. He had a beautifully detailed Celtic tattoo that ran from his wrist up his shoulder to his neck. My eyes followed the tattoo and my own heart leaped with recognition of the visitor.

Damien stood perfectly still, eyes never wavering from Raven.

Raven hissed his annoyance at the disturbance. "Who are you?" he questioned, taking a step in Damien's direction.

Damien smirked, eyebrow raised, and this only seemed to anger Raven further. Raven was a strong vampire and I had a feeling Damien was in over his head. I'd seen first hand what Raven had done to that guy in the alley.

I scooted up closer, my legs unable to move. I was numb from the waist down. No doubt my back was broken from the blows they had given me.

Adeem moved up beside me and knelt. "Do not interfere," he warned, taking my hair and yanking my head back roughly. I cried out as a bolt of pain shot down my back. Ignoring my pain, he shoved a knife up to my neck. The blade sliced my skin but only made a small flesh wound. The pain was mild compared to the broken bones in my back and legs.

Damien tilted his head. As if seeing me for the first time, he took a step toward Adeem. His black eyes met mine. The black opened, swallowing me whole, taking me captive.

Everything darkened around us as he held me in his gaze. I was walking through a dark hallway, stumbling and falling from my injuries, amazed I could stand. Suddenly a door swung open and Damien stood there, light cascading all around him as he held his hand out to me. I fell, crawled, reaching for his hand. If I could only touch him all my pain would be gone. Bile bit the back of my throat as I struggled to keep conscious. Reaching out with all my strength, I grabbed his hand, his fingers clasping around my wrist bringing me to him.

Something passed between us, seeping down my arm to the knife. Energy pulsing through my body brought me back to the arena. Dazed from the dreamlike state, I was quickly brought back to reality when Adeem started screaming in pain. He dropped the knife as he stood, mouth gaping at the burn still sizzling in the palm of his reddened hand. A huge imprint of the decorative designs of the knife was all that was left in his hand.

Just as Adeem stood, I felt tingling energy pulse slowly through me. A jolt of painful power levitated me off the ground and into the air. The crowd began to back away as I floated above them. I screamed as the pain continued. My heart was beating wildly in my ear, drowning out my own screams. Then, as soon as it started, everything grew quiet again. I floated gently to the floor. I crouched low for only a second before lifting my head to meet Adeem's shocked face. Slowly standing, my eyes never wavered from Adeem. I could feel Damien's power coursing through me, enhancing my own powers. I felt invincible. I was invincible.

Adeem's anger wavered as he took a step back. I knew he could feel the power flowing through me, licking and tasting the air around us. Sizzling in the air around me, the power shone brightly throughout the arena.

Raven took his eyes off Damien and turned toward me. I could feel him calling to me inside my mind. When I didn't move, he growled, "Come to me, I am your master!"

I watched him, no longer afraid of his power. It flickered against mine, prodding to find a way to touch me. I caressed and fondled it before shoving it back at him. He fell back a step, eyes wide in shock.

He hissed. "I will kill you if you do not join me."

Before he had a chance to move, Damien appeared beside him. "You will do no such thing." Damien's voice echoed throughout the arena, flowing into me and around me. I swayed slightly at his power as it beckoned to me.

Raven hissed again, this time bearing his long fangs. "Just try and stop me."

The two stood, waiting for the first strike when a voice interrupted the deafening silence. "You do not recognize when you are defeated, Raven?"

The voice. "Siön Baptiste," I whispered.

Siön Baptiste strolled into my sight followed by Shadow and Sevastian. "The cavalry arrives."

Are you okay, my love? Siön Baptiste whispered in my mind.

I sighed in relief. Maybe we would make it out of here alive after all. *I am fine but Ty doesn't seem to be doing well.*

"He has been drugged," Siön Baptiste answered aloud for all to hear.

Werewolves started to flee, sensing impending doom. Shadow stalked along the edge of the arena moving behind Ty's limp torn body, his skin glowed a deep blue metallic.

Sevastian walked to my side, grabbing my arm. He snapped back as soon as his fingers touched my skin. "He is here," he mumbled, looking around until he settled his gaze on Damien.

"Who is here?" I asked.

"The Dark Avenger."

Damien nodded his acknowledgement and then it was clear.

“Damien is the Dark Avenger?” As soon as the words left my mouth, I began to float through the air. Sebastian stepped back, eyes wide, not with fear but with awe.

You summoned me, and I am here. Damien’s mouth did not move as he spoke. *Use me to defeat your enemy and then release me.*

My head snapped back as I screamed. “No,” was all I could manage to say. I knew there was no turning back and that what was about to happen would change me forever. The feeling of emptiness and falling made me sway on my feet as my body slowly began to lose shape, turning to shimmering mist.

I could feel all eyes bearing down on me as what was left of myself descended upon Damien. *This will only hurt for a moment,* he warned.

There was no pain, only a numbing sensation coursing through me as I hovered over him.

Raven took a step forward, raising the sword to strike. I saw it as I entered Damien’s body. Our bodies, minds, souls and power merged. As the sword crashed toward us, we lifted our sword, blocking Raven’s strike. As soon as the metal clashed, chaos broke out amongst the remaining werewolves and vampires. I was Damien, he was me, and we were one person in one body.

The movements around us were so rapid I lost sight of everything other than the swords. It was as if the very air around us hummed with energy. Raven stumbled back as Damien and I pushed forward.

Sparks of light bounced sporadically with every clash of the metal. Raven continued to retreat as the strength of our swings increased. He backed himself up into one of the large wooden posts and with one quick jab, Damien and I pinned him through the chest to the pole behind him. He howled in pain.

Ignoring the disorder that continued around us, I leaned into him whispering in his ear, “Raven, you have a choice tonight. I will try to make it simple.” I heard my voice coming from Damien’s body. “If you make the wrong choice we will kill you.”

Raven watched us in horror, his lips trembling with fear. “What are you?”

“That is not important. What we will do to you if you choose wrong is important.” We leaned in further putting painful pressure on the sword while we spoke.

Damien’s voice took over and I could feel myself moving to the back of his mind. “Serve our queen or die,” he warned, wiggling the sword closer to Raven’s heart.

I heard a scream from the commotion behind us and literally fell out of Damien’s body. One minute I was inside his head, the next, he spewed me out. I fell to the ground shaking as his power still flowed through me.

“Go help your friends. I will watch Raven.”

I scrambled to my feet and turned to the fight. My legs were a little shaky, but with every passing second I gained steadiness as I saw what was before me. Siön Baptiste had Adeem pinned against the floor, straddling him as he wrapped his hands around his neck. Shadow had managed to remove the chains from Ty and held him in his arms as werewolves surrounded them. Sebastian was battling four fully transformed werewolves, skillfully hitting and ducking from their attacks.

I ran to help Shadow. Protecting Ty was going to slow him down. I reached the first werewolf, grabbing his head before he could react, snapping it in a quick twisting motion. The bones cracked and gave way under the immediate pressure and he fell to the ground. I grabbed the gun from his waistband and shot the other werewolf before he could reach me. He fell back,

face in shock as a single drop of blood leaked from the hole now evident between his eyes. He faltered and dropped to the ground with a squishing sound as more blood poured from the wound. I walked up to him and pointed the gun at his chest putting two more bullets in his heart.

Shadow had backed away from me. His skin was almost transparent against the darkness behind him. The glow in his eyes held only hints of the power he could wield. It wasn't until I dropped my gaze from his face to his body that I noticed he was naked. I quickly stole my gaze away from his well-muscled naked body and forced it back to his face. He had silver earrings in both ears that were covered in Ty's blood. His ears were pointed, like the guy from that space show. Right now wasn't the time to pry into what Shadow was, but soon I would need to know what kind of power I was dealing with.

Shadow interrupted my thoughts, "I will take him to safety and you must stay and help the rest. I believe I underestimated you, my Queen." He bowed, which seemed awkward as he held Ty.

"Just get him out of here, and I'm not your queen, Spock." With that, I left him alone in the darkness, his body shimmering and disappearing.

Chapter 22

I felt an eerie sensation creeping into my mind. The probe slowly oozed between the barriers I had erected. Those same barricades had been able to keep probing enemies out, most of the werewolves' probes, keeping my thoughts safe from them. I had a plan and not even Siön Baptiste knew. Someone had forced their way past my defenses now and was reading my mind. Someone powerful enough to slide past my defenses without even causing me pain. I turned slowly as a voice penetrated the noise around us.

"You and all you hold dear will die tonight." Just a whisper of a feminine voice floated around in my head, the power it wielded so effortlessly made me sway on my feet.

An image scorched my pain. Where there had been pleasurable numbness before, now pain, like a hot iron against my mind, seared my senses. I fell to my knees screaming as flashes of a dying Siön Baptiste raced through my senses. He held a hand covered in blood out to me, eyes tearing from the pain and sorrow. "NO," I shouted. The building trembled and shook as my anger pulsed to life. Rage fueled my aura and my own power washed over everyone around me. In the distance, I could hear screams and gasps as my rage threatened to engulf the building. The tremors increased as beams and lights came crashing to the floor.

Over all the noise, I heard one voice of warning. Sebastian screamed, "Get up, Samantha!"

I opened my eyes and found myself face to face with a monster nightmares were made for. A bubble of energy encased me and my rage subsided immediately. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth as fear took over where rage left off. Eyes widening, unable to speak, but knowing for the first time in weeks what death looked like in its true form. My heart raced and the pain in my chest made me realize I had been holding my breath. I felt true panic as I was held by its power, totally immobile.

The creature's hate-filled eyes bore down upon me. It wasn't its own hate I felt, but that of its master. The string that controlled the beast was just barely visible. It was kneeling before me, watching and waiting for its master's command. The master's aura was wrapped securely around the neck of the creature. My hand reached up on its own accord, feeling for the invisible line that bound the creature to its master. Its amber eyes bore a hole through my mind as it waited for its master's command. Its skin appeared to be thick like armor with a dark leather appearance and a burnt, reddish hue. I felt hell in its gaze as heat washed over me from head to toe. The face was nearly human in shape but the size of the beast was enormous. The mouth peeled back in a wicked grin, revealing sharp pointed teeth.

I tried to look away but was transfixed by its hideous appearance. The beast's tongue was too big for its mouth as it hung from its jaw. The horns atop its head were larger than my arms and black as coal. It tilted its head, watching me with eyes that flashed from deep amber to black. I knew if I looked into those eyes, I would fall into a black, bottomless pit never to return.

Everyone was frozen as the monster's power washed over the arena. It shoved my aura back into my body, my head snapping back at the sudden mystical impact.

A harsh cackle of laughter bellowed throughout the arena. "You have met my little pet."

I tried to move so I could see the woman who belonged to the voice but was lost in the

creature's hold. Only Sevastian's voice revealed who, and what, we were facing.

"Tazmaine, what are you doing? Release us," Sevastian ordered.

"Shut up, Sevastian," she hissed. "I am your queen, you will do as I say. Now bow to me." Her laughter echoed throughout the building, in my head and thoughts. Her voice echoed inhumanly all around us. I felt it crawl inside my body up and down my spine. It was as if pure evil stained my very soul and if I didn't expel her from my mind, I would be forever tainted.

"Bring her to me, Dracomere."

My heart leaped into my throat. "Dracomere?" I whispered at the revelation of what this creature was before me. Fear flooded my system. This creature could destroy earth. It stood, and as if I had a string attached to my back, I stood in unison. Tazmaine walked away from the creature toward Siön Baptiste.

My mind raced. How did she summon this creature? I only wished I had studied more and complained less when Sevastian tried to teach me about the demons.

What I did remember was not at all helpful. They were powerful beings that would one day destroy the world, unless, remembering Siön Baptiste's words, *I died*. The creature's eyes widened as if it had read my mind. If I died, he would be sent back to where he came from, leaving Siön Baptiste and the rest of the gang to deal with Your Highness, the pain in the neck. *I hope!*

"Dracomere, bring her to me now," Highness-pain-in-the-butt screeched angrily.

The demon flinched and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the aura stretch and begin to fade. As quickly as it became transparent, it just as quickly illuminated back to its full-multicolored spectrum. I held my breath, almost wishing it would break but wondering what would happen if it did. He was feeding Tazmaine power. It crossed my mind that she had been using this creature to gain power all along. A flicker of hope shined in the creature's eyes as it watched me.

"Bring her, NOW!" Tazmaine cried.

I will kill her for you. I sent the message directly to the creature.

One moment I was standing, the next, the Dracomere scooped me up into its arms. I was still held by its power, unable to move anything except my head as it carried to me to Tazmaine.

I laid my head against the demon's chest and was surprised to hear a beating heart. It thumped loudly enough to drown out my own. The leathery skin was deceptively soft and smooth against my cheek. The rhythm of the blood pumping through his body lulled me into a relaxed state. My fingers suddenly felt strong. I let them slide tentatively up the demon's arm to its neck, feeling the pulse beat strong under the pressure of my palm.

Heat radiated from the creature. Warm relaxing heat. I closed my eyes and let it wash over my skin, over my body. The monster had a soul, it beat in my ear and tugged at my heart. The pain and suffering it had endured created the beast before me. I wanted to take the pain and heal the hurt it was feeling. A single tear slid down my face and onto the monster's chest. Years of service to its master had only created the monster before me. Its steps slowed and I could feel it looking down at me in its arms. This creature was once human. I began to cry silently as I realized the years of torture this poor creature had endured. I was once human and the human side of me recognized the pain he hid. He had played with fire and had been burnt. Now suffering and paying for his mistakes for centuries.

Opening my eyes, I stared in shock and awe as the creature before me shimmered and disappeared, leaving the image of a man. A handsome face with deep brown eyes. The outline of the man disappeared leaving only the hideous beast behind. He hadn't always been a Dracomere.

He had been created and forged by a creature far stronger and far more evil. Despite the darkness that clouded his soul, there was a shimmer of light. Had part of his human side still survived?

It stopped before Tazmaine and stood completely still, me in its arms. She waved her hand. "Kneel, beast," she commanded. It hesitated only for a second before kneeling.

Stupid b....

An oily voice interrupted my thoughts. "You have a choice, Samantha." The creature remained kneeling before its master with me still held firmly in its arms. "I kill them." She pointed and I followed her long pale finger, my stomach churning and rolling. To my horror, I found Sevastian, Raven, Siön Baptiste and Damien all lined up. They were kneeling, hands held behind their heads. My eyes searched theirs for any sign of a plan. Siön Baptiste watched me with such emotion. I turned away from the mixture of love and anger he projected.

Oh, crap!

There were men lined up behind them, guns pointed at their backs. I looked around widely, and to my relief, noticed both Shadow and Tyler had escaped. I hadn't noticed the men or what was going on around me until now. One of the men forced Raven to the floor with a hit to the head with the butt of his gun. Raven's wounds had completely healed.

She asked me again. "You or them?" The man holding the gun pointed it at Raven's skull. I smiled. If she thought killing Raven would get me to do what she wanted, she had another think coming to her.

He could die for all I cared.

She waved her hand at the gunman, watching my expression. "Or him?" The gunman pointed his weapon at Sevastian. A third man walked around and punched Sevastian in the stomach. I flinched. Sevastian stood strong, not even showing any pain. This only angered the man further and he hit him in the face until blood started oozing from Sevastian's lower lip. He never moved, just stared at Tazmaine with such hatred that even I felt her fear. Another punch to the face and already Sevastian was bruising and swelling under the beating.

I tried to struggle but I could feel strong arms holding me tight. I watched in horror as a slow smile crossed Tazmaine's lips. "Let her answer."

Suddenly I could breathe again, the oppression I'd felt was lifted. My voice was hoarse as I answered her. "Go ahead, I really don't care who you kill," I croaked. Maybe if I acted like I didn't care they wouldn't be bargaining chips. I had this feeling she wouldn't kill Sevastian or Siön Baptiste because she wanted them in her bed.

Her eyebrow raised, face darkening to a deep shade of pink. She was pissed. Taking a step forward, she slapped my face. *That's going to leave a mark.* My head flew back against the muscled chest of the creature. Flashes of white clouded my sight. If I had been human, she would have broken my jaw. Queen of the Dead or not, I was going to kill her. "Is that all you have?" I coaxed, spitting blood from my mouth. If I was going to die tonight, why not make her miserable doing it.

She lifted her hand again to hit me and Adeem reached around and grabbed her wrist. He was standing behind her the whole time. She whipped around to face him, lifting her free hand to slap him. He met her motion and held her in his arms. She struggled for only a moment before starting to laugh. To my utter disbelief, Adeem leaned in and kissed her. I mean really kissed her, tongue and everything. She smiled against his lips looking back at me.

Oh, gross! "That's just not right," I mumbled, blood now pooling in my mouth. Her slap didn't break any bones but my lip was bleeding. "Adeem, I don't like you but you can do better than her. She's been around the block one too many times, if you know what I mean." I

chuckled, my laughter spurred on when Tazmaine leaped for me, hands outstretched. She was going to strangle me, I could see it in her black, hate-filled eyes. Adeem held her back as she screamed her frustration. He lifted her off the ground and took two steps back. Maybe I wouldn't kill Adeem after all.

"See, she is too high strung. Maybe she was dropped on her head a few too many times as a baby?" I taunted as she continued to fight Adeem's grasp.

Adeem calmly held her while he whispered, "We cannot harm her before she dies."

Then again, maybe I would kill him.

She settled down and leaned back against Adeem, rubbing her hands through his hair. She moved like a sensuous snake. Of course, snakes to me were far less scary than this wicked witch of the west. Despite her beautiful face and perfect figure, she oozed evil. I felt it the first time I met her and now everything I had imagined about her was true.

I continued to mock her. "Really, you two are disgusting." My hand shook as I pointed at her, "She should have a sign hanging around her neck, 'Beware of Dog'. Someone like her needs to be on a choker chain and leash for training purposes and...." I hadn't even finished and she leaped at me once again, this time dragging Adeem with her. I started to laugh at her flailing arms and legs. She looked like a raggedy Anne doll, hyped up on drugs.

"Come and get me, dog breath." I was really pushing my luck but the look in her eye was so worth the danger.

She came closer, almost getting away from Adeem.

Siön Baptiste spoke quietly. "Samantha, do not push her beyond reason."

I turned to him surprised he could speak. His eyes pleaded with me to cooperate. "They are going to kill me, why should I make it easy on them?"

He shrugged his elegant shoulders. I felt a tug on my mind and realized he was trying to tell me something, but the monster kept him at bay. He wanted me to cooperate until he figured something out, that much I could sense. What they didn't realize was by causing Tazmaine's outburst, I had given them more time.

The demon stood taking a step back, putting room between them and us. "She is mine." Its voice was gravely and harsh ricocheting around us all. "That was our agreement."

My time was running out.

Both Adeem and Tazmaine settled at the creature's announcement. "Of course she is yours." Tazmaine clenched her teeth. "And she is a willing sacrifice." Adeem placed Tazmaine down and released her. The creature seemed to have calmed them both.

Adeem's eyebrow rose. "Take what is yours then, Dracomere." His smirk chilled the blood running through my veins.

"I just want you all to know, I belong to nobody. I'm my own woman."

I could feel Sevastian and Siön Baptiste battling against the power that held them. They were held helpless by the creature. It was either them or me, and I was okay with dying, but I couldn't bear to see them killed.

"She is not willing but she will be mine." Two large teeth lengthened as he spoke. They were twice the size of vampire teeth and looked as sharp. A clear slimy fluid dripped from one fang landing between my cleavage. It stung and burned as it slipped beneath my gown. The monster shifted me in its arms, allowing my body to be pressed against him. I was now facing the creature still limp and powerless, only my arms able to move. I placed both hands on his shoulders as he leaned forward. It was going to bite me and I was unable to prevent it from happening.

I managed a weak, “No,” just before its fangs sunk into my neck. A sharp stinging sensation pulsed as its fangs entered my skin. The pain only worsened as its mouth drew closer to my throat. I knew the fangs were fully submerged when its entire mouth opened against me. Dizzying pain caused bile to burn the back of my throat. I was going to be sick. “No.” Again I struggled weakly to escape its grasp. My hand flew at its face as I tried to fight it off. I had never experienced pain this excruciating in my whole life. A broken bone, a pole through my chest, nothing compared. My body was melting in a painful fiery ball of flames. It was as though every nerve in my body was being torn and twisted into a mangled mess. Choking back a scream, I closed my eyes. Trying to wake myself from my nightmare. This had to be a dream. Tears mixed with sweat streamed down my face. I wasn’t sure I could survive the pain much longer.

The creature’s fangs retracted and it lifted its mouth. The pain eased slowly. I gasped as a rush of air flooded my lungs. Every cell that burned began to cool and grow eerily numb. I relaxed against its chest, unable to think and barely breathing. Was I dying? I hope not. I’d rather go down fighting. *Not this way.*

“Why did you stop, Dracomere?” Tazmaine hissed, obviously annoyed he hadn’t finished the job.

“Release me.” The “lease” in “release” slurred as his fangs once again elongated. I could barely make out the aura wrapped around its own power binding it to Tazmaine. “Release me and I will make her mine,” he ordered, eyes never blinking, just staring, cold and unfeeling.

Adeem grabbed Tazmaine’s arm. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” he asked. She wiggled free from his grasp. “She’s been bitten. Even if she could move, her power is useless now that he’s marked her.”

She smirked, giggling as she ran a nail over my arm before pulling back. “I can feel it in her. She won’t get free.”

Adeem backed away, bowing low to the ground. “As you wish, my Queen.”

Gag! I hoped she could hear my mind because my mouth wasn’t working.

“You are relinquished of your quest, Dracomere.” Her shaky voice gave away the fear she had of the creature that held me. “I summon you no more.”

I couldn’t help but wonder what she got out of all this. Besides my death. Then it dawned on me. With me out of the way, she was free to have Siön Baptiste? Was that her motivation? As if on cue, she glanced back at Siön Baptiste and Sevastian and then quickly focused on the beast. Her intentions were all too clear to me.

Everyone jumped as the Dracomere took a step forward. Its head bowed slightly as the aura that bound him to Tazmaine gradually vanished. Could I bind him to my aura? How did she do it? Guess I might never know. The creature brought my neck back to its face. It sniffed along my skin, running its forked tongue in slow circles. The hair on my neck stood on end as it continued to suckle and sniff the length of my neck. The pain was totally gone, only a deep dark numbness remained. This time I knew what to expect but was unable to brace myself as its fangs lengthened. They slowly pierced my skin, the heat from the bite was welcome next to the cooling numbness that took over my body. A tingling sensation vibrated from his mouth and moved down my neck, spreading little by little all over my body. A pleasurable pulse ran through my veins replacing the agony of its bite that I’d felt earlier. No, pain just a blissful pleasure. I shook as the heat took over my senses.

Just when I didn’t think I could hold in a scream of pleasure, it all stopped.

Everything went dark.

Chapter 23

Police report....

Detective: Why don't you start at the beginning, James?

Witness: Call me Jim.

Detective: Okay, Jim, tell me what you told Detective Knight.

Witness: I told you everything I know. My buddy took me out to celebrate my thirty-seventh birthday. I was dancing with this hot woman when all hell broke loose.

Detective: What started it? The fighting?

Witness: I don't know. All I know is that I have been going to the Wolves Den for months and never had a problem but last night was different. You know, the type of men that just look like they could kick anyone and everyone's butt. Well, they broke through security and took out three bouncers.

Detective: What did the men look like?

Witness: Tall, very tall. I'm tall about 6'1" and they towered over me, wearing long leather jackets.

Detective: So you fled?

Witness: Hell no, I followed them. I wasn't going to miss out on all the action. My buddies now, they ran for the hills.

Detective: What did you see next?

Witness: I, uhhhh ... I'm not sure how to explain what I saw. It was like nothing else I've ever seen.

Detective: Who killed the woman?

Witness: Something that I don't ever want to see again. It was a monster with horns and long sharp teeth. It was like something straight out of a horror movie.

Detective: A monster?

Witness: I'm not crazy.

Detective: I'm sure you aren't.

Witness: Well you are looking at me like I've grown a second head or something.

Detective: Go on.

Witness: It was a monster. Listen I wasn't drunk, only had two beers. I can handle myself when the going gets rough but this thing made my blood run cold. It had this chick and was....

Detective: Samantha Houston was her name.

Witness: Yeah, yeah, I know, the detective before you pointed that out. The monster had this chick, Samantha, in its arms. The thing was biting her neck. When it released her, she fell to the ground, dead as a doornail.

Detective: So the monster killed her, John?

Witness: It's Jim.

Detective: So the monster killed her, Jim?

Witness: Did I stutter or something? Yes, the monster killed her. Then it just disappeared into thin air.

Detective: What happened next?

Witness: This woman standing next to the creature, she began to laugh.

Detective: A woman?

Witness: YES, jeesh! Are you thick or something?

Detective: Other than a few men, we didn't see any witnesses here.

Witness: Well, there was a woman. She was gorgeous.

Detective: So a pretty woman started laughing when Samantha was killed? Don't you think that's a little strange?

Witness: You know when you can tell a woman is just all wrong in the head? Kind of like my second wife. A real nutcase, still having issues with her crazy shenanigans.

Detective: My first wife was a little crazy.

Witness: I can sympathize. Either way, this woman had a crazy look about her. Beautiful, but you could tell she hated that Samantha girl. Women can be real witches to each other. You know?

Detective: Yes.

Witness: When the monster disappeared, a few people left. Even the men with guns left.

Detective: Guns? You didn't mention that in your first report.

Witness: Nobody gave me a chance to answer. They wanted me to confess to a murder I didn't commit.

Detective: I see, go on.

Witness: The really gorgeous woman walked over to this man and whispered in his ear. I could tell he stiffened when she came close but then he nodded his head. The four men looked really upset that the young girl was killed. You know how people throw daggers with their eyes?

Detective: So they didn't appear happy about the murder?

Witness: No

Detective: Why didn't they try to stop this monster?

Witness: They couldn't. All four men had guns held to their heads. I just watched from a corner. I would have run to help the girl but it was like something held me. I couldn't move. She was beautiful in a deadly kind of way.

Detective: The girl who died or the one who ordered her execution?

Witness: Both.

Detective: What did the men do once she died and the other woman left?

Witness: I've never seen anything like it.

Detective: What?

Witness: The man who the lady with a lot of makeup whispered to, stood when she left and walked over to the body. He knelt down just watching her.

Detective: Then what?

Witness: He scooped her up in his arms and held her like a baby. He was a big man who to me was pretty scary. Tough guy. Didn't seem like the kind of man who would cry, but there he was, rocking this woman in his arms crying.

Detective: What did they do next?

Witness: Well, that's when you all stormed in and tossed those smoke grenade-like things. I couldn't see much else. I just remember the tall guy standing screaming with the woman in his arms, and then your goons attacked me.

Chapter 24

Light at the end of the tunnel, yeah right, not for me. Death was dark and cold. I would have given anything to see something. Any light was better than the darkness surrounding me. I tried to move, nothing. Crap. I'm really dead, just floating around in the cosmos somewhere. I just knew this would happen eventually. Prophecy, my butt. I was dead as a doornail and there was no fighting it now. I thought hell was hot, not cold and dark. It wasn't my fault I was a vampire. I just hoped God would be merciful on my soul.

Then it hit me. Could I be dead and cold? Only once in your life would you experience darkness that envelops your senses, taking over your soul. It had to be death. The black pit of despair covered my eyes as my own hate penetrated my mind. Tazmaine was behind everything, including Trevor's death and mine. Even dead, I wanted to wring her little neck. I will haunt her. If I can't kill her, I'll haunt her 'till she kills herself. My father would tell me stories of how I'd follow him around the house talking his head off. That is exactly what I'd do to Tazmaine. Talk her head off.

I could feel my body gradually stirring as if waking from a deep sluggish sleep. The circulation of blood flowing through my veins was slowly coming to life. Maybe I was transitioning between life and death? I tried opening my eyes and still there was pitch black. I was either blind or dead and this was my mind's way of coping. I let out a breath and it was only then that I realized I was even able to breathe. There was no relief as the air flooded my lungs. I held my breath, still unable to see. What seemed like an eternity later, I took another shallow breath. Only a dead person wouldn't need air, but the air itself had a calming affect on my rapidly beating heart.

But just to be sure I was really dead, I needed to try to move. I concentrated on my body. Visualized my toes wiggling and then tried to move them. Nothing. I took another deep breath of air and began to focus all my energies on my toes. The minute my toes began to move, I felt cold all over. I lifted my leg and my knee slammed into something hard, shoving it back down into place. I winced as a small bit of pain shot up my leg. "I'm alive," I whispered. "If I can feel pain and hear myself talk, I'm alive."

This time I raised my head and crashed into something hard and chilly knocking me back. Then the cold was replaced by a dull ache. My heart pounded in the back of my throat as I gasped for air. My lungs were starting to burn. How long had I been here? Panic pumped through me at an alarming rate and I began to hyperventilate. I was running out of air. I was definitely alive as I tried to gain control over my shallow gasps. I scolded myself for panicking. "Get a grip, Sam, you have been in worse situations than this," I mumbled.

I never did like enclosed places. Always hated playing hide and seek with my friends growing up. I was too darn claustrophobic. "Keep calm," I whispered. Getting all crazy wasn't going to help me get out of this situation.

I ran my hand along the box, feeling my way up and down the sides. I had about an inch of wiggle room on either side which only enhanced the feeling of claustrophobia. I slowly lifted my right arm, then my left, and moved my palm above my chest. I had more room above me, at least four, maybe five inches. I growled, "It's a freaking coffin."

She had placed me in a coffin. Anger replaced my panic and I started to bang on the wooden crate with my open palms. When it didn't budge, I balled my hand into a fist and pelted the stubborn box. I could smell the blood from my knuckles as the skin peeled back from the impact. The adrenaline wore off and I dropped my hands to my sides. I was weak, barely able to lift my arms let alone break through what seemed to be the toughest wood I've ever tried to break. Not that I'd attempted to escape my own tomb that often.

"I heard something, James."

I held completely still. The voice was muffled.

"I know I heard something," the woman repeated, the sound getting closer to my coffin.

A knock came at the wood. I closed my eyes hoping that they were either here to save me or if they weren't, they would go away.

"I thought it came from in here but that's not possible."

A deep voice bellowed through the room. "Cara, get out of here. The queen will have your head on a platter if she finds you in this room," he scolded.

The woman giggled like a child and the next thing I knew my box moved. Lips smacking and groaning sounds came from above me. They were making out on a dead woman's coffin! *Gross!* I bit my lip trying to control the urge to strangle them both. I knew if they knew I was alive, I wouldn't stay alive for much longer.

A third voice came from the room. "What are you doing?" He seemed none too happy. "Get off her, now," the voice growled.

Was he insisting the man get off the woman or get off me?

"Raven, sir, I am sorry." The woman sounded so young. She couldn't be over twenty. I could hear the couple scurry from the room.

Raven! Last time I saw Raven I had a sword embedded in his chest and he'd sworn his allegiance to me. I knew it was out of self-preservation, but wondered if he'd meant those words.

The box shifted and I almost squealed, managing to bite my tongue instead. I quietly braced myself against the sides of the box.

"The queen always gets her way, Samantha." He whispered almost directly above my head. I heard the drumming of his fingers on the box. "And now she will have everything she has ever wanted." With that last comment, he left the room. I heard a door open and close, clicking shut.

"What were you doing in there?" a voice asked from the hallway. I would recognize that deep baritone with a hint of a masculine sexy French accent anywhere.

Siön Baptiste? I wanted to scream, "I'm alive, alive" but didn't want to put him in danger. Hearing his voice soothed my nerves and gave me the strength that I needed.

Raven answered sarcastically. "The real question is what are you doing down here? Tazmaine will be none too happy that you are not by her side."

By her side? My heart sank.

I heard a scuffle and then someone being slammed up against the door with a thud. "Do not tell me of my duty. I am full aware of what the queen requires of me. It is you who went against her will." Siön Baptiste's voice did not shake or waver. "I am her consort, which means you do as I say."

Consort? I held back the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes.

Raven's voice dropped an octave. "You are not her consort yet, brother."

Siön Baptiste released Raven. Raven coughed and hacked. "I will be your king by the end of the ceremony tomorrow night. You should hold your tongue while you still have it to hold.

Any trouble at tomorrow's celebration and I will hold you responsible."

Raven laughed defiantly. "We will see."

For a long time there was silence. I figured they both had left, but then the door creaked open. I wasn't sure if it was Raven or Siön Baptiste, or another of Tazmaine's goons. I heard a gentle scrape on the wood above my head and then the door opened and closed again.

An eternity seemed to pass as I cried silently. I could handle death but the thought of Siön Baptiste in Tazmaine's arms caused a sharp pain in my chest. I could feel myself drifting off to sleep. So overwhelmed with grief, I didn't care that it was hard to breathe.

Soft, luminously beautiful music woke me. How long had I slept? My eyes adjusted to the dark and I could see some light penetrating through a small hole near my feet. It was stuffy but at least I knew there was fresh air coming from somewhere. I wouldn't suffocate, so this time I didn't panic. I waited, praying for an opportunity to escape this dark cold tomb of mine. I heard laughter and singing. *A party?*

The door opened with a bang and a group shuffled into the room. "We are to bury her der out back in de forest." A gruff, heavily accented voice ordered, "Grab yer end and hoist this bloody wench's coffin."

"Hey, who put de flowers on her casket?" someone asked.

"Ah, just toss them," a gruff voice answered.

"No, keep them. We will place them on her grave. No need to disrespect the dead."

Good man!

"I don't think you need all of us," another voice argued.

"Fine with me. Go to de bar iff'n you want?"

The voices were all around the box. I couldn't tell who was who. A few of the men left. When they lifted the coffin into the air, I shifted.

"Hold her steady, Cain."

"John, stop telling me what to do."

Thankfully, I didn't have too much room to move or I'd have been slung all over the place.

"Do ya have the shovel, Cain?"

"Yes, sir."

"Flowers?"

"Yes, sir," Cain replied.

Crap! They were going to bury me alive.

"The hole is dug, we just need to bury it," John instructed Cain.

The men were grunting and groaning as they carried me through the building, banging into walls and what sounded like tables. The music was louder at one point, then diminished. If I tried using my powers people would sense me and I'd be ousted and then maybe killed for real this time. Whatever happened with the Dracomere somehow didn't work. I tried to remember but everything around the scene was blurry in my mind.

A door opened and some muffled whispers and then cold air came through the small hole at the bottom of my crate. It was dark outside. One of the men tripped and almost fell, my elbow banging into the side of the box. "Ouch," I whispered. Then covered my mouth.

"What was that?" John asked.

"I almost done tripped over that der stump," Cain answered.

John just grunted and they continued on.

"Over here." John was carrying the end with my head with Cain my feet.

“Ain’t you the least bit curious to see who we are burying?” Cain asked.

“No.”

“Not at all?”

“No.” John’s voice became hard and cold. “We have a job to do, let’s get it done so we can enjoy the festivities.”

I’m not sure what happened, it was so quick. They’d started to lower me and then without warning Cain lost his grip on the bottom of the crate. I could see his work clothes through the hole. Next thing I know, my coffin tumbled onto my left side tossing me around violently. I thought for sure I was going to end up face down in the grave, unable to escape. But the coffin didn’t fall far and something splintered and cracked.

“Demmit,” Cain cursed. “I’m really sorry, boss.”

John sighed loudly. “You dumb moron.”

“I think the crate is busted.”

John started knocking on the wood. He stopped near my head and knocked again. You could hear the splintered wood. I waited until he knocked again to slowly slide back giving myself as much room as possible. His finger eased through the crack just inches from my face. The temptation to bite the finger off was almost more than I could bear.

He knelt down beside the crate and peeked through the hole.

I held my breath.

“I can’t see a thing.”

Whew!

He turned away and then Cain peeked in. “I think I see sumptin.”

Crap!

“Yeah, I see something,” John answered.

Oh boy!

“A dead body.” I could hear them tousling as if fighting over position. “Now let’s get this over with.”

They turned the coffin right side up and then stopped.

John sighed. “We have to change the coffin. The body will attract wolves.”

Yes!

“The werewolves won’t mess with dead people will they, boss?”

Crud!

“You never know, but the hole seems deep enough, it won’t matter.”

They started to pick up the coffin and then were interrupted by a smooth silky voice. “What is taking so long?”

They plopped me back to the ground with a crash. The coffin was now splintered in three different locations. When it was all in one piece, I had no strength to break through. Now it was damaged enough that even in my weakened state I could escape. I needed to feed, and soon.

The smooth baritone continued. “Was there an accident?”

Who was he? The voice was unrecognizable through the coffin.

John coughed and spoke up. “We dropped the coffin but everything is under control, sir.”

“Well bury it and be quick about it.” With that, the voice vanished.

I could hear Cain grumbling and complaining. The wood creaked a bit. They were struggling to maneuver me over the hole in the ground.

“Maybe you should jump down and I’ll slide it down to you,” John suggested.

It was too late. By the time he’d made the suggestion Cain had already decided to drop

my end. I felt my feet fall forward and hit the ground, cracking the wood in two. John, my coffin and I fell into the pit with a loud bang. The front of the coffin hit the wall of the grave and bounced back onto John. Partially pinned, he struggled, the wood cracking around me. The fall had broken the side of the coffin near where John now laid trapped. His leg was nearly inside my casket.

"I think my leg is broke, you numbskull," John muttered through clenched teeth.

It was obvious his leg was broken since the bone was sticking straight through the skin in front of my face. I gagged, and my head began to spin with the smell of the blood seeping from his wound. My teeth lengthened in response to the warm, life-giving fluid pooling in my casket. My hands clenched into balls, nails digging into my palm as I tried to gain control. He had a compound fracture. Right about now, his body was pumped so full of adrenaline he wasn't even aware of the seriousness of his injury.

"Can yee git up?" Cain hollered.

John grumbled in pain. "No idiot, my leg is busted. Go get help."

"Okay, I'll go get a ladder," Cain answered, shuffling away. He whistled a happy tune while heading off into the night.

Idiot!

This was my chance to get the heck out of Dodge. I watched John try to move his injured leg but he was stuck. The crack was big enough for me to break the side panel of the coffin out and escape. I was naked and without shoes so this might hurt, but I didn't care. The witch couldn't even have the courtesy to clothe me in death. What bothered me almost as much was that Siön Baptiste hadn't insisted I was clothed. I took a deep breath, maneuvering my body quietly so that my feet lined up with the panel, then with all my might I kicked out the side of the coffin. It splintered apart easily. I crawled out climbing over John's leg. He screamed bloody murder and scooted as far away as he could. Now that the coffin was empty, he wasn't stuck.

He fumbled with his jacket reaching for a weapon. "Oh, my Go...."

I lunged for him, crushing his leg into the ground and splintered wood. He let out a blood-curdling scream as my fangs pierced his neck. His blood filled my mouth, poured down my throat. His hand flew up to my head trying to yank me off him. I wrapped my arms firmly around his body. Scooting up, I was soon straddling him, making it impossible for him to move. He tasted so sweet and hot in my mouth, like liquid heat. The beat of his heart was thumping loudly in my ear. When his screams turned to moans, I found myself even hungrier. His heartbeat slowed as I continued to grow stronger. His heart skipped a beat, then another. I released him and sat up licking every drop of blood off my lip. He was dying.

Better him than me, I thought bitterly. I stood and realized the damage I had done. He was dead. I felt no remorse, no fear. I could trust nobody. Everyone I'd ever cared for had betrayed me. I would have my revenge, even if it meant killing Siön Baptiste.

I grabbed the man by his bloodied leg and dragged him to the middle of the grave. My back was pressed up against the dirt. Not much room to maneuver but I did the best I could in the dark. My sight was coming back to me even as this dead man's blood coursed through my veins.

I rolled him into the coffin. He was thicker than I was so it was a tight fit, but with a little shove and crunch, I got him inside. Thankfully, he was shorter than I was. I stood on the side of the coffin that wasn't broken and put all the parts back together. Once it looked right as rain, I grabbed a root and hoisted myself up and out of the grave. *My grave*, I reminded myself solemnly.

Chapter 25

Scrambling to get to my feet, I scanned the area. Thick forest on one side and a huge field on the other surrounded the grave. I could see a fence near the far end of the field. Was I on a farm? If I left now, Cain would warn someone of my escape, but if I waited until he returned and restrained him it would give me more time. There was a path leading from my grave through the woods. I was positive it would take me to the building I'd come from. Music still played tantalizingly down the path. The moon was nearly full and the light was dancing over the grass of the field. I concentrated on searching the area for any danger.

A man whistling broke my concentration. I dodged behind a large tree and scooted around as he passed by. He wasn't aware I had escaped. Cain was a big strapping idiot. He had to be over six feet tall, but he had muscles. His greasy hair clung to his face and he stunk of alcohol. He wore a long leather jacket over jeans and a tee-shirt. Carrying the ladder in one hand, he drew his weapon with his free hand.

"John," he called out, his voice echoing across the field.

No answer.

He took a step closer to the edge of the grave. I sensed something was wrong as I watched him sniff the air.

I stood silently, inching my way closer. I was almost upon him when he swiveled, dropping the ladder into the grave and pointing the gun in my direction. My reflexes, while not as fast because of my weakness, gave me enough time to duck and roll. Once I got to my feet he fired his gun. This time, my movement prevented me from being hit square in the chest, but the bullet smacked into my shoulder. I took two steps back and then rushed him. It was now or never. Leaping into the air, I hit him with such force it knocked him off his feet and we both fell into the grave. His gun went off again. This time it hit nothing but dirt behind my head. He landed on the coffin, crushing it with our combined weight, his body cushioning my fall.

Leaning into his ear, I whispered, "You can fight me or die it is your choice."

He struggled beneath me, nearly lifting me off. His arm was bent back unnaturally or else he would have bested me. I shoved him back down and looked into his eyes. "Your friend is dead and you will be too if you continue to struggle."

He was either too dumb to know better, or too angry to care, but as soon as I mentioned John's death he went mad. His legs bucked up trying to unseat me from his chest. I leaned down, pinning him to the coffin. His gun had fallen behind his head but I still couldn't reach it. His hand moved searching for his weapon.

"You blew your chance." Leaning into him, I jerked his head to one side and bit him. His blood was sweet and heady. He stilled immediately when my fangs sunk into his neck. I released him and looked down. His eyes were fully dilated and something pressing against my bare arse told me he didn't mind being my dinner.

I smiled. "Okay, I lied. I'll give you one more chance you can choose to help me or die? I like giving people choices you see. Since nobody ever gives me a choice, I thought it only fair."

"You killed John?" he gasped, shrugging his head as if he woken from a trance.

"You dumb ox. Your master killed me, or at least tried to kill me. On the other hand,

maybe she killed me and I can't be killed. Either way, you serve her and you are my enemy."

He grinned. "Dumb woman."

I was tired or I would have noticed his hand reaching back for the gun. He managed to get his hands on the butt of the gun, but not before I'd placed my hands on either side of his face and jerked with all my might. His neck cracked unnaturally and his eyes began to glaze over.

"Stupid man," I growled.

I stood, my body bruised, blood seeping down my arm. My wound was numb but soon enough it would begin to heal. Both men's blood now coursed through my veins, giving me strength. Shifting the big ogre with a grunt, I was able to remove his jacket. I pried the gun out of his hand shoving it into the jacket pocket. The coffin was shattered and Cain's limp body was draped over John's.

I turned my back on them and leaped out of the grave. I grabbed the shovel and began to bury the men in *my* grave. The dirt was piled over to one side and was easy to scoop. I picked up my speed. Every once in a while I thought I heard someone on the trail, but nobody came. I looked over my back periodically to make sure nobody was sneaking up on me.

The grave slowly filled. My arm was now just a dull ache as the wound from the gunshot began to heal. Thank goodness, the bullet exited my body or I'd be in danger of blood poison. At least, I thought, maybe I would. Not sure if vampires get blood poisoning. I'd have to ask Siön ... My thought trailed off as a tear rolled down my cheek. Either Siön Baptiste was behind everything or he was under Tazmaine's control. I patted the dirt with the bottom of the shovel and tossed it in the woods. I was sweating despite the cool evening air. There was a bunch of flowers wrapped with a blue bow lying on the ground. I picked them up and tossed them on the grave.

I draped the jacket around me, hugging it to my shivering body. I wasn't cold because of the night air, but the chill of death hung over me like a dark cloud. I ran along the path through the woods until I reached a building. Slinking along the side, hugging to the dark, I peeked around the corner. There was a large, older house and immediately I recognized the plantation. This home was practically in my backyard. I took off past the building and leaped over a white picket fence. Nobody was standing guard which surprised me.

You could see into the house through the front window. People were sitting around talking. Tazmaine was on a throne in the dining area, just beyond the living room area. *Throne?* The house was beautiful and spacious. I ducked down in the shrubs when the front door opened and two men came out armed to the hilt. They were both human and talking about everyone heading to the Wolves Den for a celebration. Tazmaine would be there.

Perfect!

The men rounded the corner and headed in the direction of my grave. Once they were out of sight, I took off down the sidewalk, ducking in between windows. There was massive garage structure on the opposite side of the house. Behind it were horses in stables facing the field where they buried me. "A horse or car?" I was getting out of here. A car would be too loud so I took off toward the stable. Once I reached the stable, an outside light popped on. I dived into the bushes as two men exited the building and rounded the corner, heading right for me. Holding my breath, I held completely still. They moved past my hiding place and headed to the house.

I sighed, letting out the breath I had been holding. My heart was hammering in my ears, as I stalked closer to the entrance of the barn. That was when I spotted a window above my head. It was swinging back and forth in the wind. I stood up and grabbed onto the windowsill lifting myself up. Nobody was left in the barn but the horses and me as I plopped down in the hay.

I ran through the barn to the back entrance. The horses neighed and shied away from me as I moved. They knew a predator when they saw one.

I swung the back gate open and walked into the yard. At the far end, a horse grazed just inside the field. I walked up to it carefully. Holding out my hand, I whispered soothingly, "Okay, boy. I just need to have you take me home and then you'll be fine." It moved nervously away from me and I kept moving forward slowly. "Come to me," I commanded, my voice calm yet forceful. The horse raised its head and came right to me.

I didn't hesitate. I'd grown up on a plantation with horses so riding came easy to me. I grabbed its mane and hoisted myself onto it. I'd ridden bareback before so it seemed natural. The only unnatural thing about it was the fact that I was naked. We galloped through the field, the jacket I had stolen flaring out behind me. Riding a horse wasn't the fastest way home, but fortunately, I wasn't that far away. This sent a shiver of fear up my spine. Trotting into my driveway, I couldn't help but wonder if Tazmaine's devils were shackled up in my bed. This angered me almost as much as being buried naked. My house was completely dark.

I jumped from the horse, leaving it in my front yard as I burst into my house. No use hiding now. "Anyone home?" I screamed.

Holding my breath, I waited silently just inside the door. The palms of my hands were covered in dirt and sweat. I stood there listening carefully for any intruders. Not a sound. Satisfied nobody was in the house, I entered. I made up my mind. I was going to the Wolves Den. Tazmaine or I would die, and if I had any choice in the matter, it would be her grave I dug tonight.

I jogged up the stairs to my room and rummaged through my wardrobe in the dark, grabbing leather pants and a vest. Wasn't going to take a chance and get staked through the heart. The vest would protect me from both gun wounds and crazy arse stake wielding ninnies. Never can be too careful. I hurried into the bathroom and turned on the shower, letting the water run over my fingers. Blood would attract too much unwanted attention at the club. I had to clean the dirt and blood off or someone would suspect something when I entered the bar. I swung the jacket off to examine my shoulder. My wound was completely healed, only dry flakes of coagulated blood remained.

I jumped into the shower and scrubbed myself raw. The soap felt like heaven on my skin. As the water pooled at the bottom of the shower it was a mess of dirt and blood. I growled, getting angrier by the minute.

Once I was done, I dried myself off and pulled my hair back in a ponytail. I laughed as I grabbed my weapon bag from the laundry shoot. Who does laundry anymore? Everything I owned ended up getting ruined so I bought new clothes instead of doing a wash. Plus, when you go to a dry cleaner and ask them to clean multiple bloodstains, the funny looks you get start to grate on your last nerve.

Fumbling through the back of the bag, I removed the custom-made, leather shoulder holster and leg straps. The straps held four clips. Each strap contained close to three hundred rounds for each leg. I smoothed down the leather pants and knelt to tie my boots. Once everything was snug as a bug, I strapped on the leg holsters containing two knives and five clips in each leg. I wore a Gerber knife, speed draw sheath strapped to the inside of my thigh. It held a six-inch blade that could do plenty of damage. In my shoulder holster, I had a compartment for two-inch mini throwing stars. In case I needed them in a flash, they had a pull string release. They dropped right into the palm of your hand for easy release. I grabbed my long silver chain with an ornately decorated cross and put it over my head around my neck. The cross fit snugly

between my breasts. The holy object wouldn't affect me but it would hurt the likes of Tazmaine.

I put on a soft, cotton tank top to protect my skin from the irritation of wearing a shoulder holster. Sliding the Berettas in place, I walked back to the bedroom. Kneeling down, I reached under my bed and pulled a large black case out beside me. My favorite weapon by far, despite the fact I'd only used it once or twice. The case opened with a click and I slowly raised the lid.

Kneeling down, I slid my finger up and down the beautifully crafted sword. I released the lock that held it in place and stood, sliding the sword and its sheath down the back of my holster. It practically went from the top of my thighs to above my head. Glancing in the mirror over my dresser, I rearranged the sword, hiding the weapon's handle behind my head. My Katana sword was my pride and joy, and since this was a special occasion, I planned to use it. I was once hired to protect the Japanese Ambassador who had visited New Orleans. They'd insisted I be trained in martial arts so I could protect the Ambassador at all costs. I'd enjoyed the training and had continued it up until three weeks ago.

I grabbed my long leather jacket from the back of my bedroom door. Its hood would hide my face long enough for me to get into the club and find out what was going on. The jacket was great for concealing weapons as well. I stalked back into my bathroom and grabbed the black bag filled with extra ammo and my larger throwing stars. These throwing stars could wallop a punch. When thrown, the blades would protrude and insert holy water into its victim. Holy water wouldn't kill a werewolf or vampire but it sure would put a hurting on one. I raced down the stairs and out the door, grabbing my keys on the way out.

My garage door was open but nobody was home except my Suzuki GSXR1300 Hayabusa. The big daddy of the GSXR range of motorcycles. My prize purchase with the bonus money from my last gig, which just happened to be the same gig that got me into the trouble I am in now. Stroking the throttle as I jumped on, I was mesmerized by its sheer beauty. Okay, so love of my bike was a little out of control. I loved it so much I'd hardly ridden it until now. One of the fastest in the world, and at four hundred and seventy-four pounds it's big, but the power to weight ratio is awesome. I'd had special training to get insurance on the sucker, but for now, I had no other way into town. I just had to drive carefully. I called him Charlie. Beautifully crafted, the chrome shone so brightly it was almost blinding in the afternoon sun. It was black, sleek and all mine. My precious.

"My precious," I said in my best Gollum impersonation. I petted him like the good bike he was. I slung my bag over my back and took off.

I raced through the city, dodging in and out of traffic, making sure to keep a look out for cops. It was almost midnight when I pulled into the alley across the street from the Wolves Den. The music was so loud it was resonating against the alley walls. I pulled Charlie up behind a trashcan and parked. Giving him a mental kiss goodbye, I pulled the hood of my jacket over my head and placed the key on the long silver chain around my neck. Both the cross and the key were special to me. The cross was my mother's. The key was my way out of here if things got bad. The streets were surprisingly crowded, most drawn to the party going on inside the club. I hustled across the road and walked behind a large group of Lycans. They were big, bad and ugly. I figured I could sneak past the doorman. Lucky for me, most of the vampires entering the club had long jackets with hoods, so I fitted in. I overheard one couple talking about celebrating the choice of a new king.

Over my dead body.

The doorman stopped the Lycans and asked for I.D. They all grumbled and a few growled. I slipped past around the crowd and entered the club unseen. After a quick glance

around, I realized quickly that there weren't any humans other than a few of the bartenders. I might not understand all the vampire politics involved in the selection of a king, but I was happy there wouldn't be any human witnesses. If I'd learned anything in the last few weeks, it was that the supernatural community would keep their mouths shut. When I made my move, it would be me against them.

The dance floor was packed with Lycans and vampires alike. Something was tickling my mind, trying to get past the barriers I had erected. I glanced around nervously, trying to find the source of the mental probe. I couldn't pinpoint where the power was coming from, so I moved behind a large group of Lycans and peered back behind me. I eased over to the back of the bar into a dark corner. There was a table with several vampires crowded around drinking and laughing. *Where was Siön Baptiste?*

With all the hoods, I couldn't tell who was who. One particular crowd of Lycans caught my attention. They were on the far end of the bar near the entrance. "Adeem," I whispered. As if he could hear me, Adeem turned to look in my direction. I scooted further into the dark recesses of my little corner of the bar, hoping to go undetected. He stared silently, eyes furrowed together in concern. A pretty waitress stole his attention when she brought him a beer. He smiled pleasantly enough but was distracted as his companions began to taunt the waitress.

I held my breath, hoping he hadn't sensed my presence. A bulky Lycan leaned in close to him, whispering in his ear and it was enough time for me to slip behind a group of vampires and head for the restroom. A quick glance over my shoulder eased my worry. Adeem was laughing again and stood to dance with a tall female Lycan. They moved to the dance floor as I opened the swinging doors to the hallway. A waitress hurried past me, nearly knocking me out of the way as she hustled back to the bar. I moved silently along the wall and into the bathroom.

There were three bathrooms, one unisex restroom that contained both urinals and stalls, and the other two were employee restrooms, one bathroom for female and one for male employees. I entered the employee only restroom and locked the door behind me.

"What are you doing, Samantha?" I asked myself, hands resting against the frame of the door. I lightly banged my head against the door. "You are here, now what?" Walking to the sink, I pulled back my hood and glanced at my reflection in the mirror. If I knew what was good for me I would leave now. Turning the faucet on, I splashed cold water over my face. The water trickled down my cheeks and chin. I should count my lucky stars that I was alive and skip town. I adjusted the sword so it stayed hidden as I pulled my hood back over my head. "No turning back now."

Someone banged on the door of the bathroom. "Anyone in there?" she asked.

I opened the door and slid past the waiting woman. Taking a deep breath, I walked back into the bar. To my relief, nobody seemed to have noticed my entrance or departure. All eyes were now at the front door where a sea of vampires and werewolves parted. Tazmaine and six male vampires were entering the bar. Someone standing behind me leaned in and whispered, "Our queen and her minions. She thinks she will rule a thousand years but she cannot outrun prophecy forever."

My mouth dropped as I turned to see the face behind the voice, but the man was gone. Everyone in the bar began to bow as Tazmaine moved into the center of the bar. I felt too exposed where I stood and began to take a few steps back. Eventually someone might notice me. I took another step back and turned to head for the loft. The loft was the only location in the bar that seemed to be vampire free. With my back to Tazmaine and her group, I started up the stairs to the only open table near a window overlooking the dance floor. I was halted in my tracks by a

familiar voice.

“Who is this who defies our queen?” the voice bellowed. It was the same man from the gravesite.

I took another step, slowly pulling my hood around my face, wishing and hoping that he wasn't talking to me. I held onto the railing willing them all to disappear.

“Bow to the queen, you insolent fool.” the man shouted.

Out of the corner of my eye I could see everyone in the bar was still bowing to Tazmaine. I was the only one standing.

“Come here, child.” Tazmaine beckoned, her voice slithering over my skin. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, warning me not to get too close. Despite the pang of warning, I turned, lowered my head, took three steps and then knelt low to the ground. This wasn't ideal, but if I could get close enough I would kill her. My hand slid inside my robe over the knife strapped to my thigh. The music stopped and only a few gasps and whispers remained of the once noisy bar.

“Who are you?” a voice called out from the back of the bar.

I kept quiet, head still bent, attempting to appear humbled. I could feel a brush of someone over my mind and quickly re-enforced the barrier around my thoughts. I showed them only what I wanted them to see, me being humble and regretful for my actions.

Tazmaine spoke smoothly. “Tristan, my brother, take care of this now.”

The group moved in front of me. I could only see their robes and shoes. Tazmaine wore high heels which made her almost my height. I lowered myself even further, nearly kissing their feet.

“You are fortunate our queen is in a joyous mood or your head would be buried and your body fed to the dogs.”

I bit my lip, refraining from laughter. My shoulders shook with humor as I laughed silently.

“Awe, you made her cry, Tristan,” Tazmaine cooed.

My fingers gripped the knife so hard they went numb.

“Leave her be,” Adeem chimed in. “We have much to celebrate.”

I kept low to the ground, willing them away.

Tazmaine's sensual laughter drifted through the bar. “Tonight is a celebration.” She turned her back on me.

I hated her. The thought of shoving my knife through her heart raced across my mind and before I knew it, I had pulled my knife free and started to stand. A hand came out of nowhere to shove me back down to the ground. Tristan whispered in my ear, “Do not be so foolish.” Then released me.

Tazmaine continued, “Drink and be merry.”

I looked up to get a better view of her. With that, the group walked to a large reserved area in the back of the bar behind the band. Adeem lagged behind Tazmaine and Tristan as they walked out in front.

I sighed, sliding the knife back into the holster. Everyone picked up where they left off, making sure to avoid Tazmaine. All eyes wide in either astonishment or fear. I was leaning toward fear. I slowly stood and returned to the stairs heading to the still empty table overlooking the band and dance floor. I sat down keeping my eye on Tazmaine, noticing quickly that nobody got past Tristan. He stopped anyone walking within two feet of their table. Adeem sat behind Tazmaine looking like a lovesick puppy. Maybe I had blown my opportunity to nail her when I

had the chance.

“Ma’am?” The waitress stood by my table. “Would you like something to drink?” she asked.

“Ummmm, sure.”

She smiled sweetly, her fangs giving away the fact she was a vampire. “What would you like?”

“Diet Coke with lemon, please.”

She walked away and I sat back in my chair relieved that I had avoided a major catastrophe with Tazmaine. How long would it be before they realized the two gravediggers were missing? With any luck, it would be a few hours, maybe longer. The waitress returned with my drink, setting it down on a napkin and then walking away. Absentmindedly, I played with the straw watching the dance floor below. Just beyond, Tazmaine’s group sat huddled together surrounded by security.

The crowd below roared to life, clapping and hollering, but I couldn’t see what was going on below the loft. Even Tazmaine clapped. I leaned way over the edge to get a glimpse but saw nothing unusual. Just as I eased back to wait out the night until Tazmaine was alone, someone sat in the empty chair across from me.

Tristan watched me carefully.

“What do you want?”

He smiled, leaning forward and taking my drink, swirling around the ice cubes. “Are you hungry?” His eyes flashed mischievously.

My hands began to sweat as I slipped one under the table and beneath my jacket. I wanted to get the jump on him if need be.

“Pull back your hood.” It wasn’t a request, but a command. His voice was masculine and as pleasing to the ear as Siön Baptiste’s.

I hesitated. Did he know who I was? I had never met him before but who was to say he hadn’t seen my body in the coffin.

He grabbed my hand, holding it firmly but gently. “You have no reason to fear me,” he urged, lifting his hand to my hood.

I abandoned any fear and reached up, grabbing his hand in a death grip before he could push my hood back. My smart mouth got the best of me. “So tell me, do you want to feed my head to the dogs or not?” I paused. “Because frankly, I kind of like my head right where it is if you don’t mind.” I squeezed his hand tightly. His lip twisted in obvious pain.

I released the grip I had on him when he started to smile. He slowly pulled back his hand, trying not to react to the hurt I’d caused him. Then he did the most unusual thing. He laughed. And he laughed loud enough to draw the attention of the groups around us. I wanted to cover his mouth with my hand but thought that might anger him.

I eyed him suspiciously. His hair was long enough to pull back in a ponytail. He had eyes like Tazmaine, dark and dangerous. He was a masculine version of the witch herself but better looking. His long, leather-clad legs slid up under the table as he leaned back. The black silk shirt emphasized his build. And he was built like a rock. Even from across the table I could see his muscles moving as he breathed. He was very handsome.

“I do not wish to decapitate you, just talk.”

I rolled my eyes.

“It is only respectful to present yourself to me.”

“Right.” I tried to keep the sarcasm out of my voice but his smirk told me I had failed.

"I can force you," he warned, his voice then washing over my mind.

"I'm shy," I countered. "Don't like crowds."

He chuckled deep in his throat, the sound both disturbing and exiting. He stood so abruptly I scooted my chair back. Holding out his hand to me, he said, "Come with me."

"I want to sit here." My voice was trembling and I cursed myself for showing vulnerability.

"Come with me, please," he asked again, his smile intoxicating.

He wasn't going away until I went with him. I stood slowly, ignoring the outstretched hand. Once I stood, he walked behind me with a hand on my shoulder and guided me to the stairs. We descended rapidly to the main floor. I balked as he became more forceful pushing me towards Tazmaine. He pulled me back and looked around the bar, then ushered me back toward the loft. A sheer black curtain surrounded a corner of the bar just below the loft's stairs. He shoved me through the curtains into a large sitting area. A wall of black velvet material was directly behind a large black couch. The room was private, yet you could still see and hear the bar. It was dimly lit. A couple sat on the couch, making out as we entered. I shrugged his hand off my shoulder. Tristan moved in front of me and spoke calmly to them, asking them to leave. They scrambled off the couch and left through the parting in the curtains.

"What are you doing?" I asked, irritated at his audacity.

He turned, taking a step closer to invade my personal space. "The question is what are *you* doing?" Leaning forward as if he were going to kiss me, I scrambled away and around him over to the couch. "I can do that." He strutted toward me.

I moved around the couch to the wall, avoiding his touch. With the ease of a predator, he slipped behind the couch and grabbed me just as I was scooting away. His hand wrapped around my arm, pulling me against him, pressing me to the wall.

"Get off me," I growled.

"Only if you tell me who you are and show me your face."

I could do neither. His power flared to life, raging over my skin. I gasped at the sudden heat washing off my body. His eyes widened. "Who are you?" he croaked, half surprised at the power that pulsed between us. Pressing me further against the wall, he slipped his hands inside my jacket. His eyes opened in surprise as my knee rose to hit him in the groin. He grunted but still held onto me.

"Why do you feel it necessary to carry enough weapons to take out a small village, and why do you cover your face now?"

He knew I had weapons on?

As if reading my mind, he said, "I knew the moment we entered the bar that something was different about you. You refused to bow to my sister and you blocked my probe of your mind. I want answers and I want them now." He pressed himself fully against me, sliding both hands inside my jacket. Carefully avoiding my weapons, he rested them on my hips. The heat immediately increased as he moved closer. "What are you doing to me?" he asked, shaking his head. His eyes blinked as if in disbelief. "Nobody has bespelled me in over a millennium."

Wow, just how old was this guy? "I'm not bespelling anyone," I croaked.

"You have, my dear. With your power. So unique, so delicious." He licked his lips.

My eyes were drawn to the movement and for a moment I wondered how his lips would feel over mine.

He leaned in, lifting one hand to the hood of my jacket. "I wonder if you look as good as...." He pulled my hood down before I could stop him and just stared.

Uh-oh!

Holding my breath, I moved my hand between us ready to push him off. If he knew who I was, I'd have to fight my way out of here.

His mouth opened and then closed, then opened again as if to say something. Before I knew it, his lips covered mine. It was the barest of touches but it sent my body reeling into motion. He must have felt it too because he groaned into my mouth. His hand slipped to my face, a thumb tracing my jaw line as his kiss deepened.

His kiss quickly became urgent, demanding. I found myself struggling to think clearly as his kiss melted away all fear of being caught. I was lost in the moment. The heat felt so real, so wonderful. A reaction so strong, my body felt boneless with passion. He tasted like cool mint and smelled like the forest. He spread my legs with his knee, pressing against my core. The movement almost sent me over the edge as he slowly nudged against me. We were both groaning loudly into our kiss. The music, the crowd, all disappeared under the burning pressure building between us.

He fumbled with my pants as he slipped a hand inside the material. He moved the other hand up my back, pressing me into him. We moved sensually in unison. I moaned into his kiss, breath raging as an orgasm raced through my system. Then he stopped, releasing my lips. His hand was fumbling behind me, and my eyes widened as I realized he was gripping my sword.

"Let go of me," I whispered between clenched teeth.

He pulled completely away. "What, or who are you?"

My mind was jumbled and confused while my body attempted to float back down to earth. The beat of my heart was still thumping out of control from his touch. He opened my jacket and saw the arsenal of weapons. "You are an assassin?" His voice was cool and unfeeling.

I was compelled to tell the truth. "Yes."

"For my sister?" he asked, watching my lips as I spoke, absently licking his own. My body tingled in response of his obvious perusal of me.

"Yes." I couldn't stop. The only thing keeping me on my feet was the wall behind me.

He crushed my body against his before I could move away. Leaning into my ear, he yanked me roughly into him, whispering, "You will have to go through me."

I felt regret at his words and wondered if he knew that I would go through everyone in this building to rid the earth of her. Did he know his sister had used the very creatures that would destroy Earth against me, to kill me?

His fangs punctured my skin. I shuddered and twisted in his arms. He lifted me so that my feet dangled helplessly as he bit down. He held me there in his arms, somewhere between pain and pleasure. I cried. He slid me down his body as his fangs retracted, licking the wound on my neck. "Why?" he whispered against my skin. "Why do you want to kill my queen, my sister?"

He pushed me away.

It was hard to look him in the eye, but I straightened my back and pulled my jacket around my trembling body. "She tried to kill me."

He retreated as if I'd sprouted horns, banging into the couch behind him. "You were the one in the casket."

I pulled the hood back over my head. "If you know what is best, you will leave her side."

"She is my sister."

"I don't give a damn if she is your mother. She tried to kill me and everyone I loved." I opened myself to the anger I was feeling and my head cleared.

His hands went up in a plea. "She would not kill someone who is innocent."

"Bull crap." I took a step forward and he took a step back. "She wants me out of the picture so she can have Siön Baptiste for a consort."

His eyebrows rose questioning me. "He has agreed willingly."

I laughed bitterly. "Maybe, or maybe he agreed after he thought I was dead."

Head cocked to one side like a puppy dog, he smirked. "You were Siön Baptiste's lover? You are Samantha Houston?"

I nodded. "The one and only."

"The prophecy then is true?"

"If you believe in that sort of stuff, then maybe. Me personally, I want to do my own thing not be bound by some dumb book."

He flinched. "Siön was right, you are disrespectful."

"Awe, that hurts. I don't give a hoot what anyone thinks of me. Your sister is a menace to society and the buck stops here, tonight."

I walked around the couch to face him head on, poking him in the chest with my finger. "And neither you nor her goons will stop me from having my revenge."

He grabbed my hand and yanked me behind him. We moved through the curtains and to the dance floor where vampires and werewolves were dancing together. He swung around, his face full of anger and pain. Slipping his face into my hood, he whispered in my ear, "Do you see what is going on here?" We danced to the music because we had no choice.

His body moved to the music in a beautiful rhythm. "What are you doing?"

We pulsed to the music together as he spoke low and quiet in my ear. "For a thousand years the clans have fought with the Lycans. For a thousand years there was no peace. She has brought the war to an end. If you kill her now, all is lost. Adeem and his men will take revenge on anyone who stands behind you and all will perish."

"Peace at what cost?" I asked against his cheek.

He sighed. "A small cost to pay for such rewards."

"So the rich get richer and the poor get poorer?"

"No, all will benefit." He pulled away from my ear, looking at me. The hood hid my face from everyone's view. "Do you wish to start a war?"

Chapter 26

I bit my lip, watching everyone dance and move together. He was right, there were vampires and werewolves alike mixing and mingling together as though there had never been a war. “She wants me dead.”

“She thinks you are dead.”

“When she finds out I’m alive this peace will mean nothing. She will hunt me down and kill me.”

“Why do you think she deems you a threat?”

“Because Siön Baptiste and his brother feel I’m part of a prophecy that will bring true peace.” All of a sudden it hit me. I stopped moving to the music and just looked at Tazmaine sitting behind us. If there were true peace, she would lose control over everything. This wasn’t about me it was about power. This was why she wanted me out of the picture. True peace would mean the power would be in the hands of the people.

He watched my eyes carefully and saw me staring at Tazmaine. “She is my sister,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry.”

“She wants peace.” He said it loudly, as if trying to convince himself.

“Move away.” People started to part giving us room, sensing the tension.

“Do not do this, Samantha.” His eyes were filled with pain and I could see him struggling to maintain his composure.

Screw composure.

Just then, everyone turned all at once and bowed, leaving Tristan and I standing alone in the middle of the dance floor. I watched the heads bow toward the door. Siön Baptiste strode through the door looking like a Greek god. “Oh great,” I grumbled under my breath. Now they were bowing to Siön Baptiste.

A few people were still half crouched on the dance floor. Sebastian followed his brother in and stood at his side. Their eyes were glued on Tazmaine and they seemed none too happy to see her. I darted away from Tristan while his back was to me. I slipped to the floor pulling my hood over my head and crawled backwards. The group with Siön Baptiste was too preoccupied with Tazmaine to notice my movement.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry,” I said as I pulled my elbow away from a kneeling vampire’s face. *Oops!*

I finally reached the edge of the dance floor. The band had stopped playing when Siön Baptiste entered. They were on stage, kneeling. *Fools!* As much as my heart fluttered at the sight of Siön Baptiste I couldn’t have him find me. He might blow my cover ... then again, that was if Tristan didn’t blow my cover first.

The curtain around the base of the stage was swaying back and forth. I slipped my hand under and realized there was space. Everyone around me was too busy kissing Siön Baptiste’s arse to notice me under the stage. Slipping up under the stage cover, I crawled on all fours, cursing the predicament I was in the whole way. I slowly slid along the edge of the stage, making sure nobody could see my movement or hear me. This time instead of backing away, I pushed

forward close enough to smell the food at Tazmaine's table.

What had my life become? Crawling around on a dirty bar floor, hiding. This wasn't my style but for some reason I didn't want to face Siön Baptiste just yet. I was tired, my energy fading, as twenty minutes quickly became an hour. I laid down watching Siön Baptiste take Tazmaine's hand in his and press his lips to her forehead. *Jerk!*

I was going to rip his head off when I got the chance. He turned, looking in my direction as if he'd heard me. I bit my lip nervously, waiting for him to reveal my hiding spot and the humiliation of crawling around like a dog. How embarrassing! Samantha Houston didn't hide, darn it all. He stood motionless for a brief moment before striding behind Tazmaine's table. His leather pants clung to his firm, rounded bum. He had the kind of bum that was touchable, squeezable, even edible. He was wearing a long, leather jacket with black boots. His hair was flowing freely around his face. *Wow!*

I almost forgot to be mad, but forgetting made me even angrier. "I'll get you my pretty and your little dog too," I grumbled, eyeing Tazmaine and her dwarfs. Tristan had taken a seat next to Tazmaine. I watched him carefully to see if he would tell her I was alive. He just sat, occasionally looking at Tazmaine, then scanning the crowd. He was trying to find me. Too bad.

Siön Baptiste leaned up against the wall folding his muscled arms over his broad chest, staring out into the bar. I had to fight back the urge to crawl out from under the bar and run into his arms. If he was in league with Tazmaine, he was my enemy. I wasn't sure that getting under the stinking stage was the most brilliant of moves because now, even if I did want to get out and do something, everyone would see my hiding place. I had to get out of here and approach them from behind.

I turned around, banging my forehead on a beam holding up the stage. "Ouch!" Thankfully, a new song started just as I hit my head and cursed. I shuffled along, ducking here and there to avoid an unwanted concussion. When I reached the opposite end of the stage, I shuffled out. *Whew!* I turned around and headed toward the exit, hood drawn tightly around my face. I tried not to rush my steps as I weaved my way in and out of dancers.

Sebastian was walking in my direction. We were going to collide if I didn't move quickly. He looked like a man on a mission. Well, in this case, a vampire. I twirled around and stalked to the bar, taking a seat next to a werewolf. The bar was packed with Lycans and vampires. Maybe Tristan was right and his sister would bring peace. Sebastian's hand slipped past me and tapped the bar. The bartender headed in our direction. *Crap!* I could smell his cologne and had the urge to turn to him. Biting my lip hard enough to draw blood, I resisted the temptation.

The bartender wasn't the same guy from before. His voice rumbled, "What'll ya have?" He had a hint of a Scottish burr to his voice.

"The lady first," Sebastian answered.

Crap, now what? If I spoke, he would recognize my voice. If I didn't answer, he would be suspicious.

I disguised my voice in the best British accent I could muster. "I'll have a rum and coke, by golly."

The bartender eyed me suspiciously, shaking his head. "And you, sir?" he asked, never taking his eyes off me.

"I will have what the lady is having," Sebastian answered. He leaned in close, whispering through the material covering my face. "And it's on me."

Was he flirting with me? I ignored him and grabbed the drink pulling it close. Sebastian

stood closer, his eyes boring into the side of my head. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"I bloody well hope not."

He chuckled. "Your accent is horrible."

Cripes! "I am from the northern part of the British Isles. It is a uniquely rare accent." I was so full of crap, I was sure my eyes were turning brown.

"What town?"

"None of your business."

He slapped the top of the bar, bursting into full-blown laughter. "I make it my business to know everyone."

"I'm sure you do." I concentrated hard to maintain the false accent. "I like my privacy."

"Suit yourself." He walked away, still laughing.

I let out all the air I had been holding and calmed down enough to prevent a mental hyperventilation of sorts. Raising my glass I took a huge gulp, downed the entire contents without stopping for a breath of air. The bartender walked away mumbling under his breath, "Must have been thirsty, little girl."

Everything got quiet and people started to hush. I felt a rush of power over my skin. "It is our queen's wish to only have her consorts finish the celebration of the coronation of her king," a voice bellowed throughout the bar. He continued, "We request that you gather your belongings and leave the bar immediately."

Everyone took "immediately" as right then and there, because with a whoosh of sound people got in line and started filing out of the bar. I turned so I could watch the procession. The bar emptied quickly leaving only the burly bartender and me. Well, I'd been waiting for the perfect moment to make my move, and it seemed now was that moment.

The bartender walked over to me and leaning down close, he whispered. "Why aren't you leaving?"

"I suggest, Mr. Burly bartender dude, that you take this opportunity to leave the Wolves Den. Things are going to get messy."

His eyes flashed amber and yellow. "And miss all the fun?"

I chuckled, gaining some strength from his sudden attempt at humor. I said a silent prayer as the last few people left. I hunched over the bar waiting for them to notice me. Nobody said a word. It was as silent as a graveyard.

Then as if the painful silence wasn't enough, Tazmaine spoke. "Who is that?" Her voice was annoying enough to make me want to leave myself.

All eyes on me now, I guess. I sat unmoving, waiting.

I heard Sevastian laughing. "Some Brit who might not understand English." He laughed again.

Gritting my teeth, I shifted, slipping my hands inside my jacket I fondled my Berettas.

"Who are you?" Siön Baptiste asked.

Tazmaine chimed in. "Answer me, child, who are you?"

I got off the barstool and stood, my back still facing the group now questioning me.

There was movement and guns being pulled. No doubt being aimed at the swell of my back or my head. "Turn toward us slowly," Adeem ordered.

Laughing bitterly, I remained back toward them.

"Who are you and why are you here?" Tazmaine's voice rose with concern.

Ah, this was going to be fun. I moved slowly and deliberately as I turned to face them. Identity still covered by the hood of my jacket.

“Answer the queen,” Siön Baptiste ordered, his face calm and handsome while his eyes danced with fire.

I shook my head causing the hood to fall back. My eyes were glued to the ground for a split second before lifting them to face my murderer. “I’m basically your worst nightmare and I’m here to kill you.” I pointed at the group.

Sevastian took a step forward while Siön Baptiste stood like a solid rock. Never wavering. I was disappointed he didn’t show more emotion, then it occurred to me he might have wanted me dead all along.

Tazmaine gasped, falling to the ground. “She was dead. You told me she was dead,” she cried into her hands.

Everyone watched her hysterics except Siön Baptiste who never took his green eyes off me. I took two steps forward. “I get that a lot but I’m not dead. As a matter of fact I feel better than ever.”

“She was dead,” Siön Baptiste whispered. For the first time he looked uncertain. “I thought you were gone.”

Taking another step forward, I put out my hands. “So, you thought I was out of the picture and decided to shack up with Miss Pain in all of our necks?”

He looked pained. “It wasn’t like that.”

I was angry now. No matter what he said to me, Siön Baptiste had betrayed me. My voice was cold and dead. “She buried me naked in a wooden coffin.”

Siön Baptiste watched as I stared him down. For the first time since I had known him, he turned away, his eyes filled with fear.

Tristan helped Tazmaine to her feet and then settled himself in the middle of both groups facing me. “She does not deserve this,” he warned, knowing my intention.

“The heck she doesn’t. She killed me,” I growled, my gaze roaming from Siön Baptiste to Tazmaine.

“She obviously didn’t succeed,” Tristan shouted and moved in front of me, blocking my view of the wicked witch.

“Do you know each other?” Siön Baptiste asked, a hint of anger in his voice.

“Yes,” Tristan said.

“No,” I said. Both of us had spoken in unison.

I peeked around Tristan’s tall frame and grunted at Siön Baptiste. “Besides, you are hers now, so who cares?”

He literally growled. “I am not hers.”

I shoved Tristan out of the way and walked past everyone. They all had guns drawn and with all the commotion, somehow Adeem had escaped. Poking my finger on Siön Baptiste’s chest, I stood on my tippy toes to confront him. “YOU made your choice. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

He grabbed my finger, nearly crushing it, and pulled me into his arms. I struggled, fists pounding his chest. “Let me go, now,” I screamed.

He held me in one arm while he forced me to look at him with the other. His fingers dug into my jaw. When I saw his face, my feet and fists stopped beating on him. Siön Baptiste, tall, sexy, and someone who had everything he ever wanted, was crying. Not just crying, but had a flood of tears flowing down his face. How do you talk to the king, or almost king, of all vampires when he’s crying? He buried my head to his chest. All I could do was inhale the dark masculine scent of him.

"I thought you were dead." His hand was tangled in my hair yanking me forcefully. He gave me no choice but to look at him. He leaned down, bringing his lips to mine in a soft, loving kiss. "I love you," he murmured against my lips. "Nobody will be my queen but you." His kiss deepened, tongue dancing with mine as our bodies exploded in heated sensations.

I saw the motion in the corner of my eye right before I felt a sharp pain in my side. Tazmaine hissed with hatred. "You will never have him."

Siön Baptiste pulled me away but the damage was done. A thin, silver knife stuck out of my side. I stumbled, almost falling to the ground. Siön Baptiste held me up against him. This was my chance. "Let go of me."

Siön Baptiste shook his head. No. Everyone's eyes were wide.

My lips pulled back as I snarled, "Let go of me now."

He backed up giving me room to survey the damage. Tristan had pulled Tazmaine away from me, holding her back as she kicked and screamed in fury. Sebastian rushed me and I shoved him back angrily. "Leave me alone."

Wrapping my hand around the cold metal, I yanked the weapon out of my side. Blood dripped onto the floor of the bar, pooling at my feet. This was the last time Tazmaine would ever hurt me. Taking a deep, painful breath, I honed my energy on healing the wound in my side. The loss of blood would weaken me but I was too angry to be bested by anyone here tonight. In the back of my mind, a spark flamed to life and slowly flowed through my body. Before anyone could react, I was in the middle of the dance floor, sword in hand ready for battle. It was worth all the energy spent to see the shock on Tazmaine's face.

"How did she do that?" she asked, fear overriding her rage and hatred of me.

I lifted my sword. "This is between her," I nodded at Tazmaine, "and me." Glaring at Tristan, I waved my sword. "And anyone who gets in my way tonight, will die."

Siön Baptiste was back under control as he walked up behind Tazmaine shoving her out onto the dance floor. Tristan whirled around to meet him, lips pulled back hissing. Siön Baptiste ignored him and spoke to everyone in the room. "This is between our queen and Samantha. If anyone interferes they will deal with the council."

Tristan walked past Siön Baptiste and kept his back to us all. "Who struck first?" His fists were balled up at his side as he spoke.

"Tazmaine." Nearly everyone in the room answered in unison.

Tristan shook his head angrily. "Unprovoked?"

"Yes." Again the group spoke as one.

His shoulders shook in a silent cry. "Sister, I cannot save you this time."

I sighed with relief while Tazmaine screamed in horror. Personally, I was reassured I didn't have to take down Tristan along with his sister. I hoped he wouldn't retaliate when I'd killed her.

"But...." Tristan's voice was forceful, compelling. "They must fight on equal terms."

I laughed bitterly. "Playing fair with Tazmaine is like playing with fire. I won't get burned again." I lowered my stance readying myself for the inevitable battle about to take place. Not your typical catfight. I shifted the sword from one hand to the other while I shrugged my jacket off.

Sebastian nodded in agreement with Tristan. *Traitor!*

His auburn hair was tied neatly back in a ponytail. His bright green eyes were darting back and forth from me to Tazmaine. "As much as I hate to admit he's right, Samantha, I have to agree. This must be fought on equal terms."

Growling low in his throat, Siön Baptiste pulled his brother back. "Samantha is injured, it would hardly be fair to disarm her."

"Fine, fine, I have a solution." Grinning wickedly at Tazmaine, I explained, "Let me stab her with the weapon she used on me and then we are good to go." Tazmaine hissed, fangs getting longer by the minute. "If you don't get those things under control you'll be puncturing yourself, Queenie." Shrugging my shoulders, I continued. "Have you ever thought of whitening those teethies of yours?"

"She is goading her on to anger," Tristan huffed.

Siön Baptiste smiled and nodded. "If Tazmaine is a true queen she will overcome her rage. If she cannot, she is hardly fit to rule."

Lifting my hand and sword, I tossed it over near the stage. With hands held up in a gesture of peace, I carefully walked in front of her. It was nice to be tall for once I noted as my height towered above her. Leaning in, I lowered my voice to a whisper. "You'll never have him. He loves me and I him. We will reign together while you rot in the ground."

Her body stiffened.

I stood back, releasing my shoulder holster and letting it drop to the ground. The only weapon I had on now was the knife strapped securely to my thigh. I turned my back on her, giving her my most vulnerable position. It put me at risk but to show such disrespect might set her over the edge. I was betting she would snap. I had to prove to everyone in the bar that this woman deserved to die. If not, I would be the boogiemer for years to come. "Why did you summon the Dracomere, my Queen?" "Queen" was squeezed out between clenched teeth.

She didn't answer, just stood silent.

With my back still to her, I continued. "You used Adeem's men to kill vampires in your quest to seek peace did you not?"

"Show some respect," a voice bellowed from one of the guards.

Stiffening with anticipation, I heard a scuffle behind me. "Do not speak until spoken to," Sevastian scolded the man.

"Answer me!" My voice rose, power pulsing and flowing through me.

"What is that?" Tristan asked.

"It's her power," Siön Baptiste answered.

"Tazmaine darling, it's not a difficult question. You either did kill those vampires or you didn't? You either summoned a Dracomere, or not? You either tried to kill me, or not?" I sighed, catching my breath. The energy was raising the hair on my back. It took all my strength not to explode in a spasm of light and energy.

"Tazmaine, no!" Tristan shouted.

I smiled. *Yes, do it!*

I knew what was about to happen before it occurred. Don't ask me how, I just knew. Aware of Tazmaine. Aware of grabbing my sword. Aware of her charging me with inhuman speed. Aware of her hate pounding against my power ... the satisfaction was overwhelming. She was shorter than I was, so her swing of the sword was high, aiming for the kill. I knew she would make sure I was dead this time. I ducked milliseconds before the sword could strike its target. Dipping low to the ground as I swung up into her chest, I focused all my power on her heart, or what was left of her heart.

Her eyes widened as she collapsed against me. The cold steel of my knife was now piercing her heart and lungs. She grunted and swayed, threatening to take me down but dropping my sword with a crash. Twisting the knife deeper, the warm blood flowing over my hand, I held

her close as she gasped for air. Her head bobbed from side to side as she coughed, blood pouring from her wound and mouth.

Pressing my lips against her ear, I whispered, "You asked for this, Tazmaine, now I will have your crown and your man." She screamed her fury, using the last bit of her strength to escape. I held on for all I was worth as she struggled. "No, not this time." I chuckled, the sick feeling of my humanity totally vanishing as I dug the knife deeper, the tip protruding out the back of her. Her breathing was ragged and forced.

A hand gently squeezed my shoulder. I turned to see Siön Baptiste watching me intently. "It is over."

The rush of power diminished and exhaustion took its place. I stumbled, dropping Tazmaine on her backside. Her eyes glazed over and she took her last breath, disintegrating before us, her ashes swirling up around my feet. Backing up, away from her remains, I sighed. I wasn't happy, I wasn't angry. Only emptiness remained and the relief that she would never hurt anyone I cared about again.

"Where is Adeem?" I asked, turning toward Tristan whose shocked face made me cringe. I'd killed his sister.

Nobody answered, they were too busy avoiding my gaze. All but Siön Baptiste who stood by my side. Sevastian knelt low to the ground bowing before me. Some hesitated then followed suit, heads on the floor of the bar. "What are you doing?" I asked, troubled by the sudden desire for everyone to bow.

I turned to Siön Baptiste who was now the only person standing in the room. Everyone, even Tristan had bowed. "I don't think I'm going to like what you are about to tell me, am I?"

He shook his head. "Maybe we should go somewhere private?" He took my arm in his and started dragging me to the bar. Calling back to the crowd of kneeling ninnies, he ordered, "Go home!"

Everyone shot up, even Sevastian, and walked out. "Where are they going?"

"They are going home, we need to talk in private."

He led me to the bar and pushed me to sit in a stool facing him. I climbed up onto the barstool, still sore from the hole in the side of my body. "Can't this wait until I'm healed?" I growled, angry at his persistence.

"No."

"Fine, what do you want?"

He loomed over me, lifting my face to meet his. "I cannot believe you are alive."

I started to say something and he grabbed my lips holding them together. "Mlet mgo."

"No, listen. When I'm done you can ramble all you want."

"Mfine."

"Do not talk, just nod yes or no if you understand?"

Grrrrrrrrrr! I bit his finger hard enough for him to jump back.

Chapter 27

“Why do you have to be so difficult?” He stuck his finger in his mouth, cleaning off the blood left behind when my fang punctured his skin. He had a small tear in his skin from pulling back so suddenly. The blood seeped slowly, making my mouth water. I had to stop myself from leaning forward and taking it back into my mouth, the sweet scent of his blood filling my nostrils.

He smiled knowingly. “Would you like a taste, my love?”

I slapped his outstretched hand away. “Just answer my questions. No double talk, Siön Baptiste or I’ll leave right here, right now.” I glared at him. “Do you agree?”

He nodded.

“First question. What happened to me? How would you like waking up in a coffin? And why the heck didn’t you help me?” My voice was a little unsteady.

He took my hands in his, rubbing his thumb against the pulse in my wrist. The motion calmed and soothed me. It also sent every cell below the belt into hyper-drive. His eyes were rimmed in red as if he hadn’t slept in months. He actually looked a bit rough around the edges, in a masculine, I’m an edible, sexy treat kind of way. “You died.”

I huffed, pulling back, but he held onto me. “I did not die.”

“Samantha, I agree to play this game of yours, but if you insist on questioning everything I say, then I will put you over my knee and spank the fire right out of you.”

I blushed, either from anger or the thought of Siön Baptiste’s hand on my bum. He gave me a slow, sensuous grin, obviously mistaking my anger for something else. I pulled at my tank top, suddenly feeling the heat rise around us. “So, I died? Really died?” *Change the subject!*

His eyes blinked, and with sadness in his voice, he continued. “You stopped breathing, your heart no longer beat. You were dead. When you didn’t disintegrate we thought it was something the Dracomere had done to prevent your body from turning to ash. The Dracomere vanished the moment you died.” He sighed, pulling me into his arms. I opened my thighs and he slid between them hugging me to him, whispering. “I thought I had lost you.”

I mumbled against his chest, “But why would you agree to be with Tazmaine?”

He stiffened in my arms. “I had no choice.”

I pulled away to look up into his eyes. Trying to find the truth. “Everyone has a choice, Siön Baptiste. You knew she was the reason I died, yet you agreed to be her king.” The word “king” was laced with the bitterness I felt.

“I only agreed to be her king so that I could kill her when the time came. The Dracomere is hers to call now and we had to stop her no matter what the sacrifice. When you died, the Avenger disappeared into thin air.”

“Damien is gone?”

“Yes, he vanished when you died and so did the Dracomere.” He shook his head and the movement sent chills down my spine. “It is a miracle that you are alive. I do not know what god you pray to, Samantha, but he answered your prayer that night, and mine.”

“There are so many gaps and holes in my memory. None of this feels real.” I shuddered, remembering the moment the creature slid its fangs into my neck. “What about John and Betty?”

I gasped, my mind registering the fact Betty had been taken too. "Where are they?"

"I do not know what happened to either but my guess would be they were killed."

"No, Betty is not dead. I would know if she had been killed." I could sense her life force. She was alive, I just wasn't sure where. "I got her involved in this mess, I need to get her out of it."

"How do you know she is alive? Did you take her blood?"

"Yes."

"You can sense her because you have taken her blood. Anyone you drink from becomes part of you." He patted my back. "Ah, we are finally growing up."

I inched my fingers up his chest, letting them sink into his warmth. The silk of his shirt was playing havoc with my senses. "So I'm finally growing up?" I asked, my voice sounding sultry even to my ears.

"Yes," he gasped between clenched teeth as my finger traced his nipple through his shirt. "I have waited for you to accept what you have become for what seems like an eternity. We will reign together as one."

My mouth closed over the nipple sucking gently. "You want to rule, don't you?"

"Yes, I have always wanted this."

"Good." I bit down hard, released, then shoved him with all my might. He flew back, hitting the barstool behind him. Without another look back, I took off leaving him laughing behind me.

I called out over my shoulder, "I will never reign with you or anyone else. I don't want to be a part of anything you have to offer."

He didn't follow me but I could feel his mind sweep over mine. "You have no choice but to rule."

I turned back to him. One page of my story had been closed tonight and yet another page was just beginning. "As queen, I am in charge, right?"

He nodded, eyebrow raised in curiosity.

"Then you and every other vampire MUST obey me?"

He nodded again.

"Find Betty and bring Tyler to me and I will consider this whole queen and king gig."

He bowed, a mocking smile forming across his handsome face. "Your wish is my command, Your Majesty."

I concentrated on my bike and the alleyway, pushing away the desire to run into his mocking, stubborn arms and kiss his annoying, but sensuous lips. White light shot across my eyes, and before I could say bite me, I was standing before my bike. "Wow, I could get used to this."

I jumped onto my bike and took off into the night.

The cool October air pressed against my face. I could feel my responsibilities crashing all around me. Tazmaine was a thing of the past but now Adeem was free. I had to find Tyler and Betty before Adeem tried to have his revenge. He'd turned out to be a real knight in shining armor, taking off while his woman was being killed.

Despite Tazmaine being a conniving witch, I felt a wee bit guilty. I'd goaded her on, knowing full well she would try to use my own sword against me. "Know thy enemy," I whispered as I sped past all the familiar neighborhoods on my way home.

Dawn was right around the corner as the sky lit up in a beautiful display of reds and deep purples. A familiar rumble from my stomach kicked in just as I rounded the corner of Barns and

Rouche. I pulled over and stepped into Nannie's Bakery. They only had the best donuts in all of New Orleans. The lady behind the counter eyed me suspiciously, giving me a knowing smile. Leaning down, I got a glimpse of what she saw in the reflection off the napkin holder. I basically looked like a freak.

"What will you have?" Her smile widened as she watched me nervously adjust my jacket and hair.

"I'll have a coffee and cream donut." I hesitated. "To go," I quickly added, scanning the empty booths and chairs.

"It will be about five minutes the coffee is still brewing." The lady smiled cheerfully and took off after the donut.

This little twenty-four hour café had seen its share of crazies but I wasn't about to wait around until the morning shift of cops came in to feast before work. A folded paper sat on the counter, my gaze swept it quickly then shot back to what I saw. I grabbed the paper and opened to the front page.

Woman wanted in questioning to multiple homicides.

My mouth dropped open as I continued to read.

All that is left of the once influential Elden agency is ashes. John Wilkins's body was found among the debris but Samantha Houston and Betty Bride's bodies were never recovered. Three unidentified men were found and police would like to bring in Samantha Houston and Betty Bride for questioning. Detective Barry Carlton who investigated the incident said, "We would like to question the only surviving witnesses immediately." Detective Barry answered reporters at Tuesday's press conference. Blood at the scene was determined to be Betty Bride's. Mr. Wilkins's funeral will be held Thursday, October 11.

The waitress was in the back, my coffee still brewing as I turned, tucking the paper under my arm and left. My breathing was erratic as I leaped onto my bike and took off down the road. I had a feeling John was dead ... but to see it in full print! My picture was plastered over the front of the paper. *Wanted for questioning.* How would I answer the questions I knew they would ask? Barry was a detective and friend of Trevor's. How could I look Detective Barry in the face and tell him what I had become. Or that I'd killed three men, but it was kill or be killed. Would the police understand? Let's hope so.

I needed to get some rest and devise a plan to fix the problems in my life. The Elden Agency was totally destroyed, John dead, Tyler and Betty missing. "John," I whispered under my breath as I swung the bike into my driveway, tears sliding down my face. I couldn't sense his life force anywhere in New Orleans last night and somehow I knew, even before reading the paper, that he had died in the attack by Adeem's men. A torrent of tears threatened to spill over as I mourned over the man who was like a second father to me. Adeem was responsible for his death. My fangs lengthened every time I thought of Adeem. I would kill him and anyone who sided with him.

A part of me wanted to climb into my bed and sleep my worries away but another part of me wanted to hunt every last one of Adeem's men down and slaughter them like cattle. It would be nice to wake up and find everyone okay and my worries gone. I entered the dark house which had brought me so much happiness as a child. Locking the door behind me, I dropped my jacket on the floor and slowly headed to my room.

The darkness of my room was comforting. I pulled the shades to hide the first light of dawn. Lost in thought, I undressed. Couldn't help but wonder if anyone I loved would survive this prophecy crap.

“I will survive.”

Chapter 28

I turned to find Siön Baptiste sitting on my bed. At least I now knew how he did his disappearing and reappearing act. It was mind over matter for a vampire. There was no mockery in his voice, no teasing in his eyes. He watched me from across the room and suddenly I became very aware of my lack of dress.

“Are you okay?” I asked, concerned with the look on his face.

He dropped his head, shaking it slowly, his long black hair billowing around his face. “I could not protect the ones you loved. I failed you, my love.” The word “love” coming out as a mere whisper over my skin. He lifted his hands and flexed them. “Saving you was all I wanted in life and even then I failed.” I could feel the hint of red creeping over my breasts as my body responded to our close quarters.

I didn’t have the energy to fight him or kick him out, and in reality, I didn’t want to. I walked over and laid my hand on his shoulder. He lifted his head and watched me, eyes nearly glowing in the dark. I stood between his legs, threading my hands through his silky hair and brought him closer. His arms wrapped tightly around me, his head resting on my stomach. His hot breath against my skin sent waves of heat spiraling throughout my body.

We both sighed in unison, melting into each other’s embrace. His hands slid up and down my back, calming and soothing me. I played with the silky strands of hair as his mouth began to plant feathery-soft kisses on the silky smooth skin of my stomach. My heart and body raced as his lips opened, his tongue flickering against me. He steadied my shaking legs, holding me against him as I swayed under his trance.

“Samantha?”

I answered with a voice barely audible over my panting. “Yes?”

His tongue dipped beneath my bra as his hands released the clasps, my full breasts falling free. He nipped the underside of my left breast and I cried out at the exquisite pleasure it sent between my legs. “I want you,” he murmured. He was working his mojo on me and I was putty in his hands.

I let out a long breath, sighing again as his mouth moved. “I want you, too.”

A deep masculine chuckle came from his chest. Hands now rested on my arse, squeezing and massaging as his lips found my nipple, pulling and tugging it to a hard peak. “I want all of you.” He released my mouth attempting to read my expression.

I felt cold without his mouth on my body. “Yes, I want you too,” I said hastily, pulling his wonderful mouth back over my nipple, holding him in place as his tongue moved slowly back and forth. My body shuddered as the pressure between my legs grew.

He stopped again, and watched me with guarded eyes. “You do not understand what I ask of you.”

My voice sounded hazy even to me as it took on a new, husky quality. “If you don’t get to the point soon, I’m going to explode.”

An all-male, I’ve got you where I want you, smile crossed his face. “So you like this?” His mouth hovered over my breast.

I looked down his fangs began to lengthen. “Yes, yes, I like,” I gasped.

He scraped a fang across my nipple. "I could make you orgasm with just one bite."

Purring, my hands clenched around his hair trying to bring him closer, but he was like moving a big boulder. A big boulder that was going to make me beg and I didn't care. "Please." My voice, no, not my own, pleaded as my body swayed.

He didn't move. "I want you to be my queen and I want you to admit you love me." His hands were shaking as they dug into each cheek of my arse. He was fighting for control and I wanted him to lose the fight.

Who was I kidding? I was losing control but not enough to agree to either demand. "No and no."

His head shot up, eyebrow rising, questioning me. "No?"

Before I had a chance to respond he sank his fang into my breast, tongue swirling madly over my nipple. The world as I knew it ceased to exist. Nothing, and everything, moved at once. My back arched as the orgasm swept over me, devastating my senses. He was pulling my life force and with each soft suckle my orgasm pulsed and grew. My head fell back as my fingers pulled his hair, holding him pressed against my body. As long as he drank my life force, I knew the pleasure would continue. I would have let him drain me dry. My head began to swim as my heart thudded in my ear. He pulled away, a drop of blood lazily moving down from each puncture in my breast. His pupils were dilated, nearly making the green of his eyes disappear.

Standing, he hugged me to his body, both of us shaking. He slid my panties down to my ankle, and in one clean movement, picked me up and laid me onto the bed on my stomach.

"Stay here," he urged, his voice husky with need.

Pulling away, my body begging for his warmth, I could hear him removing his clothing. I was drumming with life, anticipating his next move. The masculine scents of him filled my nostrils, making my body twitch with pleasure. Now was my time to escape if I wanted to.

I didn't run or hide from him, instead I submitted to his will and desire. He nudged my legs with his, his skin scorching me everywhere he touched. Holding my breath, I spread my legs wider, exposing the wet evidence of my need for his touch. He leaned down on me, his body hard and throbbing. Sliding his hard shaft between my legs, he rubbed the soft, rounded point against my opening while he pressed his lips firmly to my neck, sucking and kissing. My legs slid further apart, bringing him closer as his chest pressed me firmly into the bed. Strong hands caressed my body, fingers playing havoc on my nipples, pulling and tugging them to their fullest. It felt so good to feel him nestled between my legs, his lips and mouth teasing me to the point of no return.

My body ached for him to embed his shaft deep inside, but he hesitated. I tried moving my hands to guide him but he held them with his power and body. As I lifted my hips just enough to try to urge him on, he steadied his breathing.

His voice echoed inside my head, sending my body into the fiery abyss of pure yearning only for him. *Say it, Samantha, tell me you love me. Do you love me, Samantha?*

I could feel the smile on his lips against my rapidly beating pulse. "If you don't finish this, I'm going to die," I cried out as his fangs penetrated my neck. He left them embedded without giving me the pleasure of taking my blood. The warm pulse returned full force between my legs. My moisture ran down my thighs as he slipped himself back and forth over my opening, teasing, testing me. It only enhanced my need of him. "Please," I begged, tears running down my face.

"Answer me and this will end," he replied. I couldn't take anymore, my power surged, touching his own, but it never wavered. Sweat pooled between my breasts and on my forehead as

I attempted to get free from his hold. He was torturing me with my own craving of him. Shifting his weight against my backside, his shaft pushed into my opening only to quickly retreat stopping at the entrance. "You love me," he whispered, his voice hoarse, his body shaking above me.

"Yes," I answered, head bowed, ashamed of my need. "Yes." He sighed against my neck, the heat from his breath stimulating the penetration in my neck. His fangs lengthened and I cried out.

"Yes, what?" he mumbled against my skin, trying to hold back his own need.

"Yes, I love you," I cried out.

He stilled above me and we sat in silence, our breathing becoming one as his body trembled. "I love you, Samantha, and you are mine." With those words, he thrust into me with one smooth motion while his teeth sunk deeper, swallowing my blood. My heart stopped beating, dizzy by his motion. The lock and key around my heart melted away when our bodies began to move together. We were consumed with our passion.

He released my neck, pulling away, turning me onto my back and entered again with hurried motion. My legs wrapped firmly around him as he penetrated in long, even strokes. Each stroke hitting the very core of my being. His lips brushed against mine as we stole each other's breath. He pounded my body at a furious pace. Grabbing my hips, he tugged me against him filling me completely. My sheath was wet and tight against his throbbing hardness deep inside, triggering a wonderful heated friction. I screamed as a pulsating energy moved between my legs bringing Siön Baptiste to the brink of release. The beat of his hips slapping against mine was a rhythmic music of our own hearts beating as one.

"Bite me, Samantha," he whispered against my mouth. Exposing his neck, he begged me to release him. His mouth pressed a kiss to my shoulder as my lips covered his pulse. The smell of his blood, so sweet, pumped freely just beyond his skin. He slowed, waiting for my bite, sliding himself almost completely out of me and then thrusting again. The motion of our bodies lifted me off the bed. My fangs lengthened, scraping across the pulse. He groaned loudly. "I love you," he whispered over and over.

I smiled. "I love you too." Opening my mouth, I slowly inserted my fangs as he punctured my shoulder by thrusting himself deeper. White light flooded my vision as our cries of pleasure seeped through every pore. My orgasm hit with such force, I screamed as I clenched and squeezed his shaft. His cries soon followed as he shuddered against my back, exploding deep within my womb. Euphoric heat pulsed as we drank down our love. Our orgasms continued to trigger with each swallow of blood. We were linked in one continuous earth-shattering release.

"Enough, my love," Siön Baptiste whispered in my ear. My fangs retracted as his fingers clung to my hair. Had I taken too much blood? I felt dizzy with power. My eyes grew heavy and my body was limp.

He chuckled against my neck. "You would kill me with your love, I fear."

My voice was hoarse from screaming. "I'm not sure about killing you with love, but there have been plenty of times I've wanted to kill you."

"It is good to know some things will never change." He kissed me, tongue tracing my lips, moving things within me I thought could never awaken again so quickly.

My eyebrow shot up. "Again?"

He wedged himself between my legs, very hard and very ready. He smiled down at me, eyes filled with tenderness. "I will always be ready for you, my love."

I lost count after the fourth mind-shattering experience. Somewhere, just at the end of

number four, I collapsed into a black fuzzy world. I think some would call it fainting. I just thought I died again.

A kiss on the forehead woke me from my slumber. My eyes fluttered open to find Siön Baptiste standing over the bed fully dressed. "What time is it?" I yawned, stretching, feeling the sensual pain throughout my whole body.

He smiled, but there was a strain in his face that made me sit up. "What are you doing, Siön Baptiste?"

He hesitated.

That is when I noticed him looking at my breast peeking out from under the cover. I grabbed the sheet and wrapped myself up.

He laughed. "A little late for modesty." Brushing my wild curls out of my face, he leaned down and kissed my forehead. "I had better go before you entice me to stay and ravish you through the night as well."

I looked out of the blind and noticed the moon just beyond. How long did I sleep? Better question, how long and how many times could this man make a woman scream. I bit my lip, tongue sliding across my fangs, trembling as I remembered the day.

He stepped back shaking his head. "I need to concentrate on finding Tyler and Betty. I will not fail you again."

I started to get up but he held me down with his gaze. "I will call you when I arrive and then you can come, but not until then."

"Arrive? Where are you going?"

"I will be heading to Pennsylvania, there is a portal to Shadowmere."

"Shadowmere?"

"The Underverse." And before I could ask what the Underverse was, he cut me off with a wave of his hand. "It is the world beneath our world. Shadow is of this realm."

The euphoria from our sexual marathon was all but gone. "I'm going with you." I stood, wrapping the sheet around me.

"You will stay here until I call for you. I will not have you disobey me in this."

"Did I hear you right? Did you say DISOBEY you?" I shook my fist, my whole body trembling with anger. "Oh no, you did not just say obey you. We have incredible mind-blowing sex and you think you own me."

He took a step forward, the cocky grin back on his face.

I backed up and he reached for me, pulling me up against him. "I do own you." He leaned down to kiss my neck, his finger slipping over the two puncture wounds on my breast. I almost screamed at the sudden throb between my legs. My knees threatened to buckle out from under me as I laid my head on his shoulder.

"What did you do to me?" I didn't like being under his control.

He sighed, kissing my forehead. "I love you, Samantha Houston, and I always will. Stay here and in three days, I will call. If you do not receive word from me in two days, seek Tristan out and he will take you where you need to go, but give me three days."

"The moon will be full in just four days and then what do I do?"

"We will find Tyler and then it will be over. We can rule together."

I laughed. "You have it all figured out, don't you?"

He smirked. "I will not lose you again and I will kill anyone who gets in our way."

"I'm not going to roll over and play nice anytime soon, Siön."

His eyebrow shot up. "Seems to me you already did roll over for me, my sweet."

That got him a punch in the arm. “Just go before I change my mind and follow your bum to Pennsylvania.”

He headed for the door. His tall 6’4” frame filling the doorway and the air around me. His legs, those same long muscular legs that gave me so much pleasure, stopped in mid-stride, the leather pants snug around his perfectly shaped bum. I couldn’t help but lick my lips remembering how he felt in my hands. How he felt under me and over me ... and in me. I sighed, and as if my thoughts were his, his broad shoulders lifted as he let out a deep breath.

Without turning around he spoke. “Stop thinking about what we did or I might never leave.”

A shiver of pleasure ran up and down my spine as I felt the power I wielded over this man. “Just go before we both change our minds.”

He peeked at me from over his shoulder. “I love you.”

Then he disappeared.

Chapter 29

Love is a funny thing. Life is a funny thing. Actually, I'm finding a ton of things funny lately, all of which I'm sure aren't very funny at all. I shook my head, humming quietly as I stood in the cold October rain. The stinging against my cheeks made me glad to be alive.

Touching my face with my fingers, I was surprised I had enough humanity left to feel sorrow. Cold bitter tears streamed down my face as I watched John's body being lowered into the hole people liked to call their final resting place. A jolt of pain shot through my chest as his widow fell to the ground, mud caking her skirt and shoes, crying for her loss.

The crowd awkwardly filtered away from the scene. I stayed glued to the horror and pain before me, wishing I could go back in time and do things differently. I might have prevented a lot of heartache and pain.

The cops were still searching for Betty and myself. I'd thrown caution to the wind and disguised myself enough to show up for John's funeral. The long jacket and scarf were enough to block my face and hair but they had still found me. Scanning the various trees, I noticed a young man peeking from behind a large oak. Oh, yeah they'd found me all right. I steadied myself, waiting for them to approach. Fortunately for them, they were giving me room and giving the grieving widow time to make her peace with God and her husband. I can't vouch for what I might have done if they had barged in on the funeral.

Mrs. Wilkins stood with the help of a family friend and stumbled off to her waiting limo. I had a lot of unanswered questions and I think I was about to get some answered.

"Miss Houston?" a cool, deep voice asked from behind me.

Smooth! He'd snuck up on me, distracting me with his young buck across the field. *Very Smooth!*

I kept my back to him. "Detective Carlton, I presume?"

His voice showed no sign of fear, only confidence. "You can call me Jeffrey."

No use hiding anymore, the world needed to know firsthand what I had become and who was responsible. I turned, letting my scarf slide away. The hood of my jacket slipped past my ear and lay neatly on my shoulders. My hair was beginning to show the effects of the cold rain, curling up even more than usual.

The man who faced me was an old friend of Trevor's. I knew he would be fair in his quest for justice but his eyes only revealed suspicion. First Trevor's disappearance, then Betty's, and now John's body. Here I stood, not a broken bone on me that anyone could tell. Healthy and alive when everyone around me was dying or disappearing into thin air. If he only knew his suspicions were headed in the right direction.

"We need to talk." He held out his hand as a sign of peace.

I stood still, refusing to move or accept his offer. His hand slowly dropped, eyes roaming over me. He was sizing me up. I could tell by the quizzical look on his face that he was attempting to make sense of the situation. *Give it up, nothing makes sense in this world.*

I openly answered his gawking with my own. He was tall, nearly 6'3", and his build muscular. I could take him if I needed to, but this was an offering of peace not war. His afternoon shadow made him look five years older than he was. He was ruggedly handsome in a

clean-cut cop kind of way. I couldn't help but instantly like him. He respected Trevor enough to know I wasn't the cause of his woes, but he was smart enough to know that I had the answers to all his questions. Cocking my head, I took a long deep breath, inhaling his scent and all that it told.

His eyebrow shot up as if in sudden recognition at what stood before him. "You aren't human are you, Miss Houston?"

It wasn't so much a question as it was a statement. I smiled. If he only knew. "Is it that obvious?" I asked, a little annoyed that he could tell.

"What happened to you, Samantha?" The sudden concern in his voice took me by surprise.

"Does it really matter what happened to me? I think you really need to find out what happened to your friend and John," I reminded him gently.

He looked down and kicked a pile of dirt from John's grave. "He was your friend as well and that is exactly why I am here."

"We will talk but now is not a good time." I nonchalantly scanned the cemetery, looking for a third set of eyes. "You need to leave now. I will contact you, before I leave."

He followed my gaze, looking around for what I felt. "Where are you going? I think maybe you shouldn't leave town." He shoved his hands in his pockets, looking comfortable in his jeans and tee-shirt.

"I'll be out of town for a short time but plan on returning after I take care of business."

He stepped closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Are you in danger?"

I smiled. "No, but you are."

I knew it was wrong before I did it. I thought of my home. Imagined myself in the living room and concentrated with all my might. My sudden disappearance probably made the detective jump out of his skin. Then again, it didn't seem like much of anything would make Mr. Carlton jump out of his skin. He might prove to be a useful ally to have in the future. Now that he knew what I was, he wouldn't leave me alone, but if I could use him to track down Adeem, I would. I needed to close that chapter on my life and take Adeem out of the equation forever.

"Soon," I whispered. "Very soon."

Epilogue

Underkoffler, Dead Man Rising

“Two days without word from Siön Baptiste.” I paced the little office waiting for a reply. “I have two more days until the full moon and I need to find Tyler and Betty, and now, Siön Baptiste.” I was aggravated more at myself that I’d let him walk out of the room alone. “Stubborn, arrogant man. Couldn’t take the help of a woman. Now what?” My voice lifted to a steady growl.

Sevastian sat with his leg crossed and waited for me to simmer down while Tristan watched me from behind the safety of his desk.

Tristan lifted his hand. “If I might answer, Your Highness, Pain-in-the-butt.”

I swung on him, bringing my knife to his throat. The motion was faster than I’ve ever moved before. Even I blinked. Tristan’s mouth dropped. “How did you do that?”

A small drop of blood oozed from the wound. Involuntarily, my mouth began to salivate and I licked my lips as I tried unsuccessfully to pry my eyes from the open wound. It smelled like candy.

Sevastian’s chuckle broke my trance. “She is changing, my friend. We will need to make sure she has plenty of food lest she experiences her first blood lust.”

Tristan’s eyes lit up as if he’d seen a buffet of juicy steak before him.

“What is blood lust?” I hissed, stalking over to Sevastian.

“It is something you could not handle at this point in your young life,” Sevastian said.

“Okay, so what do we do next?” *Why waste anymore time.*

“We head to Underkoffler and pray Shadow is still in charge of his legions.”

I plopped down in the chair closest to the desk. “I wish just once,” I said wearily, “that you all would make sense.” I banged my head slowly against the dark mahogany wood. Maybe the pain would clear my mind. Ever since Siön Baptiste left, I have been on edge. Like a junkie without her fix, I craved him like a drug.

“He is your mate, you will crave him always,” Tristan chimed in, obviously reading my thoughts.

“Get out of my mind, batbrain.” Tristan looked offended at the name-calling but it was better than taking off his head. I was feeling violent all of a sudden.

Sevastian laughed, slapping his knee. “Oh, welcome to the family, Tristan.”

Tristan just shook his head. Sevastian laughed harder and I cursed them both for not being Siön Baptiste. I was going to wring Siön Baptiste’s neck if I felt this way every time he was gone. “He did this on purpose, I just know it.” Both men shook their heads. “What now, some prophecy crap I don’t know about?”

Tristan turned to Sevastian. “She doesn’t know?”

“No,” Sevastian answered.

I gave them both a dirty look and Tristan began to explain.

“What you experience can only happen to a true queen and king. Your souls are bonded. When you are together you experience the most exquisite pleasure.”

My head began to spin just at the thought of the way he made me feel. Our lovemaking was already mind-blowing, could it get any better?

“But when you are apart for too long both of you will be lost until reunited again.”

I slammed my fist into the table, pieces of wood splintered everywhere. “HE did this to me.”

Sevastian lowered his voice as if talking to a baby. “It was part of the prophecy, you were bound to him the minute you met.”

“But there were two in the prophecy,” Tristan butted in.

“Two?” That got my attention.

“One will bind her, one will guide her. Both will steal her heart but only one will find her in the dark.”

“All right, let’s just get to Pennsylvania and soon. Frankly, I’m sick of hearing about the prophecy. Let’s just do it,” I grumbled and stalked out of the small, dusty office and into the bar. All of Tazmaine’s assets had become mine. So I now owned the Wolves Den along with many other prominent supernatural hangouts throughout the country. In the back of my mind I felt like I was missing part of the puzzle, but pretty soon I had a feeling the puzzle piece would be coming to me.

“Underkoffler here we come.”