



# SOULS DEEP

M. L. RHODES

Souls Deep  
by M. L. Rhodes

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*Where Tigers Prowl (writing as Karin Story)*

## **DEDICATION**

This one's for my critique partner, who's patiently followed me down many writing paths over the years, and whose support has been one of the cornerstones of my career.

## CHAPTER 1

### **The year 2067**

#### *Power Sector Delta*

Formerly the southern regions of the Denver/Cheyenne  
Metroplex

*Keep moving!*

Griffin's lungs burned. Each desperate breath seared his dry throat. His feet pounded against the cracked pavement while his heart pounded in his chest.

He didn't dare risk a look behind him. Didn't dare take a chance on slowing his pace. Didn't need to. He felt them. Two of them. Hungry for the kill.

*Don't stop ... don't ... stop...*

The deep shadows of October nightfall closed around him. The power grid would shut down soon, snuffing out all electric lighting in a hundred-mile radius, leaving nothing but the faint sliver of moonlight slipping in and out from behind the clouds. Only then, in the near-total darkness, would he have a chance of disappearing. He had to hang on until then.

The crack of gunfire sounded behind him.

He tensed, expecting to feel heat tear through his back, then gasped a sigh of relief when it didn't.

The hunters had come up on him unexpectedly. He should have known better, but, like an idiot, he'd thought he'd be safe in a large crowd, had thought the din and the crush of bodies in the techno dance club where'd he'd found temporary work the past two evenings would afford him some

protection. Instead, it had masked his ability to read the danger coming—too many thoughts and frenzied emotions had clouded the air, and far too many of them with nefarious undertones.

Probably with practice he could learn to find some measure of control over the chaos in a crowd, but it wasn't a situation he'd often found himself in. His finely-tuned receptors had been overwhelmed, and he'd already decided once he'd gotten his money tonight he'd move on. But then he'd seen them stalking toward him in the smoky club. He'd run, not even taking the time to find his backpack with the handful of personal possessions he called his own.

He wasn't familiar with this part of the vast, dying megalopolis of Delta Sector. Blindly, he turned and sprinted up a dark alley, hoping to find more cover. Tall but crumbling buildings reached skyward on either side of him. Once, they'd probably been jewels of the area, but now were nothing so much as tired, gray monsters towering over a labyrinth of desolation and decay.

*Stay alive. Just a while longer. The grid'll go down soon.  
Stay alive!*

Another turn. Another alley.

A black wall loomed ahead of him.

*Dead end!*

He slid to a stop, seeking another way.

Walls all around. No doors. No fire escape ladders.

*Trapped.*

"Shit!"



Terror ripped through him, filled his veins with ice. He smelled his own fear, a bitter, pungent tang wafting off his skin.

And it pissed him off. He hadn't stayed alive this long by giving in to fear.

Resolve built in the depths of his core. He would get out of here. It wasn't his day to die.

"Not today," he growled aloud. And for the first time in four years, instead of running with the hunters at his back, he turned to face the shit storm head-on. He was tired of running. If he could take them by surprise ... get past them because they wouldn't be expecting him to double back, it might work. And then, when he'd reached safety, maybe it was time to fight and put an end to this once and for all.

Another gunshot echoed off the brick walls of his prison.

Pain exploded in his gut and the impact dropped him to his knees

Griffin clutched his abdomen. In slow motion, he raised his hands and stared in dull shock at the crimson stains.

*No! Not today!*

Footfalls, running, coming closer. Men in black clothing, black masks. They slowed to a walk ... only a feet away now.

"You've led us a good chase, kid. But there's nowhere left to run. You're going to die here."

"No..." The word was croaked out of his dry throat. The figures wavered in his vision. He wanted to stand. *Run*. But he couldn't make his legs work.

Blood loss, some logical part of him said. *You're getting dizzy from blood loss.*

"Nighty night, kid. We'll tell your daddy your last words were 'I'm sorry and I love you.'"

"Fuck you!" Griffin spat.

The men laughed.

He looked up the barrel of a long gun. *I'm going to die here.*

It was getting hard to keep his eyes open ... his eyelids fluttered closed. Oddly, his life didn't flash before his eyes as he'd always assumed it would. All he experienced was the grind of the cracked pavement digging into his knees through his jeans. The acrid stench of nearby trash cans. The hot yet already-numbing ache in his gut. And the sense of elation that filled the minds of his killers. It swallowed him in a maw of malevolent glee.

The sound of a shot reverberated off the brick walls. He waited for it to rip into his body and finish him.

Yet ... he felt nothing.

*Nothing?*

The sounds of swearing, grunting, fists slamming against flesh seeped through the growing fog in his mind.

He opened his eyes. Another dark figure lunged into his field of vision, dressed in black. But not like the others. As his eyesight dimmed and his body grew weaker, he watched in fascinated horror as the new arrival wrapped his arms around the neck of one of the attackers and with little effort and an almost animalistic savagery snapped his neck. He turned to deal with the second attacker as efficiently and coldly as the first.

As Griffin slumped to the ground, he captured his first glimpse of the dangerous newcomer's face. The man turned him over onto his back and leaned over him. A frisson of fear passed through Griffin ... but it faded as he stared up at the pale skin, chiseled features, full lips, and eyes so intense he felt the man's gaze pierce all the way through him and into his soul.

*I'm dying. And he's going to watch.*

"Please ... don't want ... to die," he whispered, reaching a hand out to the man.

Then the world went black.

\* \* \* \*

Griffin came awake to the sensation of heat. Surrounding him, pressing into him, making it hard to breathe. His eyes felt scratchy and dry. He tried to open them, but it took too much energy. Yet as he became more aware, he realized the rest of him was damp. *Sweat.*

A hot weight pressed against his abdomen—not hurting, but creating a tingling pressure.

Memories from the alley stormed over him with all the finesse of a tidal wave. He'd been shot ... in the gut. Nausea rose in his throat. He swallowed, but his throat, like his eyes, was painfully dry, and he gagged.

Instinctively, his hands sought to clutch at his stomach, but it was hard to concentrate and he couldn't move them. He felt no immediate pain in his abdomen. *And it should be hurting like hell right now, shouldn't it?*

No. It shouldn't be hurting at all. He should be dead right now. He knew it instinctively.

He struggled to open his eyes once more, to move, but his body was heavy. His brain sluggish.

*Drugged?*

"Drink," a low voice said. It sounded rusty, like it hadn't been used in a while.

A glass was held to his lips. Griffin opened his mouth, letting the liquid dribble in, savoring the cool dampness on his tongue and running down his parched throat.

Before he'd had his fill, the glass was taken away.

"More," he croaked.

"No. Too much and you'll be sick."

That voice again. It was strangely intoxicating. He felt it rippling deep inside him.

*Drugged.* He had to be ... that would explain why he felt no pain. And why the voice held such an odd allure.

He tried again to open his eyes, and this time managed to part them a slit.

Darkness enveloped him. But he saw a shape next to him. A man. *The man from the alley who killed the others.* Even without being able to see him, he knew who it was—something about his presence and the way he moved.

"What happened?" he asked, still croaking.

"You're alive."

"Who are you?"

"Sleep." A cool hand brushed his cheek.

Too exhausted to argue, he let the dark oblivion swallow him again.

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\* \* \* \*

The next time Griffin came to and peeled his eyelids open, it was light. Although ... not daylight. Artificial light. The soft, yellow glow of an electric bulb shone from a small lamp that sat on a chest of drawers across the room.

He had no sense of time. No clue whether it was day or night.

No, that wasn't true. If an electric light burned, then the power grid was on. Which meant it was sometime between six in the morning and eight o'clock at night. Still ... he had no idea how long he'd been here. Wherever *here* was.

His body felt less heavy than before, his mind clearer.

He was alone. He didn't have to look around to know it. He sensed no other presence nearby. He reached out with a mental search to see if he could tell where his rescuer might be. Although he still wasn't himself, and his usual internal detector was a bit fuzzy, he felt no buzz at the edge of his mind that would suggest another person close by.

He was in a room in what looked to be an older house—not a hospital, a house. *The stranger's house?* It was simply furnished with the four-poster bed in which he lay, the chest of drawers, a book shelf, an aged but still elegant deep-green brocade wing chair and ottoman that had been drawn up next to the bed, and several watercolor paintings of the mountains, trees, and other scenes of nature on the walls. The room didn't have a lived-in feel to it. It was more like a guest room that had been dusted off and opened up for company.

And again he was sweltering. But that was, unfortunately, more the norm than the exception anymore.

Global warming had decimated the environment and the world's economy in the early part of the twenty-first century. With fossil fuel vehicles banned in 2050, no funding available for research into alternative fuel sources, and power strictly regulated by the government, the vast majority of Americans now lived in poverty or hovering on the brink of it. Only high-powered government officials and the über-rich had luxuries like personal vehicles and battery or solar-powered generators that allowed them to have lights and electricity twenty-four/seven.

In the United States, much of the original coastline was now underwater due to the melting ice caps. And the climate across the entire country had changed drastically—with parts suffering high temperatures and severe drought, while other parts experienced disastrous storms. Because of that, in Delta Sector, even in October the temperature was often in the upper eighties during the day and didn't cool off much at night. Griffin couldn't remember the last time it had rained or that he'd been truly cool.

In the small room where he lay, heavy blinds covered the window on the wall opposite the bed, and he wondered if the window was open. *Damn, it should be.* He thought about getting up to check, but couldn't find the energy to attempt anything so dramatic as moving from the bed.

The sheet that covered him stuck to his wet skin. He plucked it away from his chest, then watched as it settled limply back against him.

He placed a hand on his abdomen through the sheet. There was a sensitivity in the area and a tingling sensation, but nothing like what he would have expected from a gunshot wound. It couldn't have been minor—he'd lost too much blood for that to be the case. Had the stranger taken out the bullet?

*I should be dead.*

He couldn't seem to shake the thought from his brain. Yet here he was. Not in a hospital or hooked up to IVs and machines, and with almost no pain. How was that possible?

He slid his hand beneath the sheet to find a bandage wound around his middle ... and to discover he wore nothing but the bandage.

For some reason, the idea of the dangerous, intense stranger stripping him bare, seeing him and touching him while he was unconscious, was more disturbing to him than the bandage or the wound beneath it. He remembered the man's piercing gaze that had seared through him as he lay dying in the alley—well, not really dying since he was obviously still here. *But those eyes ... those seductive, probing eyes...*

His cock stirred at the thought.

*What the hell?*

His hand slid down over the bandages until his palm brushed over the damp, heated skin of his shaft, and lower, to cup his hot balls. The touching felt good, and a mini-shudder shook him.

Another flash of the stranger's gaze in the alley filled his vision. And he suddenly remembered the feel of the man's cool hand against his cheek ... and his voice ... the raspy

voice. His wayward cock nudged his hand as it became even more engorged.

*Good gods!* He'd never been attracted to men, so why was he reacting like this? Not only that, but he'd been shot, he was barely functioning, and apparently at the mercy of a stranger who, while he'd obviously chosen to save Griffin's life, had also broken the necks of his attackers with an easy ferocity. Plus, Griffin also knew he was still in danger—always—from his family. They'd failed again this time, but they wouldn't stop hunting him until he was dead. Yet here was, getting a hard-on for no apparent reason.

He closed his eyes, willing his body back into submission. *You are seriously fucked up, man.*

It had to be something about the near-death experience. Maybe it had heightened his senses in some weird way. Or it could be the drugs the stranger had given him. He didn't feel as out of it now as he had the last time he'd awakened, but that didn't mean the drugs weren't still working. They could be the reason he felt no pain, and they could have done something bizarre to his nerve endings. He'd been living on the streets long enough to know there were all kinds of stimulants out there that could jack up a person's libido.

Whatever the cause, his shaft was aroused and growing harder by the second.

"Fucking hell," he muttered, wrapping his fingers around it.

It felt surreal to be giving himself a hand job while he was injured and lying in a stranger's bed. But at the thought of the stranger, once again his body reacted. A warm pulse of need built at the base of his balls and spread outward. He



could almost imagine the man's cool, insistent hands sliding up his thighs, parting them, then cradling his sac in one hand, while the other curved around his prick, gripped it firmly, and began a slick, steady, up and down motion.

It felt so good, so real, Griffin decided whatever the hell the drugs were, he liked them.

He stroked—or was it the imaginary hand that stroked?—his cock over and over, while the other hand played with his testicles, rolling them between his fingers. He couldn't stop the groan that rose from deep in his chest as the tell-tale tightening built in his groin. Gods ... he was going to come.

*That didn't take long.*

A burning tingle surged at the base of his balls. His gut tightened. His head tipped back against the pillow. And in an aching rush, the orgasm coursed up his cock to explode in a sizzling burst.

"Gods ... damn it!" he groaned as the second spasm started before the first had even finished, wracking through him. Another burst of scorching cream shot from his shaft. It was quickly followed by another. And another.

Shit, where was it all coming from?

With one final shudder, he squeezed out a few last drops.

Exhausted, his hand fell away and dropped to the bed next to his hip. He felt his sticky seed coating the sheet that clung to him, dripping down his hips and thighs, but had no energy left to do anything about it.

What the hell was going on with him? It had felt good. Better than good. But it was damned bizarre, given the circumstances. Had to be drugs.

"Feeling better?"

The soft, raspy voice next to him caused Griffin to jump. His eyes flew open. Heat flooded his face. He wasn't used to people sneaking up on him ... because usually they couldn't. Yet he hadn't felt the man's presence. The drugs must be messing with his mental radar, too.

The stranger stood next to him, holding a glass of water and a bowl from which the scent of food drifted. His expression was even—no hint of humor or censure. Yet Griffin was certain the man had just caught him in the act. He suspected his question—*Feel better?*—wasn't just about the gunshot wound.

"I..."

Looking into the man's face left him tongue-tied. The vague memory of it he had from the alley was nothing compared to being a few feet away from him now in the light. His high cheekbones and sensual lips were arresting ... especially for a man. Griffin couldn't tell how old he was—early thirties maybe. He had a sort of ageless beauty.

*Beauty.* An odd word to use for a man, but it fit.

His hair—a dark ash-blond color—was slightly wavy and cut short, and it stood up in spiky disarray. But his eyes were, once again, what captured Griffin's attention and held it. Light in color—gray-blue or maybe grayish hazel?—they were filled with the soulful potency he remembered from before. He found he couldn't tear his gaze away from them.

"Drink."

Griffin took the glass from the man and, lifting his head, drained it before the stranger could get any ideas about taking it away too soon again.

When he'd finished, the man took it from him and set it and the bowl of food on the dresser. Then, without a smile or any other kind of acknowledgement, he turned away from Griffin's gaze and reached for the sheet covering him.

The motion had Griffin clutching at it. It was one thing for the man to walk in on him and maybe realize what Griffin had been doing. But another thing all together for him to pull back the sheet to reveal the drying mess of his spent cum on his groin and the fabric.

The man brushed his hands aside with ease, and pulled the sheet off him. He gathered the soiled linen in his arms and left the room without comment, leaving Griffin nude and exposed on the bed.

The sting of embarrassment spread through Griffin.

*Okay, enough is enough.* It was time to regain some control here. Of himself *and* the situation.

He attempted to sit up, but although his gut didn't hurt while he was lying down, when he tried to push himself into a sitting position, it gave a sharp twinge that made him gasp and swear. But he persevered, angling himself up onto his elbows, then easing over onto his side enough he could push the rest of the way up and swing his legs to the ground.

The room spun, and a faint tinge of nausea rose in his stomach. His injury now throbbed beneath the bandage, obviously not appreciating his movement. He sat still, trying to breath slowly and deeply, to fight off the various pains and

misery he'd just thrust upon himself. The hardwood floor was hot beneath the soles of his feet, and the heat spread up through him, causing him to break out in a sweat—on top of the perspiration he was already coated with.

His flaccid cock, lolling against his thigh and still shiny with spent seed, was the least of his concerns at this point. He was afraid if he tried to move any farther he'd fall off the bed. Yet he couldn't quite get himself maneuvered so he could lie down again either.

The stranger found him stuck in that position when he returned. Without saying a word—obviously he wasn't big on talking—he set down the clean, folded sheet and the large bowl of water he carried, and, sliding one arm around Griffin's shoulders and the other beneath his knees, lifted him back onto the bed. Griffin's five-foot nine-inch frame and one-hundred-fifty-five pounds didn't seem to bother him in the least. He didn't look like he should have the strength to bear Griffin. He was maybe six-feet tall, but he had a lean build. His slate-gray, long-sleeved T-shirt clung to his torso, displaying defined pecs and flat abs, but hardly a body builder's physique. Still, he was obviously stronger than he looked.

"You should lie still for another day or so," his rescuer said. "Unless you want to tear open your wound."

"Sorry," Griffin mumbled, his humiliation now complete. Caught in the act of masturbating, caught in a stupid attempt to overdo it too soon, lying bare-assed naked in front of a perfect stranger ... could he be any more pathetic?

And why couldn't he read this guy, damn it? He hadn't felt his presence in the house. Couldn't read his thoughts. It was like a cool, gray wall stood between them. After twenty-six years of knowing what was going on in the heads or hearts—or both—of virtually everyone around him, the experience of being so ... well, *blind*, was frustrating. He didn't know if it was the drugs that were preventing him from feeling the man or if it was something about the man himself.

A shiver tore through him as he remembered again how easily this man had killed the two assassins. As easily as he'd just now lifted Griffin back onto the bed. Although he'd been gentle with Griffin, and despite the fact Griffin couldn't read his thoughts or emotions, Griffin had a feeling something dark and overwhelmingly powerful lurked just beneath the man's stoic surface. A sense that if he ever opened up with any kind of strong emotion, the intensity of it could be terrifying.

Yet, as the stranger dipped a cloth into the bowl of water he'd brought and began to wipe it over Griffin, Griffin found the man's dichotomy intriguing rather than frightening.

"You don't have to do this," Griffin said, reaching for the cloth. "I can wash myself."

"Be still."

The command, though softly-spoken, was firm enough Griffin didn't argue. Instead, he lay quietly and accepted the man's ministrations. At this point he had no real energy to do it himself, and the man had already seen him at his naked, exposed worst.

"After you're clean, you can eat something."

The warm scrape of cloth continued to move, sweeping across the light dusting of dark hair on Griffin's chest, exploring his ribcage, his sides—avoiding the bandage around his stomach—but finding no other spot on his torso sacred.

Much to his consternation, a tingle of desire blossomed again in Griffin, deep in his core, quivering and slithering through him.

The man dipped the cloth in the water, squeezed it out, then rubbed the wet, nubby fabric against Griffin's groin, around his cock and balls, which were suddenly aching in a very sexual way.

*Gods ...* Fighting to keep his breathing even, but failing miserably, he turned his head to the side, toward the wall away from the stranger, and closed his eyes. Gritting his teeth, he tried to will himself not to respond to the intimate attention. But his traitorous body was just enjoying it too damned much.

"Drugs..." Griffin panted. "What ... what kind of drugs did you give me?" It had to be the drugs making him feel this way.

"You've had no drugs."

Griffin gasped as the man lifted his twitching cock in one cool hand, holding it up away from his skin as he slid the washcloth underneath it. "Had to be ... I..."

"No drugs."

"But ... I don't hurt. Well, not really, not until I sat up and moved too much." *Not to mention you touching me is making me horny as hell, and that is not a fucking normal thing for*

*me. Men don't make me hot.* Although, to be honest, he'd never been touched intimately by a man before, until now.

His cock, by this time, was fully erect and bobbing eagerly in the man's hand. Mortified, Griffin sucked in a deep breath, trying to will the damn thing back into submission. It didn't work.

By the time the man had finished cleaning his groin area and moved down his legs, Griffin was on fire. It didn't matter the cool hands were no longer on his privates. His body had decided it liked the attention and wanted more.

"The bullet. Did you take it out?" he asked, trying to keep his mind off the raw sexual hunger that continued to rise so fiercely in him.

"Yes."

How long have I been here?"

"Three days."

Griffin's hips twitched as the stranger ran the cloth over his calves, then back up the insides of his thighs.

"Wh-who are you?" he mumbled, his voice hoarse with a need he couldn't quite hide. *Best to keep talking.* Anything to keep his mind off his damned arousal.

"No one of consequence." The raspy response sent a new surge of desire through Griffin that settled right below his balls. But the words also sparked annoyance in him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you ask too many questions."

Griffin bit back a groan as the cloth slid back up and over his hip. But then he focused his gaze on the man's intent, unsmiling face. "You killed the men who were after me. You

saved my life. Don't you think that gives me the right to ask a few questions?"

The man picked up the clean, folded sheet, shook it open, and spread it over Griffin. He smoothed it out over Griffin's chest, either not noticing or studiously ignoring how his jutting cock formed a pyramid in the fabric.

"I'm done here."

He started to turn away, but Griffin grabbed his hand. Gods knew what possessed him to do it, but he did.

The stranger froze, his back already half-turned to Griffin.

"Thank you for saving my life," Griffin said, and meant it sincerely.

The man's shoulders tensed. "Don't thank me." The words were low, almost a growl.

"Why not?"

"I'm not some white-knight hero. You have no idea who I am."

"I know you saved me when you could have left me to die in that alley. And I was dying. I know it."

The man turned to face him, and his pale gaze seared through Griffin. "How do you know I didn't 'save' you for my own sinister reasons?"

A prickle of unease crept up Griffin's spine. He hated not being able to read this man. Hated being so damned blind and having to rely on words and body language. "Did you?"

The man stepped closer to the bed. In less than a heartbeat, he'd pulled his hand away from Griffin's and imprisoned Griffin's wrist in his shockingly tight grip.



Another step closer. His eyes seemed to glow with something feral. Something that wasn't quite ... human.

*Oh, gods.* Griffin's chest tightened. His lungs seized. But at the same time, an unexpected carnal excitement stirred in him.

Shit, he truly was fucked up.

The man leaned in close. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes." Griffin's whispered response was out before he could think about it.

"Maybe I brought you here to satisfy my hunger."

There was a split second where the words hung in the air and Griffin understood him to mean sexual hunger. His body tingled all over, almost like it was calling out for the dangerous pleasure the man could offer.

But then with a lunge, the stranger latched his mouth onto Griffin's neck. Griffin felt a sharp sting.

*Shit, he's biting me!*

Before the shock could fully register, the pain was already fading under the wash of pure, libidinous need. As the man sucked at his neck, Griffin groaned and thrashed beneath him on the bed. He knew this was wrong, knew now what he'd gotten himself into, yet couldn't resist the drug-like power of the man ... creature ... *man* who held him down.

Without thought, his hands came up to tangle in the stranger's hair, fighting between pulling him off and pulling him closer. Griffin's cock grew hard as granite. His balls tingled. He was terrified, but also more turned on than he'd ever been in his life.

And then it was over.

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The man pulled away, shoved Griffin back onto the bed, and, turning his back on him, strode to the door. But he paused for just a moment in the doorway.

Without turning around, he said, "You should go. Get away from me as soon as you're able." The words were soft, husky. Contrite almost ... but not quite. "You're safer away from me."

And then he was gone, slamming the bedroom door shut behind him, leaving Griffin reeling.

## CHAPTER 2

Jarrah slammed the bedroom door shut, stalked down the dark staircase, and finally ran out of steam at the entrance to the long-neglected dining room. If his heart could beat, it would be pounding right now. He still almost remembered how it felt—the throb inside his chest wall.

*Almost.*

Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against the door frame.

Guilt stabbed through him, even as his body still tingled with unsatisfied hunger. Of the sexual kind.

That should never have happened upstairs. He'd sworn to himself he'd never again take blood directly from a human. And he hadn't ... in years.

*But the boy ...* He huffed out a breath as he realized how stupid that sounded, since his guest was probably only a few years younger than he was ... at least in body. The young man stirred things in him. Things he didn't want to admit, much less allow himself to feel. And right now, with the human's fresh blood coursing through his veins, he felt it even more acutely.

"Should have left him in the alley," he muttered. "Simpler that way."

But the part of him down deep inside that was still human—or at least that still struggled with *wanting* to be human—knew he couldn't have done it. It would be so much easier if he could shut off his conscience like others of his

kind often did. But life, for some damned reason, was still precious to him.

Even after sixty-seven years of darkness, he couldn't quite fit into any world. His existence was a hellish half-life—forced to endure the constraints and feeding needs of a vampire, yet still feeling human emotions and desires on every level. He'd tried his damndest to shut himself off from them, locked away and isolated here in this house, only leaving when he absolutely required blood.

It hadn't worked though. Well, it had. For a good while. Until three nights ago, when he hadn't been able to mind his own business ... when the emotional human in him had grabbed the detached vampire by the balls and insisted on getting involved.

*Griffin Hilliard.*

The young man upstairs probably didn't even remember spilling his name. Probably didn't remember, in his half-dead, delusional state, babbling in his sleep about being hunted, about running.

A subject Jarrah knew all too well.

He hadn't been able to determine specifics about why the young man ran, but had gathered enough to know his family felt threatened by him. Threatened enough, apparently, to send assassins after him.

He'd seen enough depravity in the world to know loved ones could and did turn on one another. But family ... family wasn't supposed to do that. Family was supposed to be the one safe haven. With a painful jolt, he remembered his own family. Long dead now. His parents had truly loved one

another and their children. They'd been liberal pacifists and had raised their kids to respect life. All life. He couldn't imagine his parents ever turning on their children, nor could he fathom that he, his brother, or sister would ever have turned against each other. His brother...

Another jolt of old, dredged-up pain seared through his gut. His brother had given his life to save Jarrah's, and all for what? *Nothing. All for nothing.* He'd died and Jarrah had become little more than an animal, having to slink around in the dark and feed on human blood.

Jarrah dragged a hand over his eyes and pushed the memory back down into the hidden cave where he kept such things. The past was the past. And right now ... He glanced up the darkened stairs. Right now he had more immediate concerns.

He sympathized with Griffin—knew exactly what it was like to run. But it was more than his own damned need to play human and help, or the young man's ugly family situation that churned his gut right now. What was tearing him up inside was the way Griffin made him *feel*.

From the moment he'd seen the young man being attacked in the alley, old human emotions had churned to the surface and taken control of him. Something about Griffin had not only led him to kill, when he'd never believed he'd do such a thing again, but tonight he'd also taken Griffin's blood.

The younger man stirred up far too much confusion inside Jarrah. Bathing him, touching him, experiencing the sleek, firm heat of Griffin's responsive cock in his hand, smelling the scent of spent seed and the musky tang of continued arousal

had been almost more than Jarrah could stand. It had taken every ounce of his willpower to remain clinical and not give in to the completely asinine and unexpected urge to climb into bed with the younger man and just be close to him. Well, fuck him until they were both senseless, and then just be close to him. It had been a long damned time since he'd rested with a warm body in his arms all night. And he suddenly craved it with a painful intensity.

Something about his guest had torn open wounds Jarrah had thought were long forgotten, or at least long ignored. And it wasn't just the physical reaction Griffin inspired in him, though that in itself was more powerful than anything he'd experienced in decades. It was the emotional stirrings that bothered him most.

As he'd tended Griffin while he was unconscious and listened to his rambling, sometimes nonsensical, but almost always poignant talk, small cracks had begun to form in the armor Jarrah had erected around himself. Fine little cracks that very quickly began to fan out and split wider.

And that was something he couldn't accept.

*No more caring.* He'd lost more than his brother when he was made a vampire, and he knew from bitter experience he could never take a human lover.

*He's nothing like Daniel. Not in looks or personality. He might surprise you...*

*No. No more caring.* The inevitable pain would destroy them both. If there was even anything left of himself to be destroyed.

*Damn.* He had to get out of here for a while.

Night was falling and the power grid would go down soon, allowing the darkness of the city to cloak him. The long night hours stretched ahead of him. Plenty of time to walk off this weakness. To wash away the clinging odor of lust and attachment in the warm air.

"Goodbye," he murmured, looking up the dark staircase. By the time he returned, he was certain Griffin would be gone.

*Good.*

But as he slipped out the front door, a dull ache centered in his chest. And for a brief instant, he thought he felt a hot, thudding rhythm.

\* \* \* \*

When he returned at dawn, Jarrah made his silent way up the stairs to his bedroom. He didn't pause outside the guest room door or bother to open it. There was no point. The young man was gone. The terror in his eyes had guaranteed his departure.

Something tightened once again in his chest, but Jarrah ignored it.

*It's for the best.*

Tired, aching all over, he entered his room, closed the door behind him, pulled off his clothes, and slid between the crisp sheets of his bed. He didn't bother to check the window blinds. Careless, perhaps, but they were always shut, always taped around the edges to keep out any stray rays of sunlight. His room would stay dark even at midday.

*Always in the dark.* And he resented the hell out of it.

But for now, it swallowed him in its mind-numbing bliss where he didn't have to think. Or feel.

\* \* \* \*

Griffin sat on the edge of the bed, dressed in his jeans, which he'd found clean and folded on the dresser. His shirt was gone—maybe it'd been destroyed by the gunshot hole and blood. His shoes and socks sat next to his bare feet on the floor.

His stomach had been empty to the point he was almost sick when he woke up, so he'd eaten the soy-chicken soup—room temperature though it was—the vampire had left on the dresser last night. Only the wealthy could afford real meat any more; most people relied on soy and other vegetable proteins, and most foods were so heavily processed now there was little risk of food poisoning. Besides, he'd certainly eaten worse over the past few years. The soup and handful of stale crackers had made him feel better. More human.

He shook his head and groaned as the unintentional pun sank in.

The room was still stifling, even though he'd cranked open the window when he'd first dragged himself out of bed. Only a faint afternoon breeze fluttered the raised blinds; not enough to get any air circulating in the small room. Droplets of perspiration formed a fine sheen across his arms and chest, glistening under the dusting of dark hair.

Swearing under his breath, he pulled himself to his feet, steadying himself with one of the bedposts for a few seconds,



since after four days in bed his legs were shaky, then crossed to the window to try to capture a little more air.

He knew from looking out earlier the two-story brick house he was in sat on a good-sized lot of probably an acre or more. Assorted pine trees and a few straggling elms—all suffering symptoms of the long-term drought—dotted the grounds, half-hiding the house from the street. What had once probably been a lush green lawn was now little more than a dirt expanse dotted with tufts of brown grass. Yet, in spite of the yard's sad state, there was still an old-fashioned elegance about the place. From what Griffin could make out through the trees, it looked like the house was on a cul-de-sac and the grounds were surrounded by a tall, wrought iron fence. This had no doubt once been a fine, upscale neighborhood. But from a glimpse of the house on the next lot—falling apart and obviously abandoned—clearly time, the climate, and the economy had taken its toll on the area like it had most others.

Griffin wondered how the vampire managed to keep this place in good condition—at least on the inside—and how he had electric lights and water considering the decay of the neighborhood in general. And, odder still, how he had electric lights even when the power grid was supposed to be shut down. He'd discovered as much last night when the lamp on the dresser had burned all night. Did the house have a generator? If so, how could the vampire afford such a thing?

A sick thought crossed his mind. Maybe this wasn't the vampire's house at all. In his limited experience with vampires on the street, they were often opportunistic

scavengers, living in whatever empty spaces they could find and stealing anything they needed. Maybe his vampire had dined on the former wealthy owner and gotten him or her out of the way so he could use the house as a temporary place to stay.

Griffin shuddered.

But then the memory of the vampire's gritty voice as he left the room last night came back to him, telling him he should leave, that he'd be safer away from here. The words had implied the vampire had *some* level of concern for human life and didn't tend to go on blind, bloody rampages at a whim. Not only that, but if the vamp had wanted to drain him dry, he'd been easy prey lying in that alley. The vampire needn't have saved his life. That he did also implied he wasn't merely an animal. So maybe he hadn't killed the owners of this house. Griffin could only hope.

He paced back to the bed and sank onto it once more.

He'd tossed and turned for hours after the vampire had gone last night, his mind racing, his body thrumming. But not with terror as it should have been. Instead he'd had the boner from hell and the horny thoughts to go with it. And he'd damn well refused to relieve his own ache again and suffer any more humiliation.

Ever since he'd been here, in spite of his injury—which didn't hurt at all now, even when he was sitting up or moving around—his body had been on some kind of lust-driven overload. He knew about the highly addictive sexual stimulant drugs that had been popular back in the twenty-forties and fifties; they heightened nerve ending stimulation, sending

blood rushing to swollen sex organs. The drugs had been banned fifteen years ago because people were dying from, ironically enough, being too aroused, but he was sure they could still be had on the street if one wanted.

The vampire had said he'd given Griffin no drugs, but Griffin had to wonder. As he'd lain there suffering, he'd decided either the vamp had lied to him and he was jolted up on sex stims ... or the vamp was using his glamor on him, stirring his libido so he'd be willing when the vamp bit him.

Griffin had lived on the streets and used the dark as his personal shield for years. Which meant he'd seen things the average citizen probably didn't know. The first and most shocking discovery he'd made early on was that humans were *not* alone in this world. The first time he'd witnessed a vampire feeding off a human, he'd come across it unwittingly, in an alley not unlike the one in which he'd been attacked three nights ago. He'd thought it was a mugging. Until he felt the animalistic hunger pounding through the vampire, and had seen the blood on his mouth when he pulled away from his victim.

Terrified, Griffin had run. And run. Until he couldn't breathe.

But since then, over the years, he'd been exposed to similar scenes and, like everything else on the streets, he'd grown somewhat immune to it. Always aware and cautious about his own safety, but no longer shocked when he saw such things.

He knew vampires had the ability to lure their victims using a type of mind control. Glamor, he'd heard it called.

One of the reasons Griffin had always been able to avoid being a vamp's dinner up to this point was that he could usually feel the vampire, maybe read some of his thoughts, but definitely read his hunger in time to avoid the creature.

And that's what bothered him about this particular one, the one in whose house he slept. He couldn't feel him.

In retrospect he realized now why the man—vampire—had been able to overcome the attackers so easily, and why Griffin had seen such a feral gleam in his eyes as he did it. But he couldn't feel him, damn it. When the vamp had bitten him, he'd had no internal warning it was coming. He'd lived his whole life able to depend on that warning system. Discovering it wasn't as reliable as he'd thought was unsettling.

He should run now. He knew he should. And the vampire had told him as much. Yet here he sat, unable to even put on his shoes.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he demanded of himself.

*Tired of running.*

*Damn it.* He sighed and buried his face in his hands. He was tired of running.

Something had changed in that alley, something even before the vampire had appeared. *He'd* changed. Or maybe he'd been slowly changing for a long time now and that just happened to be the moment it crystallized. In either case, for the first time since he'd disappeared off society's radar, Griffin felt compelled to turn and fight rather than continue running.

The problem was ... he was ill-prepared to face such a fight. He'd spent his youth in boarding school, and after that he'd attended one of the few remaining upper-echelon universities ... all paid for by his wealthy father under the guise of giving him "the best education," while, in truth, he just hadn't wanted Griffin around. Griffin had a degree in molecular biology and plenty of academic honors to go with it—but that was certainly no help now. In school, he'd had his share of fights thanks to his "difference." Yet those had hardly prepared him for the ugly reality of having to live on the run as he'd been doing. He'd stayed alive mostly out of instinct and, eventually, a few survival skills he'd learned on the fly. Even those, however, wouldn't be enough to overcome his family's iron hand and their powerful connections.

So what the hell could he possibly do?

In a moment of inspired enlightenment, a kernel of an idea tickled at the edges of his mind, then slowly grew into a full-fledged thought. Maybe there was a way he could end this once and for all...

*Gods.* Did he dare? A shiver crept up his spine. If he could go through with it, it was the perfect solution.

But that was the big question. Could he go through with it?

It was broad daylight ... afternoon. If the vampire had returned, he was probably in his own room. He'd probably come in sometime just before sunrise, along about the time Griffin had finally drifted off into a troubled sleep filled with erotic dreams of cool, masculine hands stroking his cock.

He closed his eyes and shuddered with unfulfilled need even now. *Damn.* The vamp had a strong pull on him.

Still ... the vampire could be his ticket out of hell.  
*Or into it.*

No. Nothing could be worse than the way he'd been existing the past four years.

*Then do it now, before you change your mind.*

"Shit," he mumbled, raising his head from his hands to stare at the closed door. *How bad could it be?*

Taking a deep breath, he rose to his feet and grasped a bedpost for a moment. Then, letting determination fill his veins and give him strength, he crossed the room and opened the door.

A window with heavy drapes pulled over it was immediately to his left at the end of a hallway. Diffuse daylight seeped in around the edges, but offered little in the way of true illumination. Griffin started to open the drapes so he could see better, but paused with his hands on the brocade. Vampires couldn't do sunlight and the late afternoon sun could be detrimental to his rescuer should it touch him. Griffin's plan didn't involve killing the vampire.

Turning, he padded down the bare wood floor of the hallway, peering into the door directly to his right. *Bathroom.* Another door stood open at the head of the steps. It appeared to be another unused bedroom. The remaining door, on his left, was closed. *The vampire's room.* He was certain of it.

But before he dared to put his plan into action, he ducked into the bathroom to relieve himself.

When he'd finished, he washed his hands and splashed water on his face ... his paler-than-usual face, he noted, studying himself critically in the mirror. Dark circles curved

under his brown eyes, emphasizing just how white he was. For the past couple of years, he'd taken to sleeping during the day and moving around at night—it was safer that way. But the lack of sunlight had given him a ghostly cast, not unlike the vampire's.

The bite on his neck was red and sore, but not as obvious as he'd thought it might be. He tilted his head to the side to look at it more closely, seeing the two distinct holes where the incisors had pierced the skin. He hadn't noticed the vampire's teeth when they'd talked. They must only come out when he fed.

Returning his gaze to his face, he realized the dark circles and pale skin weren't the only evidence of his less-than-stellar life. Four days worth of scruff covered his cheeks and chin, and his brown hair straggled over his ears and well down his neck. It had been months since he'd had a haircut. The last one he'd gotten by making a trade with a woman in a shelter he'd stayed at for a couple of nights. His cheeks burned with heat as he remembered what she'd asked for—and gotten—in return.

No, nothing could be worse than living that way.

With that in mind, he left the bathroom and moved to stand in front of the vampire's door.

He wished he could feel him in there, read him. But clearly that was a luxury he wasn't going to get.

Steeling himself, Griffin turned the knob, which wasn't locked, and pushed the door inward enough to slide through the gap. The room was dark and he was glad for the streak of pale light from the hallway to find his way without tripping.

When his eyes had adjusted to the shadowy lighting, he was able to make out a large, low bed in front of him. And, as he drew closer, the general shape of a body reclined on it.

He walked in silence across the thick rug that covered the hardwood floor until he stood directly next to the bed. He heard no sound coming from the vampire, not even breathing.

Of course not. Vampires didn't breath. Did they?

*What the fuck am I doing?*

A shiver of raw terror slid up his spine, raising gooseflesh on his skin and weakening his earlier resolve.

But then his initial determination shored it up. *No. Do what you came here to do. It's the perfect solution.*

"The perfect solution," he whispered under his breath, needing to hear the words.

His hand shaking, he reached out to touch the vampire, who lay on his side facing away from Griffin.

But before his hand could make contact with the sheet-covered form, the covers were thrown off, the figure from the bed rose faster than was humanly possible, and Griffin found himself in a tight chokehold. His back was against the vampire's smooth, bare chest, and a terrifyingly strong arm squeezed his neck.



### CHAPTER 3

"What the hell are you doing here?" the vampire growled.

Griffin couldn't speak. The arm across his throat was cutting off his air. In a panic, he clutched at it, trying to pull it away.

The vamp must have realized why he couldn't answer because his grip loosened enough for Griffin to gasp in oxygen. But he didn't let him go.

"Explain yourself," he demanded in a rough-with-sleep, completely pissed-off voice.

Griffin coughed and tried to make his vocal chords work after the squeezing they'd just suffered. "I wanted to see you. T-Talk to you."

His head was pulled back until he was looking up at the vamp behind him.

"You're supposed to be gone."

Griffin swallowed hard and grimaced at the pain of the movement. "Well ... I'm not," he croaked.

In spite of the shadowed room, he could clearly see the intensity of the vampire's gaze, as if a phosphorescent light burned behind his eyes. The vamp glared down at him, then pulled Griffin's head back and to the side farther still, exposing his neck.

"You will go," he ground out, "...or pay the price for staying."

Griffin almost felt the vamp's hot breath against his skin. But, no, that couldn't be right, since, he reminded himself,

vampires didn't breathe. Still ... the sensation, whatever it was, sent a ripple of forbidden excitement through him. The vampire's presence had an electrifying effect on him, and he had to struggle to remember why he was here when suddenly all he wanted was to feel the vampire's caressing hands on him again, as they'd been the night before when he'd bathed him.

His eyes closed against the dangerous thought. Had he completely lost his mind? *Yes!*

"You're not scaring me," he managed to get out, even though, in truth, he was terrified.

There was a pregnant pause, and for the first time, he felt a flutter of the vampire's emotions.

Startled at the unexpected sensation, Griffin's eyelids snapped open and he stared up at the vamp, trying to get a bead on what the other man was feeling. It was a chaotic swirl of fragments, but with concentration, Griffin was able to pick up several identifiable emotions—surprise at Griffin's refusal to leave, confusion, guilt ... but underlying it all, a burgeoning arousal that overpowered everything else.

*Damn.* The vampire wanted him ... in a very sexual way.

He barely had time to register that thought when, instead of the neck-biting Griffin had been expecting, the vampire's mouth crushed down against his lips.

Shocked into momentary paralysis at the intimate contact, Griffin froze. But then, much to his utter surprise, he found himself responding ... and liking it.

It was a completely new sensation ... similar to kissing a woman, yet in some ways nothing at all like it. The vampire

tasted faintly of cinnamon and, unlike the women Griffin had kissed in the past, whose mouths were always soft and compliant, there was an insistent confidence, as well as an underlying power and dominance in the vampire's kiss. Their tongues slid together, exploring, until raw hunger consumed them and they thrust against one another in a hot, wet frenzy.

Griffin moaned. *Gods*. He wanted ... Wanted what?

He wanted to push the other man back onto the bed and grind his prick and aching balls against the other's, feel the hard press of their bodies locked in sweaty lust, and listen to the sound of that raspy, sexy voice against his ear until cum exploded from his shaft and coated them both.

*What the fuck ... ?*

As if the vampire had had the same thought at the same time, they pushed away from each other with a violent shove.

Breathing hard, his cock aching, his heart pounding, and his mind filled with churning confusion, Griffin turned around to stare at the vampire, who was completely nude but for a leather thong around his neck with some kind of pendant dangling from it. The sight of the vamp in the buff, in all his beautiful, lean glory, his lengthy erection bobbing against his flat abs sent another surge of desire through Griffin.

*No, no, no. Hell, no! This is not happening.*

But as suddenly as before, they moved back together and were kissing again, with the vamp's mouth devouring his, his tongue stroking the inside of Griffin's mouth, his teeth scraping his lower lip. Griffin slid his hands around to stroke the vamp's back and muscular buttocks, while the vampire

cupped Griffin's head with one hand and wrapped the other around his hips, pulling him tighter against him.

With his erection straining at the front of his jeans, and the vampire's prodding against it through the denim, Griffin had the desperate urge to strip the pants away so he could feel the other man's shaft against his own. Would the vamp be hot down there? Or cool, like his hands and touch?

*Shit! What am I doing? What the hell's going on?*

As if they were still thinking and feeling in sync, they pushed apart again, and stared suspiciously at each other like two fighters, each in his corner of the ring.

Griffin blinked as he watched the vampire, trying to guess his next move. This was not fucking normal. He did *not* get off on men.

*It's the drugs. Or the glamor.*

Yet, in the still roiling emotions he felt in the vampire, he had a strong sensation the vamp had told him the truth about the drugs. And, based on the vampire's shock at this turn of events, he couldn't help but think it wasn't glamor either.

But how could he be sure?

"Are you using mind control on me?"

The vampire's pale eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Are you making me feel this way, making me want you? With your glamor? Isn't that what vampires do?"

The vampire's face grew serene. His eyes, always seductive, suddenly seemed to pull Griffin more deeply into their gaze. A strange, fuzzy sense of relaxation swept over Griffin and his thoughts blurred. Uncomfortable, he tried to look away.

"Look at me," the vamp said.

Unable to resist, Griffin did as he was told, lifting his gaze back to the pale, almost angelic face. Nothing seemed to matter anymore, except staring into the other man's eyes forever and pleasing him. He floated on a cloud of bliss and peace.

With a jolt, all the warmth and contentment were stripped away and Griffin found himself once again standing in a darkened bedroom, facing a stranger, with the weight of his own existence burdening his soul.

"What the hell?" he whispered.

"That," the vampire said, his voice low and gravelly, "is what glamor feels like."

Understanding rippled over Griffin. His eyes widened. "Oh," he breathed.

But then ... if that was glamor, and he wasn't drugged, why was he feeling this way?

*Oh, damn.*

"You should go," the vampire rasped, but his tone was saying something else altogether.

"I know."

"Then do it. Now. While you still have the chance."

Griffin was sure the vampire was trying to make it sound like a threat, yet he didn't feel threatened.

He swallowed hard, trying to make sense of the churning in his mind and heart. No drugs, no mind control. Which meant ... *Oh, damn.* How was it possible? How could he be experiencing these feelings with such power when he'd never even suspected such a thing about himself?

"I don't want to go," he finally said, and realized it was true. He desperately wanted to understand how this had happened, and if he walked out now he wasn't sure he ever would. "I'm just ... I'm confused ... I feel..."

"Fuck." The softly muttered curse exploded from the vamp's mouth, but it sounded more surprised than vicious. "You've never been with a man before, have you?"

"No."

"Go. Go now." The vamp's eyes closed as if he were in pain. His shoulders slumped and he turned away from Griffin to stand silently by the bed. Loneliness pulsed off him in waves.

A welling kinship filled Griffin—loneliness was something he understood well—and a part of him wanted to reach out, commiserate, comfort. *Comfort a vampire? Are you insane?*

Yet he could no more control the instinct than he could control the beating of his heart. He moved up from behind and laid a tentative hand on the vamp's back.

The vampire's muscles tightened, but he didn't pull away.

"I don't even know your name," Griffin said.

A long pause followed his words, and he'd just decided the vampire was going to refuse to answer as he had last night, when he heard the softly mumbled, "It's Jarrah."

The raspy response sent a new flicker of heat through Griffin. That and the subtle scent of male musk that wafted off the vampire's skin. *Supple, soft skin...*

He let the name silently roll over his tongue. There was something strong, but also a bit exotic and untamed about it. Like the vampire himself.

"I'm Griffin."

His companion gave a single nod in acknowledgement.

"I've never been intimate with a man, never even thought about it before," Griffin admitted. "But ever since I first woke up, I've been feeling things..." He dragged in a deep breath and tried to ignore the warmth creeping up his face. In spite of his embarrassment at telling a stranger such personal details, he felt compelled to get it out because, in truth, he was scared, yet increasingly turned-on at the idea of being with another male. The close contact between them right now—his bare chest only inches from Jarrah's bare back—was heightening the sensation by the second.

"Being around you has made me question myself. That's why I thought I was drugged, and why I asked about the mind control thing."

"Because, God forbid, you couldn't believe you might feel desire for me without being under the influence of something." The low words were rife with accusation.

"No. I mean ... I don't mean that in a bad way. I'd just never suspected I could feel that way, I've never felt that way before, so I guess it was only natural for me to look outside myself for reasons."

A soft snort came from the vamp, and Griffin felt bitter disbelief shimmering off him.

"What I'm trying to say"—Griffin's arms, of their own volition, curved around the vamp's lean waist, and his palms settled against his flat abdomen, which contracted lightly at the touch—"is that, even though I know I should leave ... I find myself wanting to know more."

He'd never been the touchy-feely type, but exploring Jarrah seemed like the most natural thing in the world to do. He teased his fingers over the taut skin, tracing the muscular ridges and valleys, enjoying the sensation. Then, in a daring move he surprised himself with, he slid one of his hands lower, following the thin line of hair that began below Jarrah's navel until it disappeared into the nest of soft curls at his groin and the jutting shaft that rose from them.

Jarrah hissed softly at the contact, and Griffin thought he felt a faint tremble radiating off the vampire. Or maybe it was his own hands trembling. He couldn't believe he was doing this.

The vamp's cock was hard and sleek and too cool to be completely human. It felt like smooth marble, yet was still pulsing with life and barely restrained lust. Another contradiction Griffin found fascinating.

For the first time in his life, he wondered what it would feel like not only to touch and be touched by a man, but to be fucked by one. Would it hurt to be so intimately invaded? Or would the sensation of such sleek power impaling him overwhelm any discomfort or fears? His ass clenched in response and a mini-shudder rocked through him.

As he caressed Jarrah's cock with his fingertips, a soft moan escaped the vampire, and Griffin sensed a tremulous struggle in him—Jarrah wanted what Griffin was doing to him, wanted to touch back, but he fought it. Fought it why?

Griffin still couldn't read him clearly. Instead of being an open book of thoughts and emotions, which many people were to him, with Jarrah there was still very much that cool,



gray wall between them. Except now, Griffin could see colors, sensations, emotions flickering around the edges of it. It was difficult to get an accurate reading because he was only sensing bits and pieces ... sometimes coherent bits and pieces, but mostly disjointed.

Deciding to take Jarrah's reaction as a good sign, Griffin continued his exploration, even as he wondered again at his own daring in doing it. But in spite of the fact he'd never in his life thought about touching a man in this way, here and now, with Jarrah, he was struck again at how right it felt.

He was led only by his instincts and the knowledge of how he, himself, liked to be stroked. His fingers brushed over and around Jarrah's balls, lightly at first, savoring their full, rough texture and fleshy weight, then he cupped them in his palm, rolling them gently. His other hand wrapped around Jarrah's cock, eliciting another moan from the vampire. *No ... from the man.* He's still a man, Griffin realized. With a man's needs.

"Will you show me what it's like?" he asked, nervous at the thought of exploring this newly discovered craving in himself, yet tingling with excitement about it at the same time. "Will you show me how to be with a man?"

*This isn't what you came in here for.*

No, but right now, with his body thrumming, another man's rod hard and heavy in his hand, and his bare chest pressed against the sleek skin of masculine back, Griffin couldn't seem to focus on anything else. He vibrated with a deep-down hunger he'd never before experienced.

Jarrah turned to face him, forcing Griffin to release him.

"Let's be clear. I'm not using any kind of mind control to make you feel like this, to make you want this." Jarrah's forehead was furrowed and lines of strain etched the skin around his sensuous mouth.

"I know that now. I'm asking of my own free will. I want to understand why I feel this way."

Griffin felt a clear ripple of fear from the other man. Fear of ... was it caring?

Could this get any more bizarre? Griffin had always assumed vampires were merely blood-drinking fiends in human bodies. The ones he'd come across had given every impression of being exactly that. Yet everything he knew so far about Jarrah shattered that assumption. There was something very different about this vamp.

*Different.* That word again. Usually it was applied to him. "Griffin is different," he used to hear his mother say before she died, but always in a loving way. Not so from the dozens of teachers and counselors over the years. "Griffin Hilliard is different. Something's not right with that boy. Thinks he can read people's minds. Doing it for attention, no doubt."

Jarrah's shaking head brought Griffin back to the here and now.

"No. You don't know what you're asking."

"Maybe not. But I'm willing to take the risk."

"You don't understand. Vampires ... when we're aroused, we..."

"Bite?" Griffin supplied.

Jarrah's expression grew deadly serious. "Sexuality and feeding often go hand in hand."

"Okay. But even if you bite me, it doesn't mean you have to kill me, right? I mean ... you didn't before."

*Tell him what you want, what you came here for.*

*No. Not now. Later.*

"You're a fool," came Jarrah's rough response, "to ask for such a thing." Griffin caught a sense of desperate almost poignant longing in him.

"Maybe. But I can't help what I'm feeling right now. And you want it, too. I can tell."

Jarrah's eyes narrowed. "You know nothing about me."

"I know you want me as much as I want you." Griffin's gaze dropped to the vamp's well-endowed groin where his erection nodded its agreement. He shivered at the sight. *Shit, why does this turn me on so much?*

Jarrah's desire continued to eddy around him. Griffin felt another moment of hesitation in the vamp, and then, "You're a damned fool," Jarrah said again, shaking his head. "But clearly I'm an even bigger one."

In two steps he'd crossed the short space between them and unceremoniously jerked open Griffin's jeans.

Griffin's breath caught at the swift, sure movement, and his heart began to pound wildly. Was he really going to do this? Let a vampire touch him ... maybe fuck him?

But when his painfully hard shaft sprang free from its confinement, and the large, cool hand he'd had such erotic dreams about stroked it, a buzz of electricity shot straight up from his balls and spread into every portion of his body. A buzz of daring. Of illicit thrill. And, again, strangely enough, of rightness. What, at any other time of his life would have been

an awkward, uncomfortable moment—another man intentionally fondling his cock to bring him pleasure—wasn't awkward at all.

And when Jarrah's mouth found his again, invading with his tongue, delving deeply and thoroughly, Griffin felt a sense of belonging. As if all the sexual and intimate experiences he'd had up to now had merely been placeholders, a way to pass the time, until this man entered his life and showed him how it was really supposed to be.

Jarrah had unhanded him in order to work Griffin's jeans down over his hips, but continued to kiss him for several seconds longer. When he pulled his mouth away, he pushed Griffin's pants down to his ankles.

Griffin had to grasp the other man's shoulders to steady himself. His legs, still a little weak anyway, began quaking in earnest. When he was nude but for the bandage around his waist, Jarrah rose and stroked Griffin's stubbled cheek in a surprisingly gentle manner.

"Scared?"

Soft breaths huffed out of Griffin's mouth. "I'm ... nervous, I guess. But—unh!" Jarrah's thumb slid over Griffin's cockhead, massaging in the droplets of fluid that had already escaped his slit. "I'm—Damn." While the other man's hand continued to play gentle, erotic, teasing games with his shaft, his other had moved up and was pinching and tweaking one of Griffin's nipples. "I ... I can't think when you do that."

"Do you need to think when you fuck? Doesn't that defeat the purpose of what fucking's all about?"

Jarrah's voice did things to him that were downright indecent. The sound of it alone was enough to start the tingle of impending release building in Griffin.

His legs shook even harder.

With a gentle but firm hand on his shoulder, Jarrah pressed him to sit on the edge of the bed, then tugged Griffin's jeans off the rest of the way. "You're still not at full strength," he said, sinking to his knees on the rug between the younger man's spread legs, but never missing a beat with his caressing hand on Griffin's shaft. "Are you sure you want this? Absolutely sure?"

"Yes."

*Gods, yes.* Jarrah's touch was incredible. Griffin had never felt anything like it. Had never wanted anything more.

Or at least that's what he thought ... until the moment the other man's tongue rolled over the head of his cock.

"Oh-shit-oh-shit," Griffin gasped, his fingers digging into the edge of the mattress on either side of him as Jarrah's masterful tongue grated along the sensitive rim of his crown, looping over the head, then back to the underside.

When he released him, Griffin started to protest. But the words caught in his throat as the vampire, his gaze intense, cupped the back of Griffin's head in one hand and pulled him close, giving him an open-mouthed, demanding kiss. Griffin could taste himself on the vamp's tongue and a new shudder of excitement coursed through him.

Just as he was getting seriously turned-on by the thrusting, probing kiss, Jarrah switched again, lowering his head to Griffin's groin, giving it the same attention he'd been

giving his mouth. His tongue swirled around and around the underside of Griffin's cock and then he slowly closed his mouth over the entire head.

Griffin moaned at the sensation. *Fuck ... so good.*

Jarrah began a gentle motion that was a combination of swirling tongue and suction. As Griffin's pleasure grew and his moans came louder, the other man increased the pressure, sucking harder and harder until the sensation bordered on pain. Griffin's hands moved up to Jarrah's shoulders where his fingernails gouged ridges into them.

Just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, that he might scream from the intense stimulation, Jarrah released him and rose to recapture his lips. The teasing back-and-forth between groin and mouth kept Griffin on the edge, but wouldn't allow him to go over it.

Jarrah lured in Griffin's tongue, then sucked on it like he'd been doing his cock, with strong motions that had Griffin burning with need. His shaft ached to have the attention back on it, but the vampire studiously ignored it until, once again, Griffin was certain he couldn't take it anymore.

With impeccable timing, Jarrah pulled his mouth away. His lips traveled down Griffin's neck and the human wondered, in a foggy sexual haze, if Jarrah would bite him now.

But instead of the sting of teeth, he felt the wet heat of tongue stroking over his jugular, then up, where it traced around his ear and dipped inside it, exploring every curve and hollow. Again, he thought he felt the sensation of warm breath on his skin, which only fanned the flames of his lust even higher. His cock, still ignored, felt hard enough to burst

and wanted attention. But clearly Jarrah was in no hurry and was enjoying this slow, torturous pleasure.

"You're still shaking," Jarrah murmured in his ear. "Is it fear or desire?"

At Griffin's strangled moan, Jarrah pushed the tip of his tongue into his ear again and fucked it until Griffin mumbled soft cries. Then he whispered, "Maybe it's both. I'm a vampire. I could bite you right now, drain your blood, leave you for dead. That thought should make you tremble with fear."

A shudder wracked Griffin. He had utter belief the vampire could do such a thing, and he couldn't deny the possibility scared him. But he sensed Jarrah wouldn't really hurt him. Not permanently. There was something in him, some flicker of emotion, that made Griffin believe he didn't want to hurt him.

"Or maybe..." Jarrah's fingers moved to Griffin's nipples, finding them amidst the soft smattering of chest hair and tugging on them, rolling them, pinching them, while Griffin moaned and writhed. "...maybe you find my touch exciting. Maybe the idea of being with a vampire, or being with another man makes you hard and hungry for sex in a way you've never felt before."

The words were spoken in a low rumble against Griffin's ear, and each syllable sent new sizzling bolts of electricity through his balls and up his spine.

"Is that what it is, Griffin? Does my touch make you horny and eager to be fucked?"

"Unh!" Damn, he couldn't get words out.

"I'm going to suck your cock again now. Suck it until you beg me to let you come," Jarrah whispered. "I think I'm going to like hearing you beg."

For a man who was so stoic the rest of the time, Jarrah's sex talk was plentiful ... and hot as fucking hell. Dizziness assailed Griffin at the low-spoken words. Dizziness and raging eroticism the likes he'd never known before rolled over him. His eyes closed and he heard his own breathing escaping in frantic huffs from his dry, parted lips.

True to his word, Jarrah's strong, greedy mouth sucked up Griffin's swollen cock.

Within seconds, Griffin was shaking harder than ever, groaning, aching all over.

Firm fingers rolled and fondled his tightly pulled-up balls. And the vampire's tongue was doing things to him he'd never known could feel so amazing. Jarrah's fingers moved lower to the sensitive skin under his testicles. Light, unexpected brushes against his anus sent new jolts of lightning through Griffin. He'd never been touched there and the sensation was electrifying.

At the same time, Jarrah slowly swallowed more and more of Griffin's shaft into his mouth, taking him deep ... inhumanly deep.

Everything in Griffin's being zeroed in on that sinfully hot mouth and throat that enclosed his cock, and the teasing fingers that played him farther down. He grasped Jarrah's head and tugged it closer, wanting more ... craving ... damn, craving ... something.

"Please..." he groaned.



One slippery-with-saliva finger circled his opening, then pressed against it.

Griffin tensed, wanting it, but scared of it at the same time. He squirmed, trying to move away, but Jarrah wouldn't allow him to pull free. He held him in place with his mouth deeply seated on Griffin's cock and a strong hand on his hip.

The pressure increased, pushing slowly, slowly. His ring burned at the stretching and the unfamiliar invasion, and instinct caused him to tighten up and want to fight against it. But the deep strokes of Jarrah's mouth on his cock and the building tingle in his balls began to work their magic. Slowly, his contracting muscles relaxed and gave way. His squirming on the bed became more about seeking, intensifying the contact rather than trying to escape it.

Jarrah began a steady up and down sucking motion on his rod, taking him from root to tip and back again. Between that and the probing, twisting finger in his asshole, he thought he might come apart. He'd never been at someone else's mercy like this before. But what shocked him the most was that he liked the feeling.

"Please ... please..." he found himself babbling, begging. Please, what? some distant, still-functioning cell in his brain asked.

He bobbed Jarrah's head up and down, wanting more ... and more. Electric shimmers of release built within him.

He cried out when Jarrah's finger passed the last barrier of tight muscle and slid home, delving as deeply as it could into Griffin's clenching passage. When it curled inside him and rubbed his prostrate, white-hot flames ripped through Griffin.

Cum sizzled up his cock—he swore he could feel it burning him from the inside out as it raced up his shaft—and exploded in powerful bursts against the back of Jarrah's throat.

Jarrah never even gagged. Even when Griffin grabbed his head out of blind, impassioned instinct and thrust hard and deep. As Griffin groaned out his release, the other man swallowed every drop, and rode with him all the way until Griffin was spent.

When Jarrah freed his cock and gave one last lick to the ultra-sensitive tip, Griffin fell in an exhausted heap back onto the bed. His eyes closed as he tried to slow his breathing and the pounding in his chest.

The vampire pulled his digit out of Griffin's still-contracting opening. Moments later, he felt Jarrah's weight settle next to him on the bed.

"I told you you'd beg."

The husky voice sent a slow, deep tremor through Griffin, and all he could do was mutter an unintelligible moan of exhausted satisfaction.

A deep, rusty chuckle shocked him out of his languorous daze.

He opened his eyes to discover Jarrah reclining on his side next to him, his head propped on his hand, and the first ever smile Griffin had seen on his face. *Shit*. And he'd thought the man was arresting and sensuous before.

"Was it good for you?"

"You have to ask?" Griffin's throat was so dry his voice sounded as raspy as Jarrah's. He couldn't tear his gaze away from the lingering, soft turn-up of Jarrah's lips.

"You're a telepath," Jarrah said. It was a statement, not a question.

"And an empath." But then Griffin's eyes widened as the vamp's words really sank in. "How the hell do you know that?"

"I sensed something different about you before, and I suspected it from things you said. But just now, I tasted it."

*Tasted it? Okay, not even going to ask.*

"Is that why your family hunts you?" Jarrah continued.

Griffin's blood froze. "How do you know *that*?" Was the vampire in league with his father? Is that why he knew?

"You talk."

At Griffin's questioning look, he added, with another faint smile, "In your sleep. For three days."

"Oh..." Griffin breathed. What all had he said?

"Are they afraid of you?" Jarrah asked, his voice soft, almost as if he already knew the answer and understood.

Griffin swallowed hard. "Yes."

"Because they don't understand you?"

"No. Because they think I know things they don't want me to know."

"Do you?"

"No."

"Have you told them that?"

Griffin huffed out a bitter laugh. The old hurt and anger welled up in him, completely washing away any lingering glow from his orgasm. "Have you ever met my family?"

The question was rhetorical and Jarrah seemed to know it. But his gaze was open and intent, as if he had all the time in

the world to listen to anything Griffin wanted to say. And for the first time in four years, Griffin found himself trusting someone enough to pour out the story.

"When I was a little kid, my father pretended not to notice when I knew things I shouldn't. Whenever it came up and my mom tried to talk to him about it, he made light of it, calling it my 'overactive imagination.' When I was ten, my mom died and my father, with my Aunt Susanna's encouragement—she's my dad's sister—sent me away to boarding school. He was always too busy with his job for me to be home, so I was told. I stayed at school even during summers. The rare times I saw him, he would come to my school and take me to lunch or dinner and then he'd be gone again. By the time I was in high school, the visits grew farther and farther apart. He didn't even bother to attend my high school or college graduations." He paused and rubbed his eyes.

"When I finished my college degree, I went home that summer for the first time since my mom had died. I knew I wasn't wanted—as I grew older and my father realized my abilities were more than just imagination, he was uncomfortable being around me. I know that's why I was sent away and why he avoided me. But I was curious about the house where I'd lived with my mom, and a little curious about him, too. So I showed up unexpectedly. Even though it was a weekend, they were in the middle of some big business meeting at my father's office and I had to wait.

"My dad's the CEO of one of the largest privately owned electric companies in the country—government regulated, but still owned by my father and aunt, passed down from my

grandfather when he died. Right here in Delta Sector, in fact." Bitterness bled from Griffin's voice. "Money and power—of the domination kind, not the electrical kind—have always been the be-all end-all of my dad's universe. And now, as you know, electricity is a highly sought after commodity, so I'm sure he's in power-mogul heaven."

Jarrah didn't comment, but his gaze continued to encourage Griffin to talk.

"When my father and aunt returned home from their meeting and found out I was there, my aunt reamed out the household staff member who'd allowed me to enter the mansion. I heard the entire conversation through the closed door, and felt not only my aunt's fury, but my dad's anger as well, along with his unhappiness I was there. It pissed me off, so I split without seeing them. I hadn't found a place to stay, since I'd traveled in from the east coast and had assumed I'd be at my family's house, so I checked into a nice hotel, ordered room service, and charged it all to my father's account for spite. Not real mature behavior, I know, but I was hurt.

"That's how they knew where to find me. Late that night, they tried for the first time to kill me; it was supposed to look like an accident. I'd gotten up to go to the bathroom and only my ability to sense the danger coming saved me and I got away. I've been on the run ever since. Four years, four months, and twenty-two days."

"And your father thought you heard or sensed something that could be detrimental to his business?"

Griffin nodded. "Apparently enough to get rid of me permanently. He never bothered to discover the truth—that I can only read people who are in close physical proximity to me. Since I sure as hell haven't been around him, whatever dirty little secrets he has remain his."

The dark reality of his life settled back over Griffin like a thick, black fog. He closed his eyes and tried to blot out the pain, but his stomach roiled with anger and hurt.

"You need a shower," Jarrah said calmly, bringing him back to the here and now.

When Griffin mumbled a protest because he didn't want to move, Jarrah ignored it. "We both do. Come on." He rose from the bed and lifted Griffin in his arms, cradling him like a child.

Heat raced up Griffin's face and he tried to protest, feeling ridiculous being carried this way. But Jarrah silenced him with a kiss as he strode toward a doorway Griffin hadn't noticed before—another bathroom that was part of the master suite.

By the time Jarrah flipped on the overhead light and set him back on his feet inside a large, black-tiled, walk-in shower, Griffin's family-related unrest was once again in the backseat and he was amazed at how efficiently Jarrah had managed to bring him out of his funk. He discovered he was trembling from the sheer excitement of being so close to the other man. Between that and the fact he was still a bit weak-kneed from what had happened in the bedroom, he had to lean back against the shower wall to steady himself.

"Let's get this bandage off. You probably don't need it anymore."

Griffin gazed down at the white gauze wrapped around his middle. He felt no pain and had completely forgotten about it while Jarrah had ... Another flood of heat moved up his cheeks at the memory of exactly what Jarrah had done to him in the bedroom. At how he'd completely fallen apart—*begged*—just as Jarrah had predicted.

His shaft stirred and, much to his shock because he wouldn't have believed it was possible so soon, desire rose in him again.

He thought he saw Jarrah's lips twitch as he worked at unwinding the bandage, and his palm just happened to brush against Griffin's thickening cock on each pass around after that.

When the bandage was gone, Griffin stared in shock at the small, puckered, and already-closed wound a few inches to the left of his navel. "How can this have healed so fast?"

Jarrah shrugged. "Blow jobs aren't the only thing I can do."

The words were soft, and the gaze Jarrah raised to meet his was one of modest pleasure. It was so different from the vampire's usual commanding intensity, and from the dark loneliness he'd also displayed, that Griffin's breath caught. He stared at the man and burgeoning warmth spread through his chest.

But then Jarrah averted his eyes, breaking the moment. "It's something I knew how to do once," he mumbled, "but it doesn't serve me much purpose now."

"You saved my life." Griffin brushed his fingertips over the vampire's lean cheek. "To my way of thinking it serves a lot of purpose."

"I told you..." Jarrah's gaze locked with his once again, and it was back to the probing intensity that seared through Griffin. "...I'm no white knight. You know exactly what I am. Don't kid yourself into thinking I'm anything else."

"I know what you are. But I also know you're not like any other vampire I've met."

"And you've met so many of them?" The words were faintly mocking.

"Well ... no. Not up close and personal. But I know what I felt from the other vampires I ran across. I know what they were thinking, what drove them. I've never sensed that from you."

"You think because you can read minds—"

"And emotions."

Jarrah's blue-gray eyes narrowed. "...and emotions, that you're somehow an expert on me?"

"No," Griffin told him honestly. "I can't fully read you. You're ... walled off for some reason. But from what I can read, there's something different about you."

A tightening around Jarrah's eyes indicated Griffin had hit a nerve.

Jarrah turned away and stepped out of the large shower to discard the gauze. When he stepped back in, he said, "Don't presume to know me." His voice was grittier than usual.

"I don't presume anything."

"Good."



Jarrah's gaze roamed over Griffin, from his head, slowly down his torso, lingering on his groin, then studying his legs. Jarrah looked like he was ready to devour him. Whether in an edible kind of way or a sexual one, he wasn't sure. *Maybe both.*

Waves of hot need radiated off the vampire. He moved in close to Griffin, and his tone dropped to a throaty whisper. "I do know some things about you, though."

"Oh?" Griffin barely managed to croak out of his suddenly dry throat.

Jarrah's face moved in close to his and Griffin's lips parted out of instinct, since he felt sure he was about to be kissed. But the vampire didn't kiss him. Instead, he teased the tip of his nose along Griffin's jaw, up his cheek, then nuzzled the hair at his temple.

Excitement zinged through Griffin at the gentle, intimate touch and he closed his eyes, savoring it.

"You like it when I touch you," Jarrah rumbled, his mouth against Griffin's cheek. One cool hand caressed Griffin's now-exposed abdomen, while the other lightly fondled his balls. Griffin's cock gave a little leap of joy, proving the words.

*Damn.* He did like it. Liked it more than he'd ever liked anyone's touch. Liked it more than maybe he'd liked *anything* in recent memory. He squeezed his eyes more tightly closed and tried to concentrate on keeping his breathing even. But it was pointless—air already huffed out of him in soft pants.

"Were you thinking about me when you got yourself off in the bed last night?"

*Oh, gods.* The remembered humiliation at being caught masturbating surged through Griffin.

Jarrah kissed his neck, his collarbone. His tongue laved one of Griffin's nipples. "I'm going to bathe you again." His mouth moved back up Griffin's neck, then lingered by his ear. "But this time, I'm going to be more *thorough*."

As Griffin shuddered in response to the softly spoken words, he felt Jarrah reach around him. A blast of warm-almost-hot water hit him. His eyes flew open and he scrambled to move out of the way. But Jarrah curved his powerful arms around Griffin and settled him back against his chest, then turned him so the water sprayed directly on his groin.

The powerful flow of liquid stung his still-sensitive flesh, and he gasped and squirmed. But Jarrah wouldn't let him move. He anchored him in place with one strong hand splayed flat on Griffin's chest, while the other dipped lower to lift Griffin's cock more fully into the spray. Jarrah's hard shaft nestled into the crease of Griffin's ass, and at the same time, he kissed and suckled Griffin's neck from behind.

Griffin groaned. His head fell back to rest against the vampire's shoulder.

Jarrah angled him slightly away from the direct spray and picked up a bar of soap from a large shelf built into the wall. Griffin wasn't aware anyone still used such a thing; most people used liquid sprays now. But when Jarrah brought the slick, hard bar to Griffin's groin and slid it over and around his cock, he developed a sudden appreciation for the old-fashioned item. The clean tangy scent filled his nostrils, but it

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was the slippery pressure of the other man's hands that did him in.

Letting out a soft moan, he gave himself over to the new, erotic sensations.

## CHAPTER 4

Jarrah had quit trying to fight his intense attraction to the younger man. Not only was Griffin's beautiful, warm body an oasis in a long, dark, cold existence, but he continued to surprise Jarrah with his open willingness and honesty. He'd tried so hard to push the human away, yet the stubborn shit wouldn't have it. When he'd threatened and tried to scare him off, instead of running, Griffin had asked—of his own free will—to be led on a new and potentially dangerous adventure.

And so, like a fool, Jarrah had leapt. Maybe not head first, but leapt nonetheless. And he'd found himself drowning in the sheer, blissful sensuality of it ever since.

Now his biggest concern was making sure he didn't come to like the young man too much. Jarrah had to keep reminding himself that he could enjoy Griffin's body all he wanted, but he could not, under any circumstances, allow himself to become enmeshed in any kind of emotional entanglement. That included not getting involved in the younger man's issues with his family or coming to feel anything more for him than just physical need.

If he could keep it all about sex and only sex he'd be free to scratch his itch as much as he wanted, give the younger man the experience he wanted, and then they could both go their separate ways with memories of a pleasant few hours together.

But as Griffin writhed and moaned against him, a part of Jarrah knew it was already too late. He admired the younger

man's spirit, including his stubborn streak. And Griffin felt natural in his arms, full of life and radiating trust and genuine pleasure at their coupling. Something Jarrah hadn't experienced in a lover in too long to remember. He'd sought out sexual partners on occasion over the years—the kind that could be had for money—but the experience had always left him emotionally cold. Even as a human he'd never been able to give himself over to passion just for the sake of a great fuck. He'd always known and liked his partners ... or loved them. A painful knot formed in his chest.

*The past is the past.*

Besides, Griffin was nothing like Daniel. *Nothing like him.*

One of Griffin's arms came up and curled around Jarrah's neck, while the other grasped his hip. His touch, simple as it was, seared into Jarrah, jerking him out of the painful, old memories and back to the here and now with pounding need.

He eased the bar of soap up Griffin's abdomen, away from his groin, and Griffin groaned and clutched at him harder in protest.

Jarrah smiled. "Greedy thing, aren't you?"

"I liked it..." Griffin gasped.

"And you'll like it again. Eventually."

Using both hands, he soaped Griffin's torso, enjoying the feel of the soft thatch of hair on the younger man's chest against his fingertips. Then he worked on his arms and shoulders, and smiled again as Griffin jerked in ticklish reaction when Jarrah spread suds under his arms.

Finally, unable to ignore the growing vibration in the younger man's body—or his own—he replaced the soap on

the shelf and moved back to Griffin's groin, slipping both hands under his heavy sac. He was taller than the human by a few inches and over Griffin's shoulder could see the younger man's glistening, soap-covered, circumcised cock standing at attention. It was, in his opinion, just right—not too long, not too thick. *A perfect handful.* The head was a deep red, and veins bulged beneath the delicate skin of the shaft. He curled one of his hands around it and stroked upward until just the plump crown was in his fist. He gave it a gentle squeeze.

Griffin moaned and hips arched toward Jarrah's hand.

"You like that."

"Yessss..." the human hissed.

Jarrah squeezed again, a bit harder.

"Damn ... damn..." Griffin panted.

His ass squirmed against Jarrah's hard member, and for several moments, Jarrah had to use every bit of his self-control to keep from shoving the human face-first against the wall and plowing into his virgin passage, then pounding out his release until Griffin screamed. And then ... when they were both at their peak, overcome with lust, he'd bite into the pulsing jugular that promised sweet nectar and drink his fill.

*No! No more biting, damn it.*

Jarrah shuddered with barely restrained craving, willing his fangs, which had begun to let down, to retract. He found himself, instinctively, breathing in and out—even though his body no longer required the air to survive—much as he would have as a human, to gain control of himself.

When he had, he gave Griffin's cockhead another squeeze, then pumped it a few times, savoring the way Griffin jerked

and groaned when his grip dragged across the sensitive ridge of the crown. At the same time, Jarrah slid his own cock up and down the wet crease of Griffin's ass.

"You ... you..." Griffin stuttered.

"I what?"

"You're hard. It feels good."

"I imagine it does. Do you want it inside you?"

A shiver swept through the smaller man. "I ... think so."

Jarrah turned Griffin so he faced the wall. Another quick flash of his earlier vision shot through him—of Griffin pinned helpless while Jarrah fucked him hard and fast—but he tamped it down. He had other plans in mind. "You think so. But you're not sure?"

"I ... yes, I think I'm sure."

"I have no intention of fucking you until you really want it. Until you can ask me for it." He spread Griffin's arms and placed his palms against the wall on either side of his head, then pushed his legs apart with one of his knees until the younger man was spread-eagle. "But don't worry," he said against Griffin's sexy, roughened cheek, "you will ask. You'll beg."

Griffin's breathing came hard and fast, and he tried to turn his head to look at Jarrah, but Jarrah turned it back to the wall. "No. Be still. I like seeing you this way, spread open, waiting for me."

Griffin shuddered again.

"Does it feel good to have your cock pressed against the wall? If you rub it just a little, you might even be able to get yourself off."

He smiled as Griffin twisted slightly, trying it out. Then he put a stop to it by grasping Griffin's hips in his hands. "But you won't. Because I won't allow it." He licked the curve of the man's ear. "You won't come until I tell you to come. Isn't that right?"

"Fuck," came the ragged gasp.

Jarrah caressed the cheeks of Griffin's ass, then burrowed a finger into his slippery crack to play lightly against his opening. "I already told you, I'm not going to fuck you until"—he nipped Griffin's ear—"you"—his wet finger probed against the young man's spasming ring and forced its way a couple of millimeters inside—"beg."

Griffin bucked against him and a strangled cry escaped his throat.

"I want to hear you beg me for it. Until then, you'll stand here and do as you're told. Understood?"

"Fuck you!" The words were spat out, but Griffin's entire body shook, his eyes were tightly closed, and he didn't move out of the position Jarrah had made him assume.

Jarrah grinned. He really, really liked this young man.

*Too much.*

He sobered quickly. *It's just about the sex. There's nothing wrong with enjoying the sex.*

With that thought firmly in mind, he stepped back to admire the view of the human's spread body. Griffin's dark hair, damp from the steam, curled slightly against his neck—not really long, but looking in need of a good trim. His shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist and thin hips. His legs were lean, yet muscular in a wiry sense, and covered in



the same dark fuzz as his chest. Jarrah's gaze moved back up to his ass. *Damn*. And a nice, firm ass it was, too.

Just the edge of the water's spray misted over Griffin's back and droplets glistened on his skin, making him look good enough to lick. Devour.

Picking up the soap again, Jarrah lathered it up in his hands, then spread the fresh-smelling foam across the younger man's shoulders, taking his time, massaging it into his back, over his ass, his legs.

Griffin stayed still, but his body surged with an occasional ripple and Jarrah could hear him panting.

His human was horny as hell, and the prolonged and platonic washing was making him crazy. Jarrah didn't have to be a mind reader like Griffin to know that.

He lifted the removable shower head off its bracket on the wall and wet Griffin's hair. Again, he took his time rubbing shampoo through the dark waves and massaging his scalp.

"Damn, that feels good," Griffin sighed.

When he'd rinsed him, Jarrah hung the shower nozzle back up, and aimed it so it was more directly hitting Griffin again. The warm spray pulsed off his backside, and the sight sent swells of eager horniness through Jarrah. Again he had to fight the urge to take Griffin here and now.

He moved up against him, pressing the length of his body to the younger man's.

Griffin tried to arch back to get closer. Another smile curved Jarrah's lips. Then he shook his head in wonder. He'd smiled more in the past couple of hours than he had in probably the entire past two decades.

*It's him. He feels right.*

"Do you feel better? Cleaner?" he asked, nuzzling the young man's neck.

"Yes."

"You have a beautiful body. Has anyone ever told you that?"

Griffin shook his head.

"You do." He slid his palms down over Griffin's torso, delighting as yet another tremor rattled the human. He curved his fingers around the smaller man's hips and pulled him tightly back against his own groin. Griffin groaned and Jarrah had to bite his lip to keep from doing the same.

"How's your cock doing?" He reached around with one hand to fondle it, discovering it was even harder than before and pulsing in his hand. "Ah, it wants something, doesn't it?" Jarrah teased his thumb over the plump head and slit, then let it go. "But it's going to have to wait."

Griffin made an unintelligible sound of frustration in the back of his throat.

Jarrah spread Griffin's legs even farther apart and pulled his feet out from the wall so he was at an angle, his beautiful, pale-skinned ass jutting out and asking for attention. His own cock jerked at the sight.

Reaching toward the shelf built into the shower wall, he picked up a tube of gel. The younger man had never been penetrated before, and as eager as Jarrah was to delve into such tight, virgin heat, he had no desire to hurt Griffin. It would be much more pleasant for Griffin if he were worked up to taking something the size of Jarrah's shaft.

He knelt on the floor of the shower just behind the young man and set the tube next to him. "You have a fucking beautiful ass," he murmured. "I'm going to enjoy showing you how much pleasure you can get from it."

Using his palms, he spread the pale globes apart and gazed at the tight, quivering ring between them.

"Did you know you have nearly as many nerve endings in and around your anus as you have in your cock? That's why, when you're relaxed and turned-on, it feels so good to be touched back here." He brushed his thumb over Griffin's clenching opening, getting exactly the reaction he'd expected to—a groan.

"There are many ways to make it feel good. This is one..." He slid the tip of his tongue over it.

Griffin jerked, and Jarrah winced as the young man's head banged against the wall. But when Griffin moaned, "Fucking hell," and moved quickly back into place, Jarrah knew he was okay. And clearly eager for more.

With a smile, he gave Griffin his first lesson in the glories of anilingus. He teased and circled the pulsating opening, then probed deeper until Griffin shook against him, mumbling incoherently, and finally thrusting his buttocks back against Jarrah, asking in the most primal way for Jarrah to enter him.

When he was sure the younger man was primed, Jarrah paused and found the tube of gel. He squeezed a generous dollop on his fingers.

"Don't stop ... please, gods, don't stop," Griffin begged.

A soft warmth spread through Jarrah's chest at the sound. The urge to make this the most mind-blowing experience of

Griffin's life filled him. But he couldn't kid himself—it was well on the way to becoming an amazing memory for him, too.

When he spread the man's cheeks once again and spied the wet, fluttering folds of virgin ass, a powerful spasm shook his own body. *Damn*. "Sexy as hell," he murmured.

With one hand on Griffin's hip, spreading his cheeks apart, Jarrah used the other to rub the slippery gel over and around Griffin's opening, then pressed his middle finger against it.

Griffin's response was hard and instantaneous. Before Jarrah could stretch the opening and take it slow, Griffin had rammed back on his finger, impaling himself all the way to Jarrah's palm.

Jarrah shook at the younger man's eagerness. It was more than he ever could have hoped for.

"It's good for you then?" he asked, trying to not to let his words sound as shocked as he felt.

"Yes. Fuck, yes!"

Jarrah worked his finger around inside the blistering-hot passage, massaging the clenching inner ring of muscles, relaxing it. Then he slowly eased a second finger inside. He paused for a few moments, letting Griffin's body adjust to the new addition and waiting for the muscles to ease up and accept him. Then, ever so slowly, he swirled and twisted both fingers, spreading them apart to stretch and open him. Griffin bucked and moaned at the attention. But when Jarrah began to push his fingers in and out, grating gently on each pass against the young man's prostrate, the moans turned to sobs, and the bucking turned to intense shivers that wracked the smaller man's body.

*Good God.* Griffin's response, so uninhibited and vulnerable, had Jarrah's cock throbbing. But it also formed a large knot of emotion in his throat. As he did on occasion, he thought he felt the skitter of a heartbeat in his chest.

"Please," Griffin cried. "Jarrah, please ... I need ... need..."

"What, Griffin?" Jarrah could barely get the words out past his tight throat.

"...need ... you ... need ... something..."

Mindless of anything but those soft, panted cries, Jarrah pulled his fingers out and quickly coated his cock with the lubricant. At this moment he couldn't thank God enough that he didn't have to pause and scramble for a condom like he would have in his human days. As a vampire he was immune to any human sexually transmitted diseases, but it didn't matter anyway because now all humans were vaccinated at birth against a broad spectrum of them—everything from herpes to HIV.

Steadying Griffin's hip with one hand, he used the other to guide his throbbing cock to the delicate opening.

Griffin's hands on the wall were pressed so tightly against it they shone white. His eyes were closed. Water droplets glistened on his body mixed with what Jarrah knew was also a fine sheen of sweat. Steam rose around them, closing them off from the outside world.

Jarrah struggled to maintain control, to keep from shoving his bulging shaft hard and deep into Griffin's body. *Slow and easy.* It had to be this first time. His cockhead eased through the outer ring of muscles, and Jarrah paused to give Griffin's passage a moment to adapt. Then he probed deeper, feeling

the tight ring of inner tissues forcing against him. Pulling Griffin close, he massaged his back and hip, then curved his hand around to massage Griffin's rod and hard, tight balls.

"Your ass feels magnificent clenching around me," he groaned.

"Jarrah," Griffin cried, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper. "I..." His body gave a quick, violent convulsion.

"...more ... want it all. Fill me ... please..."

Jarrah shook his head in wonder at the young man's openness and another flare of warmth filled his chest.

"Gods ... please!" Griffin begged, thrusting his ass back hard.

Jarrah's fangs began to let down as the scent of sexual musk and blatant lust filled him. He couldn't stop them this time. Grasping Griffin's hips in both hands, he held him in place and, with a brutal thrust and a tortured grunt, plowed the rest of the way into the volcanic heat of Griffin's convulsing tunnel.

"Oh gods ... shit ... shit!" Griffin cried.

Jarrah knew he was stretching his lover's opening in a way it had never been stretched, knew his entry had been less than gentle, but now that he was in, raw instinct took over and he couldn't have stopped if he tried. He slid his cock out a few inches, then shoved it home again, deeper still, eliciting a strangled sob from Griffin.

"Good God in hell," Jarrah groaned, not in much better shape.

He began a series of quick, deep thrusts that shoved Griffin forward until his cheek was pressed against the tile.

Jarrah could see his eyes were squeezed tightly closed and his mouth was open as ragged sobs escaped it each time Jarrah surged into him. Griffin was shaking so hard now a ripple of concern shot through Jarrah. Jesus, the last thing he wanted was to hurt him.

He paused. "Are you okay? Do you need me to stop?"

"No!" It was nearly a shout. "No ... no..." His ass wiggled against Jarrah's groin, sending a new flare of fire through Jarrah's body. "...need you, Jarrah. Please. I'll always need you now ... never be the same."

Raw emotion hit Jarrah with the ferocity of a firestorm, then dispersed in curling tendrils in his chest.

In that moment, he knew he was lost. Well and truly lost. He recognized the tender emotions that filled him, things he'd thought he'd never feel again.

*You barely know this young man. You're a damned fool.*

He was. And he didn't want to be. But it seemed some higher power had other ideas.

"Please," Griffin begged again. "Please, Jarrah."

Knowing he might regret it later, Jarrah let go of his control, and gave himself over to the sheer, glorious pleasure of mating his body and his growing emotions with Griffin's.

He renewed his thrusts, going slow for the first couple, but then quickly losing even that tiny bit of control until he was pounding hard into Griffin's hot passage. Lost though he was in his own impending gratification, he wanted to make sure Griffin found the ultimate pleasure as well. He held Griffin's hip in one hand, and with the other claimed the man's cock. Griffin's shudder at the touch filled him with satisfaction. He

stroked the younger man hard, not trying to be gentle. He found a rhythm between the deep thrusts in Griffin's ass and the forceful jerking motions on Griffin's shaft.

A sharp ache began in his own balls and Jarrah knew he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. But it was important to him that Griffin climax first and fully. The younger man was a writhing mass of trembling muscle and whimpered cries.

"Feel my cock inside you, in a place no one else has ever been?" Jarrah rasped, grinding his groin hard against Griffin's ass. "Feel my hand mastering your prick? Right now, you belong to me and only me."

"Yes," Griffin sobbed. "I want that."

"Good. I want you to come now. Right now," he ordered. "Do it!"

With a savage convulsion, Griffin shouted in pained triumph as semen exploded from his cock, shooting against the shower wall in a powerful blast, coating Jarrah's hand, dripping onto the floor.

"That's it," Jarrah crooned. "Let it all out. Give it all to me, Griffin. Never hold anything back from me."

And Griffin didn't, continuing to convulse and erupt longer even than Jarrah would have expected. The younger man was a glory of sensuality.

When Griffin had finally spent his last, Jarrah gave his softening cock a final squeeze. "You are a wonder," he said, pressing a kiss to Griffin's neck.

Then his hand returned to the slim hip in front of him, anchoring Griffin in place. His own body was already



humming with imminent release. "And now I'm going to fill you with my cum. And for the rest of your life, you're going to remember I was the first."

Giving himself up to his own pleasure, he delved hard and fast into Griffin's sizzling and still contracting ass. The heat and the tight, squeezing glove that swallowed his cock brought him to the edge in seconds. The younger man's cries and answering thrusts back against him put him over it. With a fierce growl that quickly became a groan, he shot his own release deep into his lover's body, savoring the aching burn as each explosion bathed the passage that held him as no other ever had.

Even as his body lost all control, he still managed to maintain control of the beast within him. He hungered for a taste of Griffin's hot, sweet blood, made even sweeter by his recent sexual release. With a shudder, he fought it back. *No. Never again.*

With a final groan and thrust, he expelled the last of his seed. But he continued to hold Griffin's ass against his groin for several moments, enjoying it as long as possible. Eventually, though, he knew it was time to withdraw.

He eased his shaft free of Griffin's still clutching inner muscles. "Shhh, try to relax ... it's okay," he murmured.

The younger man groaned as Jarrah's bulbous cockhead stretched inflamed, well-used tissues on its exit.

"I'm sorry. I know it's tender." Jarrah winced, not wanting to hurt him, but the first time, when the natural anesthetic of blind passion wore off, it was often sore afterward.

He lifted the showerhead and rinsed Griffin and himself, then shut off the water and dug on the shelf again until he came up with a jar of herbal balm he knew would be soothing. Griffin hadn't moved, was still leaning against the wall at an angle, eyes closed, gasping in deep breaths. Jarrah scooped out a small portion of the balm and, with light touches, smoothed it over the young man's red, sensitive opening. "This will help."

Griffin moaned softly and his ass twitched, almost as if, in spite of the pain, he could still get turned on again.

"You're fucking amazing," Jarrah said softly.

Finished, he returned the jar to the shelf, then wrapped his arms around Griffin and pulled him up, intending to let him lean back on him for support. The younger man felt limp in his arms, completely spent.

But as Jarrah was drawing him back toward him, Griffin turned to face him. His brown eyes swam with emotion. "Need you," he whispered. "Only you." He grasped Jarrah's head and much to Jarrah's shock, pulled him down into a deep, emotionally charged, open-mouthed kiss that went on and on.

All the tenderness Jarrah had experienced earlier returned tenfold. It was joined by a protective hunger—the need to hold Griffin like this always, to be there for him, keep him safe and happy. And to allow Griffin to make *him* happy.

*God in hell. I'm so lost.*

When Griffin's legs gave out, Jarrah scooped him up in his arms. He seated him on the commode only long enough to

rub Griffin and then himself dry with a soft towel. Then he carried the younger man back to bed.

It was hot in the room as always, though it seldom bothered Jarrah. His body wasn't dependent on an internal thermostat like a human's.

Griffin gazed up at him in the semi-darkness.

"I can see you so clearly now," he whispered, reaching out a hand to stroke Jarrah's cheek. "Even though it's dark in here. Why?"

Jarrah smiled. "My semen's not exactly human. It's giving you a buzz, giving you a small dose of vampire power. You'll probably find your sense of sight, smell, and hearing heightened for an hour or so."

Griffin stared at him in wonder. And for the first time since he'd been made vampire, Jarrah felt a moment of appreciation for his preternatural powers.

Griffin fingered the circular jade pendant that hung from the leather thong around Jarrah's neck. "The peace symbol?"

Jarrah nodded. "It was a gift from my mom a long time ago, when I was human. Is it too hot in here for you?" he asked, brushing strands of damp, dark hair off Griffin's forehead. In spite of the shower, a fine layer of perspiration was already forming on the young man's skin.

"Yeah, maybe," Griffin whispered.

Jarrah looked at the clock next to the bed. The sun had set a few minutes ago. He rose, and for the first time in the twenty-nine-years he'd lived in this house, he pulled away the tape around the blinds, raised them, and opened the window.

A soft evening breeze fluttered against his skin.

He climbed onto the bed with Griffin and tugged him against him so they were facing one another on their sides.

"You already slept all day," Griffin said apologetically. "I slept today, too. I don't know why I'm so weak and tired."

"You were shot four days ago. You still aren't back to full strength. And that's not mentioning the strenuous activity you just participated in." A gentle smile curved Jarrah's lips. It felt strange and still a bit rusty ... but good.

Griffin blushed. "What happened between us..."

"Yes?" Jarrah prompted, finding his hesitation endearing.

"I never knew..."

"How good it could be?"

"I've never experience anything so..." A tremor shook his lithe body.

"You liked it."

"Gods, yes." The words were breathed out more than spoken.

"I'm glad you and your gods approved." Another smile teased at Jarrah's mouth. Damn, he must be setting some kind of record.

Griffin tilted his head slightly and his expression grew curious. "I've heard you refer to God. Singular. Most people don't use that expression anymore."

"When I was human, people weren't afraid to refer to their deity of choice. It wasn't until later the pressure became intense to make language 'politically correct' and drop all references to specific deities in order to make the masses feel like they were being inclusive. The way I feel about it is that either you believe in God or some other deity or you don't. I

think people should say what they mean. Using 'gods' the way you use it is nothing more than a politically correct cop-out."

"You really are different."

Jarrah shrugged. "I am who I am."

"You didn't bite me," Griffin said softly.

Jarrah felt the urge to drag in a deep breath, and did, even though it served no purpose. "No."

"Why not? You said sexuality and feeding go hand in hand." His forehead creased as if a thought had just occurred to him. "Do I taste ... bad?"

The question was hesitant, and Jarrah felt Griffin's embarrassment that he might somehow not measure up.

Another breath of air entered Jarrah's little-used lungs. He closed his eyes against the memory of Griffin's blood. "You taste extremely good."

"Then why?"

Jarrah opened his eyes to find Griffin's gaze on him. Something more than mere curiosity was driving the younger man's words.

"I don't drink from humans."

Griffin's eyes widened. "So, like, what? You feed off animals or something?"

Jarrah grimaced. "God, no. Vampires can't exist on animal blood alone. We have to have human blood."

"But you just said you didn't drink human blood."

"No, I said I don't drink *from* humans. There's a difference."

"So what do you do? Where do you get it from?"

"Do you ever get tired of asking questions? Enough of this. I didn't bring you to bed to discuss vampire dining habits."

Jarrah kissed him. Almost as much to shut him up and change the topic as because he just plain old craved the feel of the human's mouth again. Griffin's willing tongue stroked against his, filling Jarrah with another flare of contentment.

They kissed and fondled for several long minutes, until Griffin had to pull free for air. As he dragged in shallow, panting breaths, Jarrah nuzzled his neck. He felt the steady pulse against his lips, could almost smell the blood through his warm skin, and once again the urge to bite, to take what he wanted reared up in him. And once again, he successfully shoved it back down.

Griffin arched his neck as if in invitation, causing Jarrah's control to waver for an instant. But then he mastered himself.

"Do it," Griffin breathed.

"Do what?" Jarrah rumbled against his neck, continuing to rain kisses just beneath his ear. "I'm not sure your body's up to taking me in it again so soon, Griffin."

"No, not that ... I mean, yes, that eventually, yes! But I meant ... uhhh!" Jarrah had moved lower, to press small nibbling kisses in the sensitive hollow between Griffin's neck and shoulder, and his fingers had just begun tweaking one of Griffin's pebbled nipples. "Oh, gods ... God ... gods ... when you do that it just feels ... unh! Oh ... yeah ... good!"

Jarrah chuckled, feeling pretty damn good himself again.

"But ... b-but that's not what I meant. I meant ... bite me."

"I told you, I don't feed from humans. What happened last night was a fluke. I was trying to scare you away."

"You didn't."

"I noticed."

"I want you to bite me again, though. I-I really want you to."

Jarrah stared at the younger man. For the first time since he'd caught Griffin in a chokehold when he first entered the room, Jarrah smelled his fear. "Why in hell would you want me to do something you're so clearly afraid of? Why in hell would you want me to bite you, period? If it's a little pain with your pleasure that you want, there are other much more pleasurable ways..."

Griffin shuddered and this time Jarrah smelled a new upsurge of lust mixed with the fear.

"You like it hard? Is that it?"

"No! I mean ... I haven't ever really had sex like that ... hard, with p-pain, so I don't know if I like it or not. But that's not why I want you to bite me and feed from me."

Jarrah propped himself on his elbow. "Okay, I'm listening with rapt attention. Let's hear it."

Griffin drew in a ragged breath. Then another. Steeling himself for something, Jarrah thought.

"My father wants me dead."

"I noticed. But no one's going to hurt you here."

"I ... it's not that. I'm tired of running. I'm tired of having to live on the streets and always be looking over my shoulder. I want it over."

*Fuck.* Jarrah felt a tightening in his chest. Here it came. Griffin was going to ask for his help and even though he should be horsewhipped for thinking it, he strongly suspected he wouldn't be able to say no. And then he'd be involved. And that was something he'd always wanted to avoid. *Wasn't it?*

"I'm not strong enough to fight my family," Griffin was saying. "They have a lot of power, a lot of money, and a long reach. I can't fight them like this. The way I am right now."

"Naked in my bed?"

"No!" Griffin blushed, but his gaze was serious. Too serious. "I can't fight them ... as a human."

Jarrah arched an eyebrow. "Not following you."

"I'm too vulnerable. Too easy to find, too easy to kill. But ... if I were like you ... then maybe I could fight them."

"Like me?" A nasty ache settled in Jarrah's gut and he had a sudden sick feeling he knew where this was going.

"If ... well, if you turned me, made me a vampire, then I could fight back."

Jarrah opened his mouth, but Griffin rushed on, cutting him off before he even spoke. "I'd be physically strong, like you are, and I could kill the assassins myself. I wouldn't be able to be killed like a regular human. And they'd have to fear me, right? I mean, people are afraid of vampires, of what they're capable of. And then I wouldn't have to live on the street anymore. I could find some nice abandoned house like you did and take it over, settle in one place. All I'd need is for you to drain me almost dry, then I would need to take some of your blood, right? Isn't that the way it works?"



Tremors of shock and pain rolled through Jarrah, building in strength by the second. "Killing. Intimidation. Stealing. Is that what you think my life is all about?"

"I..." Griffin's brows furrowed. "I guess I don't really know."

"You know nothing," Jarrah spat. "You know nothing at all about me. You presume far too much, Griffin Hilliard."

"H-how do you know my last name?"

"You talk in your sleep, remember? How long have you been planning this?" Jarrah said around the squeezing pain in his chest. "All day? Is it why you came in here and woke me?"

"Yes," Griffin whispered. "I wanted to ask you if you'd do it ... Will you?"

Jarrah knew he'd been a damned fool. To trust. To believe. *For even a moment.*

Unable to get out any words that wouldn't be purely vitriolic, he rose from the bed and crossed to the dresser, where he opened drawers and pulled out clothes in a numb, mindless fog of hurt and fury.

"Jarrah?"

He felt the imaginary throb of a long-dead heart banging inside him as he stabbed his legs into a pair of dark jeans and tugged on a shirt.

"Jarrah?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Griffin rise to his knees on the bed.

He pulled on socks, slid his feet down into his black boots, and laced them up with methodical precision.

"What's the matter? What'd I say?"

Finally, Jarrah spun around and stared down at the naked human, taking in his wide, haunted eyes.

"The matter," he ground out, "is that you used me. You came in here and played a game to get what you wanted, and now you've been caught."

"What?"

"Did you read my sexual hunger for you and figure you'd take advantage of it? Did you think if you slept with me it would soften me up and I'd agree to turn you?"

"No! I hadn't even thought about—"

"Let me make this crystal clear. I would *never* turn you. Whether you played your little sex game with me or not." He pointed a finger at the bedroom door. "Get out. Now."

Griffin's dark eyes widened. "That's not the way it was at all. Yes, I came in here to ask you to turn me, but the rest of it ... the intimate stuff ... that just happened."

"Nothing ever 'just happens.' I've been around a far sight longer than you have. Don't play me for a fool."

"I'm not! Jarrah, I swear, I'm telling the truth." Panic laced Griffin's words. He scrambled to his feet, but he had to clutch the bed to steady himself.

Jarrah looked at him in disdain—hating him, but hating himself more for thinking ... well, for thinking things he shouldn't have damn well been thinking in the first place.

"Clearly you're in no shape to go anywhere right now," he said, letting his contemptuous gaze roam up and down Griffin's body. "Since I can't stand the sight of you any longer, I'm leaving. When I get back, you'd better be gone from my home—and, yes, shocking as you may find it, it is

my home, not some place I stole. And I mean it this time ... if I find you here when I get back there won't be anything left for your father's men to scrape up..."

He left the threat hanging in the air as he spun around and stalked toward the door.

"Jarrah!" Griffin's voice was rife with confused anguish. "Please! Don't leave. I didn't set anything up. What happened between us was..." His voice caught. "Damn it, it wasn't a game."

Something deep in Jarrah heard the quiet, honest desperation in the words, but with the younger man's betrayal fresh and bitter in his mind and soul, he ignored it.

Why did it always have to end in betrayal? *Just like Daniel.*

Sick at heart, he ignored the pleading man behind him and stalked down the stairs to let the dark of night swallow his pain.

## CHAPTER 5

Griffin heard the door downstairs slam before he could even move.

"Jarrah," he whispered, the single word raw in his throat.

He'd never catch him, and knew the other man wouldn't listen even if he did. He sank back onto the bed. How had it all gone so wrong? How had he managed to fuck everything up so badly without even understanding how it'd happened?

He'd know there was always a possibility Jarrah would say no to his request. But he'd never in a millennium expected such a cold, violent reaction. And certainly not after what had transpired between them.

During their intimacy in the shower, there had been moments when Griffin could, at last, experience Jarrah's full emotions and had even begun to pick up flickers of his actual thoughts. He'd felt his surging lust, but also tenderness, protectiveness, as well as Jarrah's surprise that he was experiencing the softer but powerful feelings at all.

Yet the moment he'd asked Jarrah to turn him, the vampire's walls had gone back up—as thick and impenetrable as when he first woke up to find Jarrah at his bedside. Something about the request had clearly crossed an unspoken boundary of some kind for Jarrah, enough that he'd shut Griffin out—and kicked him out—with an icy tone that had frozen Griffin's heart.

A deep-down jolt of pain tore through him as memories of everything Jarrah had done to him flooded him, and he

groaned and closed his eyes. He'd been shocked not only at his response to Jarrah's touch, at how natural it had felt and how much he'd loved being close to him, but at his own intense emotions as well. He'd never experienced anything like them before. He'd known Jarrah such a short time, yet he felt as if he'd always known him, as if something deep inside him had recognized Jarrah from the beginning.

A wet, hot streak slid down his cheek and he brushed it away with the back of his hand, ashamed of himself. Not for giving himself over to the unmitigated physical pleasures of another man's, or even a vampire's touch, but because he'd so quickly managed to mess it up.

The story of his life. All his life, just when he'd begun to feel close to someone, something would cause the other person to run like hell. His father. The string of kids and teachers over the years. Other students at college. As soon as they realized what he was capable of, the damned curse of his abilities always scared them away. Even when he'd tried his damndest to hide it, something always managed to slip out. He'd acknowledge something they were thinking or feeling and then his secret would be out. People were afraid he'd know intimate things about them they didn't want him to know.

For a short while he'd dared to believe it might be different with Jarrah. Jarrah had asked him with a casual curiosity if he was a telepath, and hadn't even flinched when he said he was. He'd told Jarrah the entire sordid, pathetic story of his life, for gods' sakes, and Jarrah had listened without censure.

But even if it wasn't his difference that had run Jarrah off, something else about him obviously had. Was he tainted? Even if he managed to escape his father's grasp once and for all—and gods knew that was unlikely to ever happen now—would he spend the rest of his days isolated and alone?

*Yes. You've always known that.*

Not always. Not when his mother was alive. But that had been so long ago he could barely even remember what she looked like. All he had were vague, fuzzy memories.

So why did the pain in his gut right now, that had nothing to do with the healing gunshot wound, feel as if it were going to rip him inside out?

*Because, until Jarrah, no one's ever touched you with such genuine pleasure and joy before.*

No one in his life since his mother died had shown him true intimacy—not just the sexual kind, but emotional as well. Until Jarrah. No one in his life since he was ten years old had given a shit whether he lived or died. Until Jarrah.

*And you fucked it up.*

Searing pain built in his chest. And then the truth hit him. "Oh, shit."

Jarrah wasn't like any vampire Griffin had seen or heard about, but it wasn't until now it finally sank in why that was. Yes, he'd killed the assassins Griffin's father had sent, but they had been attacking Griffin and Griffin was clearly unable to defend himself. When Jarrah could have had easy pickings of Griffin himself, bleeding and dying in the alley, instead he'd saved his life. He didn't drink from humans. He wore a peace symbol around his neck—a sentimental item given to him by

his mother long ago. And tonight, several times over, Griffin had read all-too-human emotions in Jarrah.

Lame-ass fool he was, he finally understood, at least in part, why Jarrah had gotten so furious at his stupid, stupid request. For whatever reason, Jarrah was a vampire who respected life, who lived, in many ways, like a human and still experienced full-blown human emotions.

Another flash of enlightenment went off in Griffin's head. *Jarrah not only respects human life, he wishes he still was a human.*

*Oh, my gods.* That was it.

He still wanted to be human. So why in hell would he willingly agree to turn another human into a vampire?

*He wouldn't.*

Renewed pain gripped Griffin's heart. He'd not only pissed off Jarrah ... he'd hurt him. He'd blithely called him a murderer and an opportunistic thief, and then, for all practical purposes, had asked him to murder *him* after Jarrah had gone to considerable trouble to save him in the first place.

*You've fucked up on so many levels, even if you did see Jarrah again, you could never make it right.*

Numb with emptiness, Griffin knew it was time to move on. That seemed to be what he was good at ... running. But this time he didn't see any other choice.

He staggered to his feet and found his pants. He hated to take anything of Jarrah's and give the man yet another reason to be furious at him, but he couldn't very well go out and roam the streets bare-chested. So he borrowed a T-shirt out of the drawer, lingering for a moment, running his palms

over the articles of clothing, remembering little intimate details about the man who wore them.

With a gulp, he pushed the drawer shut. *Too hard to think about it.* But when he pulled the black shirt over his head, it smelled clean and still slightly of Jarrah's unique, spicy scent, and the sizzling, scintillating memories returned with a vengeance. Both arousing and tormenting him with what he'd had and lost in a moment of blind stupidity.

He wandered down the hall back to the room where he'd slept for four days, staying only long enough to put on his socks and shoes.

There was nothing else. His backpack was probably long ago rifled and his few personal possessions stolen by the dance club staff where he'd left it when his father's hit men found him.

He was empty-handed, with nothing but the clothes on his back. Just the way he'd begun this nightmare four years ago when he ran from the hotel.

He'd thought never to feel such desolation and loneliness again as he has that night when he'd realized his father hadn't just been uninvolved, but truly hadn't loved him. Yet right now, every breath he dragged in, every beat of his heart, and every step he took down the stairs and out into the night, was more painful even than that fateful night so long ago. Tonight, although he'd only known Jarrah a short time, he felt like he'd lost something even more important.

*Jarrah, I'm so sorry.*

\* \* \* \*



Jarrah stayed away from home for two days. Not because he thought Griffin would need that long to get out, but because the thought of going back to his house and the eternal emptiness was overwhelming. The quiet isolation that had been his salvation for almost thirty years now loomed cold and empty on the horizon.

All because of one stubborn-assed, manipulating human who'd twisted his gut in knots, given him the best sex he'd had in decades—*don't kid yourself, it wasn't just sex and you know it*—dared to make him care, then betrayed him. And he had no one to blame but himself because he chose to get involved instead of minding his own business.

But he couldn't stay away forever. For better or worse Delta Sector was his home now and he had no desire to return to the nomadic life he'd once lived, wandering across the world.

His weary footsteps led him up the cracked and unused pavement toward his house. The moon was nearly full tonight, but he didn't need its light to see where he was going—his preternatural vision had led him on this journey even on the darkest of nights. Not only that, but he'd made this trip so many times he had it memorized. It was exactly 4,947 steps from his gate to the nearest train station—about two-and-a-half miles. Most of that through what had once been suburban sprawl and was now crumbling, long-ago deserted houses. Since few could afford electric personal vehicles, most people didn't live out this far, choosing to reside in the metro areas, within easy walking distance of their jobs and stores.

Which is why this neighborhood appealed to Jarrah. Over the years, more and more people had moved away and now he had it to himself. It was quiet. No one bothered him. He didn't require city utilities because his house ran on solar power. An odd quirk that ... a vampire who couldn't be in the sun, living in a house powered by the sun. The house had its own well, drilled long ago, before he ever bought the place, and he was lucky it tapped into a deep, underground aquifer that didn't seem to be affected by the severe drought the Rocky Mountain region had suffered for years.

But tonight the quiet neighborhood only enhanced his loneliness. During the two days he'd been gone, he'd been haunted by visions of Griffin. Griffin's anguished expression as he knelt in the middle of Jarrah's bed, asking what he'd done wrong. Griffin, weak-kneed and shaking, as Jarrah tasted his cock for the first time. Griffin bent over in the shower, soft, whimpered groans and pants escaping his warm, parted lips as Jarrah introduced him to the pleasures of being loved by a man.

*Love.*

That was a word he needed to lose from his vocabulary because it meant nothing anymore. It had once—family love, the love of his partner. But like everything else in his life, the moment he became a vampire, it had turned to ash.

Yeah, the wonderful vampire's life Griffin thought he craved.

Jarrah sighed. He wanted to hate Griffin, but in truth, he couldn't. In a twisted, not-clearly-thought-through way, he could see why Griffin might think becoming a vampire was

the solution to his problems. It was a stupid plan, of course, but he understood the young man's desperation to free himself of his family's threat. Griffin'd had no way of knowing Jarrah was cursed with a damned conscience. Any other vamp probably would have gladly turned him. Or gladly killed him.

No, that particular hang-up was his own problem, not Griffin's. Though he still stung inside at the way Griffin had used the sex to get to him.

*Did he really, or are you just using that as an excuse to push him away?*

Jarrah squeezed his eyes closed. He'd thought about nothing else since he'd left home. He wanted to believe the younger man's assurance that it hadn't been a game, that the intimacy had "just happened," as Griffin had put it. In his heart he knew Griffin's desire wasn't an act. And the combination of nerves and wonder assured him he really hadn't been with a man before. Griffin's reactions had been so open, so filled with uninhibited sensuality—and at the end, in the shower, with emotion—that it was hard to fully believe he'd set up the sex as a way of getting to Jarrah.

*It was real.*

*Yeah, maybe.* And, yeah, he was the one who'd probably overreacted.

Guilt stung him. It had been sixty-seven years since Daniel's betrayal, long past time he should have gotten over it. Yet he'd immediately assumed the worst about Griffin, assumed he was as fickle as his former lover, when, in truth, Griffin had probably been guilty of nothing more than ignorance.

But it didn't matter. Because he couldn't give Griffin what the younger man wanted, and he certainly had nothing else to offer him. He knew from bitter experience the harsh reality of his life wasn't something a human could deal with. Hell, he could barely tolerate himself. How could he expect a human to? In the end, Griffin would have turned on him in disgust and fear. At this point the young man was long gone by now. And that was for the best. For both of them.

But the cool logic didn't stop the ache in his chest. Or the dread at having to face his empty house.

As he opened the gate and closed it behind him, then made the trek up to his front door, he knew it would be a long time before he'd forget the warm, sexy, stubborn man who'd so thoroughly invaded his life this week.

*You won't ever forget.*

No. He wouldn't ever forget. And he had an eternity to come to terms with that fact.

\* \* \* \*

Griffin heard the rattle of the front doorknob and his heart leapt into his throat. He felt slightly sick to his stomach as he rose from the dining room table where he had old newspapers spread out, and steeled himself against the panic that suddenly filled every atom in his body.

*Oh, gods, please let him understand.*

The look of shock on Jarrah's face when he saw Griffin lasted only a split second. It was there and gone so quickly Griffin couldn't tell if it had been pleased shock or angry shock before it was hidden away under the stoic mask Jarrah

had worn when they'd first met. And, of course, Jarrah had him completely blocked out so he couldn't read anything from him.

"Hi," he said softly, barely able to get the single word out past the lump in his throat.

"Why in God's hell are you still here?" Jarrah asked, his voice a tired sigh.

In the soft white glow of the chandelier light over the table, he looked exhausted. But at least he wasn't yelling. And his anger appeared to have faded. A flutter of warmth filled Griffin's chest at the sight of him. *Damn*. He'd missed him.

"Please don't be mad at me. I tried to leave," he admitted.

"Tried?"

He nodded. "I got down the road a little way and then I just couldn't do it. After everything you've done for me, the thought of not seeing you again, of knowing you were angry at me when I truly never meant to hurt you ... I just couldn't go like that."

The muscle in Jarrah's jaw clenched and released. "You're a fool."

"So you keep telling me."

As if he couldn't bear to meet Griffin's gaze, Jarrah stared past him, at the framed van Gogh print of sunflowers that hung above the cherry sideboard.

"I can't do this, Griffin. I won't turn you, and there's nothing you can say or do that's going to change my mind. You're kidding yourself if you think otherwise, so you might as well leave."

Griffin swallowed hard as guilt battered his heart. "I don't want to change your mind. I know asking you to make me a vampire was a stupid idea. I came up with it, thought about it for five whole minutes, then acted on it." He shook his head. "And I apologize for springing it on you the way I did."

"If it had been any other vampire but me, you'd be lucky if he or she hadn't just killed you outright—taken your blood and the hell with turning you."

Griffin swallowed again. "I know. My only excuse is that almost dying scared the shit out of me. That night in the alley I was terrified because I didn't want to die. And then you saved my life. The idea of being strong and immortal like you held a lot of appeal."

"It's never that simple."

"I know."

"No, you really don't," Jarrah rasped, meeting his gaze. "You see what you think are the glamorous parts about being a vampire—strength, enhanced abilities, long life. But the reality of a vampire's life is far from glamorous. It's dark and ugly and soulless."

Griffin's brows tugged together. "You're not soulless. Far from it."

"You know nothing about me," Jarrah snapped. "Why do I have to keep reminding you of that?"

Griffin took a deep breath and plunged ahead, feeling like he had nothing to lose at this point. "I know more than you think. And I think I understand now why I can't read your thoughts and emotions very well."

Jarrah stared at him coolly. "Still trying to analyze me? Okay, let's hear it."

"I kept sensing walls around you whenever I tried to read you. I thought to a certain extent, they were figurative—something my mind created because I couldn't explain why you were completely closed off from me so much of the time. But they're not. They're protective barriers like lots of other people have up, except I've never met anyone who's closed himself off like you have. It's like you're protecting yourself from ... well ... everything. Like you don't want to feel anything, not even the good stuff."

Jarrah's gaze narrowed. "Again, you presume too much."

"No, I really don't think I do." Griffin knew he could very well be pushing his luck, but at this point, he saw no need to mince words. He didn't believe Jarrah would kill him, or even hurt him—not physically anyway. And he'd realized, when he'd tried to leave two nights ago but his steps had grown slower and slower until he'd stopped and been rooted in place, that it was time to quit running. Not just from his family, but from everything. He'd been doing it far too long. It was time to take responsibility for his actions and for his life.

The kinship he felt with Jarrah went beyond just a simple understanding of loneliness or a powerful sexual attraction. Something inside him told him in no uncertain terms that Jarrah was important to him. Griffin had spent the vast majority of his life, since he was old enough to know about such things anyway, following his gut instincts about people. And everything in him hummed with belonging when he was around Jarrah. Putting aside the vampire and human

differences, they were more alike than he'd ever imagined. And probably more than Jarrah was willing to admit.

"All this time I thought I was the one who was running," Griffin said. "But you've been running, too."

"I've lived here for almost thirty years. There's no running involved."

"Yeah, maybe you've lived in one place, but inside you're still running. Tell me about this." Griffin picked up a piece of yellowed newspaper from the table and began to read...

"Associated Press, April 29, 2000.

Guerilla fighters ripped through a humanitarian medical camp in Sierra Leone, West Africa yesterday killing all the patients, staff, and the American doctor in charge, Jarrah Kincaid, M.D., 33, along with the doctor's elder brother, River Kincaid, 35, who was the chief fundraiser for Humanitarian International..."

He paused and looked up at Jarrah, whose shoulders sagged.

"You had no right..." Jarrah's voice caught. "No right to go through my things."

"I know. And I'm sorry. But at the same time I'm not. You kept telling me I know nothing about you, and you weren't here to ask, so I decided to learn what I could on my own. You're a doctor."

"Was." The word was firm and definitive.

"You still are. You saved my life."

"Don't." Jarrah's eyes closed and he scuffed a hand over his face.

"Don't what? Tell the truth?"



"It's not the truth," Jarrah growled. "The part of me that was a doctor died a long time ago, at the same time the part that was human died."

"The guerilla fighters in Sierra Leone ... were they vampires or did the vampires find you afterward and turn you?"

Jarrah rubbed his face again and his words were muffled against his palms. "It's always questions with you. You ask too damned many questions."

Griffin wanted so badly to move closer and touch him, comfort him. But he knew it wouldn't be appreciated right now. It might never again be appreciated, and that thought sent a spear of pain through his heart.

"I want to understand, Jarrah."

"My life is none of your business."

Griffin gulped back the stinging hurt the words caused. "I know that. I just..." He had to take a couple of breaths before he could continue. "You'll probably think this is crazy, but I care. I didn't mean to hurt you, but I did. And I just want to be sure I understand what happened, so I don't ever do it again. I don't want you to hurt."

He expected a sarcastic comment or, at the very least, a reprimand that it was presumptuous of him to assume he'd be around long enough for there to be an "again."

Instead, Jarrah growled, "If I answer, will you leave me the hell alone?"

Before Griffin could respond, Jarrah stepped into the dining room and with a sigh sank into one of the heavy, upholstered

chairs. With a restless hand he brushed his fingertips over the old clippings spread out on the cherry table.

"Yes," he said without looking up at Griffin, his voice more subdued. "The guerillas were vampires. Yes, they killed everyone, including my brother, while I watched. Fucking lot of good it did me to be a doctor. I was supposed to be able to save people, but I couldn't save any of them. My brother..."

He grimaced and shook his head. "My brother, River ... he was always the strong one. The classic, protective older brother. When they came into the hospital camp late at night, he was afraid I'd be killed. He tried to play hero and save me. Which only made the vampires more gleeful about killing him and turning me, so I could spend the rest of eternity remembering what they did to him."

He shuddered and Griffin had the urge to touch him, support him. But again, he didn't.

Jarrah huffed out a bitter laugh. "I decided I'd beat the bastards at their own game. I made up my mind to walk out into the sunlight one morning and end it all. No more memories. No more pain. No more guilt. But even then I was weak and useless. I couldn't find the nerve to kill myself."

He rose and in a movement so fast it wasn't remotely human Jarrah picked up a vase from the sideboard and threw it. Griffin flinched as it shattered in a spray of red and gold against the deep green wall.

"Couldn't even fucking kill myself," Jarrah gritted out. "Couldn't save anyone else, but I sure as hell could save myself."

"It's only human to want to survive."

"I keep telling you ... I'm not human!" He dragged his hands through his hair, leaving it to stand on end. "You want more proof of it? I had a lover before I was turned. His name was Daniel. He was a doctor, too, but working in a different country. He assumed, like everyone else in the world, that I'd died and the rebels had destroyed my body. After everything that happened in Sierra Leone, I missed him and wanted to see him, but I was torn. I was scared to see him because of what I'd become. But I was desperate for solace and he was my lover.

"In the end, that won out. I went to Ghana, where he was working. When he saw I was alive, he was ecstatic. But I was newly a vampire and didn't know how to control the bloodlust that raged through me constantly. I tried to hide it from him, but it became obvious very quickly there was something not normal about me when I couldn't go out during the day. And then he caught me feeding..."

Jarrah grimaced. "You see, I am a killer after all. Daniel found me draining an old woman. I tried to explain. I told him about the vampires that had attacked my hospital, but once he discovered what I really was, nothing else mattered. He went insane, he was terrified." He shrugged. "And I can't blame him for that. But then ... then he turned on me completely. He went to the police, saying I'd been in on the killing of everyone in the camp."

"Why would he do such a horrible thing? If he loved you, how could he?"

"Fear."

"What happened?"

Jarrah shook his head, and his gaze was far away and long ago. "I lived on the run for weeks. Finally I snuck into the hotel where Daniel was staying—he'd run, too, afraid, I guess, that I'd come kill him during the night at his medical camp, so he packed it all up and moved to one of the cities until he could fly back to the States. I just wanted to talk to him, make him realize I would never have hurt anyone under my care, that I would never have hurt my own brother.

"The police had been watching the hotel and they showed up while I was inside and started shooting. Daniel was hit by a stray bullet and died in my arms. I disappeared. Eventually, the police wrote the whole incident off, saying that because Daniel had been treated in the past for anxiety, he must have been having some kind of anxious delusion, and I had died in Sierra Leone after all."

"I'm so sorry," Griffin breathed. "You lost so many people you cared about."

"Yeah. Well, that's what happens when you're no longer human." The words were steely with bitterness. "So now you understand."

He turned his back on Griffin, his fists clenched at his sides, and his shoulders and back muscles tense and straining against the long-sleeved, midnight blue shirt he wore. Then, with a guttural growl, he stalked out of the dining room and toward the front door.

His heart clenching, Griffin ran after him this time. "Jarrah, no, don't leave again."

When he put a hand on the vampire's back, Jarrah spun around and grasped his wrist in a painful clench. Griffin's

breath caught when he saw Jarrah's eyes, which had that odd phosphorescent glow in them again. But it was the sight of his teeth that startled Griffin the most. His incisors had elongated, and when he bared them and hissed, an icy shiver coursed up Griffin's spine.

"Don't make me feel anything else," Jarrah snarled, glaring down at him. "Leave me the hell alone. I don't want to feel."

Instead of scaring him off, the words settled in Griffin's deepest core. With his free hand, shaking though it was, he reached up and stroked Jarrah's smooth, alabaster cheek.

Jarrah flinched and hissed at him again. But Griffin ignored it, along with the pressure on his wrist, which had increased and was causing his hand and arm to ache. He traced his thumb over Jarrah's lower lip. Then, standing on tiptoe, he replaced his thumb with his mouth, stroking Jarrah's lip with his tongue, sucking on it.

Jarrah began to tremble, and even as his grip on Griffin's wrist tightened yet again, a moan slid out of his open mouth.

Griffin continued, growing more daring, cupping the back of his lover's head in his hand and pulling him down closer. He bit Jarrah's bottom lip lightly, ran his tongue over it, then slid his tongue inside the other man's mouth. It was an odd sensation with Jarrah's fangs elongated, and in some distant part of Griffin's brain he knew he should probably be at least a little bit afraid of those fangs and their close proximity to him, yet he wasn't. As with everything else about Jarrah, there was a strange rightness to it. And kissing him with his fangs extended, while a different experience, wasn't any more threatening than kissing him without. It was just ... Jarrah.

With a soft groan, Jarrah surrendered. He released Griffin's wrist and his hands came up to burrow into Griffin's hair, angle his head, and pull him closer. His tongue twined with Griffin's, stroking and playing a sensuous game of charge and retreat that left the younger man's shaft hard and throbbing. Little pulses of white heat shot out of his balls, spreading through his body, and creating a hum of electricity that felt like it was crackling on his skin.

Jarrah tore his mouth away first, but he didn't release Griffin. Instead, he rested his forehead against his. "If you know I'm not going to turn you, then why are you still here?" His voice was slightly slurred from his fangs, which were still out. "I don't have anything to offer you. What do you want from me, Griffin?"

"I've asked myself that several times over the past two days," Griffin said, stroking Jarrah's cheek again, fascinated at how smooth it was. Did vampires not ever have stubble? No, they must. Why else would he have found a razor in Jarrah's bathroom?

"And?"

"And the only answer I keep coming up with isn't that I want anything *from* you so much as I just really want ... you," he whispered. His heart was suddenly racing and his throat went dry at the admission. Would it send Jarrah running again?

The vampire was silent for several long seconds, during which a stew of emotions churned inside Griffin. But finally, Jarrah said, "In spite of what you may think, of what you've found snooping around, you hardly know me."

"I feel like I do know you. I don't understand it, I just know what I feel."

"No, what you feel is curiosity. Being with a man was different for you, a new experience. Now that you've become aware of it, it's natural for you to want more. It's not me you want so much as just more sex."

Griffin shook his head. "I told you, until I met you I'd never been attracted to men. It's not like I was feeling it and repressing it. I never felt it period. And when I think about it now, being with someone else, I still feel nothing. You're the only one, Jarrah. The only one I want."

"No, that's imposs—"

Griffin pressed his fingers against Jarrah's lips to silence him. "And when I say 'want' I don't just mean the sex, although it's ... gods, it's fucking amazing. But it's more than that." He pressed a hand against his own heart. "What I feel about you is in here. Deep in here. Soul deep."

Jarrah pulled back slightly to look down at him. Emotion swirled in his eyes, and, with a leap of hope, Griffin felt it flutter against him as well, in warm colors of gold and orange and pink. As Griffin watched, fascinated, Jarrah's fangs retracted. Lines furrowed his forehead.

"You don't know what you're saying," Jarrah murmured, but he didn't sound like he was even convincing himself with the protest.

"Yeah, I do. And please don't get all outraged at me for being presumptuous again, but ... I think you feel the same way."

The lines in Jarrah's forehead deepened, but he didn't argue.

"I've been going over and over what happened in the bedroom two nights ago," Griffin said, "trying to figure out why you got so upset and accused me of using the sex to manipulate you. It's been killing me that you would think that when it was the farthest thing from the truth. But then I finally realized ... if it had just been sex to you, a way to spend a few hours slaking your lust, you might have been mad, because no one likes to be used, but you wouldn't have been hurt. And you were hurt. You wouldn't have felt that if what happened between us wasn't important to you. If you didn't care."

Jarrah's gaze was intense, but before he could protest or order Griffin away again, Griffin pressed on. "So for the record, let me say this again. I did go to your room two nights ago to ask you to turn me. But what happened between us ... it happened on its own. I never meant to hurt you. I never even imagined we'd make love."

Jarrah's body stilled ... an odd thing considering, as a vampire, he was already pretty damned still with no heartbeat and no regular breathing. "What'd you just say?"

Griffin blinked and his pulse raced. Oh gods, was Jarrah about to explode? He couldn't read him again—he was sealed up tight. "I said I never meant to hurt you."

"No. The last part."

The words were so quiet Griffin had to strain to hear him. His mind frantically searched for the last thing he'd said. "I



never meant to hurt you ... I never imagined we'd make love."

He watched as Jarrah's chest rose and fell, like he was dragging in a deep breath. It was fascinating to watch because Griffin knew he didn't need to breathe. It was an odd quirk Jarrah had, like he still instinctively wanted to be human. It made Griffin feel even closer to him.

"Make love?" Jarrah whispered. "Is that what it was to you? Lovemaking?"

Jarrah held his gaze with such rapt intensity Griffin shivered. But not with fear ... with a deep-down longing. He nodded. "It might have started off as fucking, but by the end, I think we both know it was more than that."

"Griffin..." His walls eased open a crack again and Griffin was assailed with Jarrah's physical desire and an intense emotional longing for closeness that nearly swept Griffin's feet out from under him it was so strong. "I can't turn you. Ever. I just can't do it. The idea of killing you and forcing you to live in this hell..." He grimaced like he was in pain.

Griffin rested a hand against Jarrah's chest. "I understand. And I told you, it was stupid of me to ask in the first place. Jarrah, I don't need any *thing* from you. I just..." The lump in his throat was back. "In a perfect world, I'd just like to be with you. But I know that really is being presumptuous and it's not my decision to make—it's yours. Not to mention I still have family issues I have to deal with, and God knows that's not your battle to fight. I don't want you to end up hurt because of my shitty problems."

"You said 'God.'"

"What?" Griffin looked at him askance, but without waiting for a response he pulled away from Jarrah and rubbed his eyes. "I want all of this fixed. I want you to not be mad at me anymore. I want my family off my back. I want to have a life again. Maybe do something mundane like get a real job and maybe make a difference somehow instead of always having my tail tucked between my legs, running. I'm tired of running," he said with a sigh. "So tired."

"Then don't."

A soft, bitter laugh escaped Griffin. "Yeah, it's a great thought in theory. But I don't have the resources to fight my family. And until I do, I'm going to have to continue doing what I've been doing ... keep moving and hold them off."

"You don't have to do it alone."

Griffin shook his head. "You've done enough. I don't want you to—"

Jarrah grasped a handful of Griffin's T-shirt and pulled him closer. When Griffin gazed up at him in surprise, the raw emotion swirling in Jarrah's pale blue-gray eyes turned Griffin's heart upside down.

"For a change, why don't you let me think for myself and decide what I want?" The words were spoken in the husky voice that set Griffin on fire.

"Jarrah—"

The rest of what he was about to say was swallowed in a hot kiss that instantly had Griffin hard, needy, and swaying on his feet. But the last part wasn't a concern for long. Jarrah broke the kiss and easily lifted Griffin over his shoulder so he was head down by Jarrah's back and ass up in the air.

"What the hell? Jarrah, put me down!" But in spite of the words, excitement flared to life in full, fiery glory in Griffin. Even his fingers and toes tingled with it.

The vampire strode into the entry hall, then took the steps two at a time, again without apparent exertion.

"Where are you going?" Griffin demanded.

But he knew. Jarrah radiated his intention without saying a word. Thick desire and tender anticipation flowed off him and surrounded Griffin. And Griffin wallowed for a moment in the sensations.

Jarrah did care. A burst of emotion overflowed in his chest. *He cares.*

"You're the most stubborn, questioning, know-it-all I've ever met. And you've taken great pleasure in defying me at every turn since I've known you. So I'm going to take great pleasure in defying you this time."

Jarrah set him back on his feet in the middle of the dark bedroom, a few feet from the bed.

"What are you talking about?"

"This time, when, for some lame reason, you think you can admit you want to stay with me, but then give me excuses why you shouldn't, I'm going to make you stay." Jarrah's voice was low and thick with an undercurrent of sex that made Griffin squirm. "And not only are you going to stay, you're going to like it."

He crossed to the bedside table and turned on the stained glass Tiffany-style lamp.

Jarrah's eyes, when he turned back to Griffin, were intense with passion. "No, I take that back," he said, raking his hot

gaze up and down Griffin's body. "You're going to love it. And I'm going to enjoy the hell out of watching you beg for more."

A jolt of raw lust hit Griffin so hard his knees nearly gave out. And there was nothing nearby to clutch at to steady himself.

A smile twitched at Jarrah's mouth as if he knew the problem. He lounged a hip against the bed post.

"Take your clothes off, Griffin. Slowly."

Griffin swallowed back the warm, mushy lump in his throat even as his balls tightened into hard knots.

"Start with my shirt. Which, by the way, looks good on you."

"Jarrah...?"

"I swear if you ask me another question right now I'm going turn you over my knee and spank your ass," Jarrah said.

Embarrassment at the thought of such a thing had Griffin gaping at the vampire, but it was quickly overcome as a jolt of erotic heat seared through Griffin, giving his hard-on a hard-on. "You wouldn't?"

A sexy laugh rumbled from Jarrah and he shook his head. "God in hell. You just can't help yourself, can you?"

And in one of those inhumanly quick motions Jarrah sometimes exhibited, Griffin found himself sprawled stomach down, ass up, over Jarrah's lap, with Jarrah now seated on the bed.

"You're not really going to do this, are you?" Griffin gasped, struggling to sit up, but being held firmly in place by one of the other man's strong hands in the center of his back.

With his other hand, Jarrah had already unfastened Griffin's jeans and was jerking them down.

"Yes, I really am. You ask too damned many questions."

Jarrah's tone was firm, but Griffin felt the underlying humor and the building sexual tension in it, and it caused him to quiver in both fear and anticipation.

"Besides, you owe me."

"What do I owe you for?"

Griffin's jeans were now around his knees, and he realized his struggling and twitching to get away was probably only giving Jarrah a bigger show as his bare ass was fully exposed.

Jarrah's big, cool hand stroked over Griffin's ass cheeks, and the touch had him twitching in a whole new way. "Let's see..." Jarrah murmured. "First, you took my shirt. So you get one for that." His hand came down with a crack on Griffin's butt.

Griffin yelped in shock and pain, but even as his skin stung, a deep tingling spread into his groin.

"Second, you went through my private things while I was gone." His hand smacked Griffin's ass again. Then, before Griffin had a chance to protest, Jarrah continued, "Third, you jacked off in my guest bed and covered a perfectly good sheet with your cum, thereby giving me more laundry to do." His palm came down again on Griffin's throbbing flesh.

"J-Jarrah. Please..."

"And then there's the fact you outright defied me every time I told you to leave. I think you need one for each time." *Whack.* "That's for the first time, after I bit you." *Whack.* "That's for the time in the bedroom when you admitted you'd

never been with a man before and I told you to go." *Whack*. "That's for not leaving immediately when I told you to get out two nights ago." *Whack*. "And that's for still not leaving while I was gone for two days."

"I'm sorry," Griffin moaned. Tears slid unbidden down his cheeks and he struggled to wipe them away without Jarrah seeing. His ass throbbed. It felt hot as hell, but much to his shock, his prick was hard as a rock and his balls ached with unfulfilled need. "Please, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

"And this one..." Jarrah's palm made contact yet again, but this time not quite as hard. "...is for incessantly asking me questions and generally disrupting my peaceful life."

A quiet sob shook Griffin, but he wasn't sure if it was because his rear hurt, or because Jarrah had made his point all too well and Griffin felt supremely guilty for doing all those things. Or maybe it was because he'd never been so horny in his life and wanted to feel Jarrah touch him in a much more intimate way and the frustration was killing him. Or maybe—probably—it was *all* those things.

He felt Jarrah reach across him. Heard a rustling noise. But he couldn't force his eyes to open to see what he was doing.

Shock rippled through him as Jarrah spread his ass cheeks apart and he felt a cool, lubed finger probe between his crack and brush over his opening. "This," Jarrah's voice was thick with obvious lust, "is because you have the most beautiful ass I've ever seen and I don't think I'll ever be able to get enough of it." His finger entered Griffin with a smooth, firm motion, and Griffin spasmed.

"Jarrah, shit!" he gasped, clutching the vampire's legs, which was the only real contact he could make in his current position.

The long finger slid in and out a few times, then swirled around, stretching him open.

Griffin had never known anything could feel like this. When Jarrah touched him, penetrated him, filled him, the world stood still and nothing else mattered. He couldn't begin to understand how it had happened or why, but he knew in his heart he belonged with this man.

## CHAPTER 6

Desire, sweet and hard, shuddered through Jarrah at the sight of his finger sliding in and out of Griffin's body, at the feel of the younger man's weight across his legs, at the sound of his quiet moans and the way he said Jarrah's name with such open longing and emotion.

*You are so lost.*

*Yeah, completely.* And for the first time in sixty-seven years, Jarrah dragged in a deep breath, and as he released it, let go of the last painful memories of Daniel, his betrayal, and his death.

*It wasn't your fault he died. Daniel made his own decisions. His death was an accident.*

"Jarrah," Griffin murmured again, twisting his groin against Jarrah's legs and bringing Jarrah's attention fully back to him.

"Have you learned your lesson?" he asked the sexy, struggling man across his knees. "Are you going to behave yourself now?"

"Y-Yes. N-no!"

Jarrah laughed and joy spread through him. "You know what I think, Griffin Hilliard?"

"What?" Griffin moaned as Jarrah slid another finger inside him to join the first.

"I think you're a rebel at heart. And I also think you do like a little pain with your pleasure." He rubbed his free palm against Griffin's hot, red ass, eliciting a strangled cry from the young man. "I think you enjoyed having me spank you



because, even though it hurt, it made you feel damn good at the same time."

"Fuck you," Griffin mumbled, but Jarrah noted it wasn't an obvious denial and he smiled.

"You can, you know? If you'd ever like to. I love filling your ass with my cock and I love exploding deep inside you, knowing my seed is in you, making you mine. I won't ever get tired of it. But if you ever decide you want to see what it feels like the other way, all you have to do is tell me."

"I want you in me right now."

The softly gasped words ripped open the last of Jarrah's carefully guarded emotions.

He pulled his fingers free and laid Griffin on his back on the bed. With a smooth motion, he yanked the black T-shirt up and over Griffin's head and tossed it aside, then tugged off Griffin's shoes, socks, and his jeans, which had still been around his knees, leaving the human nude and shaking with obvious desire. The sight of the damp streaks down Griffin's cheeks tore at Jarrah's heart. The sight of his jutting, firm shaft filled him with hunger.

Jarrah's fingers moved to the buttons on his own shirt, but Griffin sat up and rose to his knees in front of him.

"Let me."

Jarrah held his hands to the sides and let Griffin's nimble fingers take over. He watched as the younger man slid each button from its hole, anticipating his warm touch on his skin. Damn, he'd missed Griffin, missed being close to him the past two days.

When Griffin had the last button free, he pushed the shirt open and over Jarrah's shoulders until it slid down his arms and fell to the floor.

Slowly, as if enjoying the view and savoring the moment, Griffin's palms explored Jarrah's chest, touching his jade peace symbol with gentle fingers, easing over his pecs, teasing whorls around his nipples with his thumbs until Jarrah moaned, then sliding downward to caress his abs.

"You're beautiful, too," Griffin said, gazing up at him. "More beautiful than anything I've ever seen."

Jarrah's chest tightened and he couldn't seem to find his voice to respond.

Griffin moved closer and his tongue sought out one of Jarrah's nipples, swirling around and around it, then his teeth closed lightly against it. As he suckled and bit on the small, dark pebble, his hands were busy at Jarrah's pants, unbuttoning them and easing the zipper down over his erection. When his cock sprang free, bobbing up and out, Griffin let Jarrah's jeans fall and pool on the floor, and stroked his cockhead with his thumb. Then he simply gazed at Jarrah's swollen shaft in the golden light from the lamp, watching it twitch and pulse in response.

Jarrah gritted his teeth, wanting him to touch it, but getting so damned aroused at nothing more than just having Griffin look at it, he couldn't bring himself to break the moment.

The younger man smoothed a roughened fingertip over the head again, rubbed up a drop of creamy fluid from the slit, then brought his finger to his mouth to suck it off as he met

Jarrah's gaze. The sight shook Jarrah to the core and made him needy with an intensity he'd never before experienced.

Returning his attention to matters lower down, Griffin's hand recapture Jarrah's shaft, and the other reached down to cup his balls. Again Jarrah had to bite back the urge to beg.

"It's amazing how this fits inside me," Griffin murmured, studying Jarrah's cock. "It's so long and thick. I would never have imagined I could stretch open far enough."

"You can and do." Jarrah squeezed his eyes closed in an agony of wanting.

"I might want to feel what it's like to be inside you. I probably will sometime." Griffin's hand curved around Jarrah's shaft and squeezed lightly, then began a gentle up and down stroking. "But I have to admit something to you."

Jarrah opened his eyes and he looked down at the dark-headed, dark-eyed lover he knew he'd never grow tired of.

"I love it when you touch me down there and make me squirm, make me crave you worse than I've ever craved anything in my life. I love it when you fill me. When your cock is in me, there's a pressure and fullness that feels like it reaches all the way to my heart you're so deep." He swallowed hard, as he were struggling to admit something. "I ... I like the way you make me feel as if you're in control of me. It excites me, and at the same time, it makes me feel safe. It makes me feel like I belong to you."

For the first time since he could remember, hot moisture stung Jarrah's eyes.

"I don't think I'd like for you to order me around and be in control of the other parts of my life, though. I don't take orders well."

"I've noticed," Jarrah said with a smile.

"But I..."

"You like being a bottom," Jarrah supplied. When Griffin gave him a blank look, he added, "You like being the one who's penetrated, the non-dominant partner in sex."

"I think so, yeah. Is that ... weird?"

"Hell, no." Jarrah cradled Griffin's face in his hands and kissed him. "It's wonderful."

"I really want to taste your cock," Griffin said. "Can I do that?"

"You can do whatever you'd like."

Without further urging, Griffin's head dipped and the heat of his tongue nearly melted the tip of Jarrah's shaft. Jarrah moaned and tried to keep his hands steady at his sides so he wouldn't grab Griffin's head and shove himself hard and deep into the moist, hot heaven. But as his lover found an up and down rhythm that drew Jarrah deeper and deeper into his mouth, and his gentle hands began squeezing his balls and teasing below them, Jarrah found himself quickly losing control. Inexperienced though he might be in the art of man love, the younger man gave head like nobody's business.

"Fuck," Jarrah whispered. "Jesus!"

His fingers threaded through the dark waves of hair and, as the burning tingle grew in his balls and spread up his shaft, he couldn't stop the instinctive reaction of pressing Griffin's head up and down. He was drowning in the sultry, wet

sensuality of his lover's mouth and fondling hands, and his entire body vibrated with a resonant hum of knowing. Knowing he was already close to coming. Knowing Griffin was the light in his heretofore dark world. And knowing he didn't ever want to be without the young man again.

"I can't last," he groaned. "You don't ... have ... to swallow, Griffin."

But his lover was either so lost in the moment himself he didn't hear, or he had already made up his mind.

Flames licked through Jarrah's balls and seared up his cock, exploding in a sizzling gush from his slit and hitting the back of Griffin's throat. The younger man gagged on the first burst, but wouldn't let Jarrah pull free. Instead, he grasped his ass in warm hands and pulled him closer, seating him even deeper, then taking and swallowing the rest with a hungry eagerness that shocked Jarrah.

When he'd shuddered his last, and Griffin eased his mouth away and looked up at him with satisfaction shining in his eyes, Jarrah could only shake his head and wonder what in hell he'd done to deserve this man. "Every moment I spend with you, you amaze me more and more," he murmured. Then he lowered his mouth to Griffin's, tasting himself, and growing hard again already.

He kicked off his boots and the pants around his ankles, then pressed Griffin back onto the bed. The tube of lubrication lay on the bedside table and Jarrah generously greased his sensitive prick.

"Damn. You're still hard," Griffin said, staring at his shaft in obvious wonder.

"You make me this way." Jarrah's voice was hoarse with need.

"But ... but isn't that impossible?"

Jarrah smiled down at him. "It's a vampire thing."

He squeezed a dollop of the gel onto his fingers. Spreading Griffin's legs, he knelt between them and massaged the slippery lube around and into his opening, feeling his cock leap in satisfaction at Griffin's moans.

He lifted the man's legs and pressed his knees toward his chest, then, as his lover watched, wide-eyed, he probed the tip of his slick shaft against Griffin's hole.

Griffin's breath caught. His eyes closed.

"No, keep your eyes open," Jarrah commanded. "I want you to watch us together."

The dark, passion-filled eyes opened.

"Relax," Jarrah said softly.

"You're so big."

"But not too big. Your ass was made for me, Griffin. It was made for me to stretch and open and fill. That's it ... that's it..."

The tight muscles fluttered and relaxed bit by bit, and soon they were clutching and releasing Jarrah's cock head, massaging it slowly inward.

Griffin trembled and twisted his hips, his absolute trust and utter arousal written on his face.

"So good ... it's so good."

"It's good for me, too. You're hot as hell and your body squeezes me so hard I can barely keep from spilling again right now."

Griffin's eyes burned with raw lust and soft pants escaped him.

Jarrah's cockhead slid past the tight muscles, and with a guttural growl he couldn't hold back, he buried himself to the hilt. He paused for a moment, trying to give Griffin's body time to adjust to his size and depth, but it was too hard, the hot, tight sleeve around him too tempting. He slid out part way, then rammed back in, causing Griffin to cry out.

Griffin's eyes closed, but quickly fluttered open again. He clutched handfuls of the sheets and raised his hips, taking Jarrah even deeper. "Fill me. Fuck me. Make me yours again," he urged, his eyes fevered. "I missed you."

Jarrah needed no further urging. Never taking his gaze off his lover's, he grasped the younger man's hips and plunged into him, over and over until Griffin sobbed out his name and begged him to never stop, never leave him. The words ripped at Jarrah's insides, and filled him with a tender protectiveness that squeezed his chest so tight he thought for a moment he could feel the throb of his own heartbeat.

Griffin's hand closed around his own cock and, as Jarrah watched, began a rough jerking motion that matched the rhythm of Jarrah's thrusts in his body. "I'm coming," Griffin gasped.

"Don't stop looking at me. As you come, I want you to know I'm here and I'll never leave you."

"I belong to you, Jarrah."

*Fuck.* It took all Jarrah's self control—every last dreg of it—to keep from losing his own load at Griffin's words. "Yes, you do."

Griffin's motions grew frantic and then in an impressive display, thick, ropy cream shot from his cock in an arc that splashed back onto his flat abdomen and dark dusting of chest and groin hair.

"More," Jarrah demanded, knowing the younger man had no control over it at this point, but liking the thought of commanding it anyway.

Griffin's body tensed, squeezing hard against Jarrah's reaming cock, as another stream shot upward.

"Again."

The young man's hand continued to milk his still-swollen, purple shaft in long, deep strokes, bringing forth another, smaller burst of semen, then another.

The sight of Griffin spread beneath him, coated in cum, the scent of it and Griffin's still not completely satiated desire, was more than Jarrah could take. He slowed his thrusts for a few seconds, then drove several hard ones into Griffin's shaking body. Then he slowed once more, enjoying the pleasurable agony of prolonging it.

Griffin writhed beneath him. "Jarrah, oh, God, can't ... get ... enough. Need you. Always."

"I need you, too," Jarrah moaned, so lost in the physical pleasure and emotion he could barely speak. And with a mind-bending spasm that wracked his entire body and took Griffin's with it, he found his own release, filling Griffin's depths with his liquid heat, marking him forever as his.

When his cock, spent at last, began to wane, he slid out of Griffin's body and lowered himself to press a lingering kiss



against the younger man's lips, and savor the comfort and closeness of his embrace.

Jarrah rolled to his back, taking Griffin with him, and nestled the dark head against his shoulder. Griffin's fingers roamed slowly over Jarrah's chest, not teasing or trying to entice, just touching in an intimate lover's way that filled Jarrah with a peace he hadn't known since he was human.

"Not that I want to fight with you anymore," Griffin said, raising himself on one elbow to gaze down at Jarrah, "but if this is what making up is like..." His dark eyes sparkled with tired humor and utter contentment.

"Don't get any ideas," Jarrah warned, but felt himself smile.

"So this vampire libido thing ... is this normal? The ability to come twice in a row without losing your hard-on?"

"Scared I'll wear you out?"

Griffin huffed out a soft breath and a small, uncertain smile curved his lips. "I don't know. It's kind of ... maybe kind of intimidating because I can't do that. So maybe I'll disappoint you."

Jarrah smoothed a hand down Griffin's cheek. Sometime over the past two days he'd shaved, leaving a neatly trimmed, sexy goatee in place. "You couldn't disappoint me if you tried. In fact, I keep finding myself amazed at how open and uninhibited you are."

Griffin's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You think so?"

"I know so. And you give a fucking incredible blowjob."

Color stained the young man's cheeks, but he smiled.

"Yeah? That was my first."

"I know. But it didn't feel like a first. You're a natural."

Jarrah saw the pleasure in his eyes at the compliment.

"Can I ask you a question?" Griffin asked.

Jarrah groaned.

"I know, I know ... always with the questions. I'm sorry. I'm just naturally curious, I guess." His smile was lopsided and semi-apologetic ... and completely endearing.

"All right. What is it this time?"

"I saw the blood in the refrigerator. Where do you get it?"

Jarrah gritted his teeth. Of all the things to talk about, unpleasant vampire details weren't at the top of his list. But if Griffin was going to be in his life—and he knew he was insane to be thinking it, but he hoped with all his heart he was—then he was going to learn things like this eventually. Better he find out now than be shocked and turned-off later.

"The South Delta Blood Bank thinks I'm a doctor giving a leukemia patient transfusions at home. I buy several week's worth at a time."

"You *are* a doctor."

"Griffin." His tone was a warning not to pursue the topic, but the human, as usual, wouldn't let it go.

"Instead of fighting the fact you're a vampire, why don't you embrace it?"

"Because I have no desire to be a killer."

"No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the fact you obviously have enhanced abilities now. I should have died, but you healed me. Way too fast for regular medicine and without drugs. I don't know what kind of skills you had as human, but as a vampire, you obviously have strong healing

mojo of some kind. Why don't you take advantage of it and use it to help other people? It might make you feel better."

Jarrah snorted. "What hospital is going to hire a vampire? No one's that crazy."

"Maybe. But there are plenty of free clinics around Delta that are always desperate for help. You could even go in at night. Do you honestly think they'd turn away a doctor's help? They don't have to know you're a vamp, and wouldn't know since you have such phenomenal self-control."

"Why do I keep having the urge to kiss you just to shut you up?"

Griffin laughed, and it sounded good.... relaxed and sexy.

"You just think you need to shut me up, but really, you think I have a hot, desirable mouth and you can't get enough."

Jarrah smiled. "You do have a desirable, hot mouth. And I can think of dozens of other things for it to be doing besides pestering me."

He pressed his lips to Griffin's and proceeded to shut him up, except for soft moans, for several long minutes.

But he was the first to break the kiss. "Listen," he said, turning serious, and stroking Griffin's hair off his forehead, "I want you to stay inside and lay low for a couple of days, okay?"

Ridges instantly furrowed Griffin's forehead. "Why? Oh, shit, it's my family again, isn't it?"

"You know, sometimes it's a real pain in the ass, this ability you have to read minds," Jarrah said, trying to make light of the news. But he realized as soon as the words were

out that Griffin's tension was too tightly strung for jokes. Better to be honest. "Yes. While I was out the past two days, I stopped into a bar where I sometimes get a drink and I overheard someone say your name. Saw him showing your picture to some of the patrons."

"Fuck." Griffin's panic was almost tangible.

Jarrah gathered him close, stroking a soothing hand up and down his back. "The person doing the asking is no longer a threat. And they're not going to find you here if you just stay put. I'll make sure you're safe."

Griffin shook his head. "They're not going to stop until I'm dead."

"It's not going to come to that. I'm going to help you and we're going put an end to this once and for all. But there's nothing we can do about it tonight. So let's get your mind on something else.

He rolled Griffin to his back and minutes later, with Griffin writhing beneath him, Jarrah felt certain his lover's thoughts were far from the dangers of his family and focused on nothing but the sensual magic they seemed destined to find together.

## CHAPTER 7

Griffin awoke to the unfamiliar but not at all unpleasant sensation of masculine legs twined with his and a possessive arm around his waist.

A rush of fulfillment swept through him as he opened his eyes and in the soft glow of lamplight—they never had bothered to turn it off—looked at the peaceful sleeping form of the vampire next to him. It was a bit unsettling, he had to admit, to study a man who had no heartbeat and didn't breathe. He should have looked corpse-like, and maybe in a way he was. But Griffin knew too well just how alive and vibrant Jarrah was and it seemed, to his way of thinking, that some of that radiated off Jarrah even in sleep. Griffin couldn't read him clearly—Jarrah probably put up his walls out of instinct when he slept—but a flutter of contentment hovered around him. That and a peace Griffin hadn't felt from him before. He hoped he had something to do with that.

But the warm thought quickly fled and was replaced with chilly dread.

Jarrah had distracted him masterfully last night, taking him on one erotic journey after another, showing him sensations and pleasures that had left him begging for more, and coming more times than he'd thought possible, until they'd finally collapsed from sheer exhaustion well after the sun had come up. But Griffin had known from the moment Jarrah said someone was looking for him what he was going to do.

He was done with running. It was time to regain control of his life.

He didn't have a firm plan in mind, but a conversation he and Jarrah had had a few days ago kept running through his head...

*"Are they afraid of you?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Because they don't understand you?"*

*"No. Because they think I know things they don't want me to know."*

*"Do you?"*

*"No."*

*"Have you told them that?"*

Could it be that simple? Did he have the nerve to walk into his father's house and say, "Hey, listen up! You've been hunting me because you think I know your nasty little secrets, but the truth is, I don't know a damned thing?"

*No. It would never be that simple.* But after four years of living in hell, he had to try.

Long ago memories of his father when his mom was alive came back to him. Playing games, taking walks, traveling. Once, they'd been a close family. His dad had never been comfortable with Griffin's abilities, but he remembered hugs and bedtime books not just from his mom, but his dad, too.

Over the years the memories had resurfaced on occasion—in truth, it's why he'd gone home after he graduated from college. There was a part of him that had hoped if he and his dad spent some time together, he might be able to find the

man he remembered from long ago. Obviously it hadn't worked out that way, though.

Once, he'd thought his father cared. But then when his mom died and Griffin had been sent away to school, they'd grown farther and farther apart until there was nothing left. What had happened to make his father hate him enough to want him dead? What kind of secrets could he possibly have?

It was time to find out, time to confront his dad about the truth.

Moving as slowly as he could, he eased his legs out from between Jarrah's and lifted the other man's arm from his waist and slipped out from beneath it.

Jarrah shifted and rolled to his back, but didn't wake up. It was a bit unnerving not to be sure, though. Even if Jarrah was awake and just hadn't opened his eyes, Griffin wouldn't know it because he was so still.

Once he'd slid off the bed, he couldn't resist turning to look back down at the vampire. In repose and at peace, his sculpted face, high cheekbones, and sensual lips again struck Griffin as being nothing short of beautiful in an angelic way. His body was lean and well-defined, and he had one arm thrown over his head. The other rested across his smooth chest, while the crisp, white sheet rose to his groin, barely covering his magnificent cock.

Even in sleep he had the ability to make Griffin quicken with desire.

Griffin had to force himself to reach down to the floor for his pants and Jarrah's shirt he'd worn earlier because what he really wanted was to crawl back into bed and let Jarrah

"distract" him some more and keep him safe as Jarrah had promised last night. But, as appealing as the thought was, he was far too old to depend on someone else to look out for him. And it was time he quit allowing himself to be a victim and got his life back on track. How could he have a relationship with anyone, including Jarrah, when it felt like his life was spinning out of his control?

He couldn't.

And so, with determination steeling his spine, he slipped out of the bedroom, pulled on his clothes and shoes in the hallway so he didn't risk making a noise that would wake Jarrah, and crept out of the house.

Mid-afternoon sunlight slanted through the straggling trees as he walked down the path to the gate, then followed the road to what he hoped would eventually lead to a metro area where he could catch a train.

He still had his transit card in his pocket and hoped he had enough money left on it to make it to northern Delta Sector and his father.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later, Griffin walked the long, silent hallway to his father's office. The building, much to his surprise, had almost no security measures in place. He would have thought that if they had secrets big enough to kill for, the place would have been sealed up tight as a drum. He'd entered through a small side entrance with no problem. No doubt he'd been caught on surveillance cameras, but no one had stopped him.



He'd found the building directory computer and had taken the speed elevator to the top floor.

It was after dark, around seven-thirty at night, but even though the power grid would shut down in less than an hour, this building, the corporate offices of Western Electric, would still be fully powered, as would the metro trains and emergency facilities like the police stations and hospitals.

In spite of the late hour, Griffin knew, from old experience, his father was a workaholic, and so was counting on the fact he'd be here.

His heart pounded in his chest and his palms grew sweaty.

*What the hell are you doing here? Have you completely lost your mind?*

Probably. But he couldn't get the conversation with Jarrah out of his head, or the need to end this crap forever.

He came to double doors at the end of the hall and the digital placard on the wall indicated this was his stop: *Richard G. Hilliard, CEO*

Griffin broke out in a cold sweat. Had they caught him on camera coming into the building and now had armed men on the other side of the door, ready to shoot when he opened it?

*Idiot. Do you feel anyone on the other side of the door?*

He sucked in a deep breath to calm himself. *No*. He felt no one. And in his lifetime of experience, he could almost always read something from people ... thoughts, emotions, flickers of something. Some people were more adept at building emotional and mental walls than others, but he'd never met anyone who could block him as efficiently as Jarrah.

With another steadying breath, and trying hard to ignore the way his damned heart was racing, Griffin twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

He found himself standing in a plush outer office. An oak receptionist's or secretary's desk sat to his right, standing guard over another set of double doors—no doubt his father's inner sanctum. The outer office was empty. Apparently it was past working hours for his father's staff, but in truth, that surprised Griffin. The man he remembered worked long hours and he'd assumed would demand the same of his worker bees.

He crossed the enormous room, his footfalls silent on the thick burgundy carpet, until he stood before the second doors.

And clear as crystal in his mind, he felt his father. Numbers ran through the man's mind ... data for something. He was intently focused on it and the only emotion Griffin could read was determination to finish the work before he left for the evening. He didn't know Griffin was coming.

Deciding he liked the element of surprise, he opened the door without knocking.

"Eileen, I thought you'd gone home for the day," the older man at the desk said, his fingers continuing to type at the handheld computer he worked on. But when his gaze lifted and saw who really stood there, his hands froze. Shock billowed off him.

"Hello, Dad."

His father was grayer and looked more tired than he had the last time Griffin had seen him—it had been almost nine years now.

"Griffin," the older man whispered, looking at him as if he'd seen a ghost.

Ruthlessly, Griffin searched his father's mind for evidence his father thought he should be a ghost, that he thought he should be dead. But oddly, he felt nothing that suggested it. Instead, he continued to feel his dad's shock at seeing him, the old niggling unease because he wasn't sure what Griffin could read about him, and guilt. But Griffin didn't sense it was guilt because his father had spent the past four years trying to have him killed—it was more like guilt that ... damn, guilt that he'd gone so long without seeing Griffin?

Now it was Griffin's turn to be startled, but he took a page out of Jarrah's book and forced a stoic expression on his face. "Surprised to see me?"

Richard Hilliard rose from his desk. He wasn't a tall man, standing around five-nine or so, the same as Griffin, but he seemed a bit stretched thin, as if his skin barely fit over his bones and muscles. "Yes. I've thought of you so often."

"I'll bet you have."

The older man came around the desk, automatically straightening his gray business suit that matched the color of his skin, but stopped short of moving any closer to Griffin. "It's been a long time, son, and I've been worried about you, not knowing where you were or how you were doing."

He was a cool one, Griffin had to give him that. He continued to probe into his father's mind, searching through

the nooks and crannies of his thoughts and memories, digging deeper than he ever had with anyone.

"Are you ... are you doing that thing you do?" his father asked, his voice shaking a bit.

"Yes." Griffin felt no remorse for doing it either. "I'm tired of the crap that's been going on the past four years."

His father's expression crumpled and guilt flowed off him in murky waves—but again, not the kind of guilt Griffin was expecting.

"I know," Richard said. "I've had a lot of time to think about it and there's no excuse for the way I've behaved. I've been a very poor father to you."

Fighting his own confusion at the words and what he felt from his dad, Griffin gave a bitter laugh. "A poor father? That's a bit of an understatement, don't you think? You send fucking hit men after me for four years, almost put me in my grave more than once, and all you can say is that you've been a 'poor father'?"

At the horrified look on Richard's face, Griffin lost his cool.

"Oh, please! Don't look at me like you're shocked. Whether or not you like it or approve, I'm a telepath. I can read minds, including the minds of the men you've used to hunt me with over the years. Not only that, but they do talk, you know? The last message I got just this past week from one of them was, 'We'll tell your daddy your last words.'"

Richard was shaking his head. His eyes were wide. "I don't know what you're talking about," he gasped. "Griffin ... son ... I've never tried to hurt you. My gods, I would never even think of doing such a thing."

Griffin had passed the point of being calm enough to read his dad. All he saw was the man who'd ignored him, then turned on him. Too many years of hurt and fury surged through his veins to be reasonable.

"Fuck you! I know you think I must have overheard or mind-read some deep, dark secrets about your precious company the last time I tried to see you, secrets deep and dark enough you couldn't risk having them exposed. But here's some news for you ... I've never been around you long enough to read anything! I can't read people long distance. The only thing I read four years ago was yours and Aunt Susanna's fury that the butler had dared to let me in your house to wait for you. I left right after that, since it was obvious I wasn't wanted. So whatever you think I know, I don't."

His father stared at him, looking grayer even than before. Even his lips had turned gray, and he seemed to age another ten years as Griffin watched. His mouth opened like he wanted to speak, then closed again, only to open again.

"Griffin, I can say with all honesty I don't know what you've been through these past years, but it's not been done at my hand. I have no dirty secrets I'd be afraid of you knowing. I had no idea why you ran out four years ago. Your aunt ... she said she thought you were angry with me for being such a bad father and that's why you'd stayed away all this time."

Suddenly exhausted and wanting this over with so he could go home to Jarrah, Griffin shook his head. "Cut the crap, Dad. I came here tonight to tell you the game's up and

you *will* call off your henchmen right now or I'm walking straight out of here and going to the police."

"I really don't think so."

Griffin turned at the sound of the no-nonsense feminine voice. He discovered a tall, thin blonde—not a strand of gray showing in her severely pulled-back hair—dressed in a black-and-white form-fitting designer suit and heels that put her a good three inches taller than Griffin.

"Aunt Susanna," he said through gritted teeth. He'd never cared for his father's older sister, finding her abrasive even when he was a child, and he automatically reverted to his old habit of shutting her out. There never seemed to be anything decent going on in her head or heart, and poking around in her thoughts had always left him feeling shitty.

"Griffin." She stood poised in the doorway.

"Susanna, my son's been telling me disturbing stories. Someone's been trying to hurt him and they've led him to believe I was behind it."

"Well, imagine that." She pulled a palm-sized vid-phone out of the pocket of her suit and punched in a few numbers, then tucked it back away. "Do tell?"

"Get out. This is between my father and me," Griffin told her. Once upon a time she'd intimidated him. But no more.

"No, dear." She shut the door behind her and moved into the room to sit in a luxurious, padded leather chair near the desk. "It's a bit more complicated than that."

"Susanna, do you know anything about this?" Richard's voice was stronger now than it had been when she first entered the room.

"Sit down, Richard. You know I don't like it when you hover over me. Now, Griffin, dear, when I came in you mentioned something about the police. I don't think that's a wise idea at all. After all, you're the one who ran off and disappeared for four years to live on the streets. Do you really think they'd give your stories any credence?"

Something about her words bothered Griffin. And then it hit him. "How do you know where I've been living?"

She smiled, and a chill shot up Griffin's spine. "I would have to assume that's where you've been since you haven't tried to access any family funds."

Confusion rippled off his father. "You've been living on the streets?" he asked, gaping at Griffin. "Why, son? You've always had family resources at your disposal."

His dad wasn't the only one confused. Nothing was happening as Griffin had expected. His father wasn't at all who he'd thought he'd be.

Then, with a narrowed gaze, he turned to look at his aunt. And with a grimace, because he suddenly had a sick feeling in his gut he knew what he'd find, he lowered his guard to read her.

The duplicitous anger and hatred that poured off her nearly doubled Griffin over.

"You," he accused, fighting back roiling swells of nausea at the black emotion surging from her. With a barely restrained groan, he slammed closed his telepathic and empathic doors, shutting out everything around him until he could recover his composure.

She didn't bother denying it. Instead, she gave a negligent shrug. "From the day you were born you've been a thorn in my side."

"What the hell did I ever do to you?"

"You mean aside from being born?" she asked with a thin smile. She waved an airy hand toward his father. "You're Richard's son. And his heir."

"Susanna, what are you talking about?" Richard asked, still looking confused.

She shook her head and gazed at him in disdain. "You never have been very bright. The gods only know why Father chose you to head the company before he died."

"What are you saying?" Richard mumbled.

"She's saying she's a conniving bitch who has, apparently, been lusting after this damned freaking electric company all these years. And let me see if I can fill in some blanks here," he said, looking at his aunt, who gave him a curt nod and another snotty smile.

"She wanted the reins, but Grandfather gave them to you instead. Gave you the majority share of the company. And then you had the nerve to father a child, giving you an heir to your majority share. She couldn't do anything about you at that point without arousing suspicion, but she sure as shit could drive a wedge between you and me. It was her idea for me to be shipped off to boarding school when Mom died. And probably her idea to keep you from visiting me very often or for me to come home since she wouldn't want me to sniff out her schemes. How am I doing so far?"



Susanna continued to smile. Griffin turned to glance at his father, and saw he was even greener around the gills than he'd been before.

"When I showed up unexpectedly after I graduated from college, she was afraid I might have read her plans, so she decided it was time to take more permanent measures. She arranged a little accident for me and led me to believe my dear father was responsible. Then I'd be out of the way, and she'd be free to run the company through her puppet"—he looked at his dad once more—"which would be you. Then when you were gone, and I'm sure it would only have been a matter of time before you, too, had an accident, it would be all hers."

"You always were an annoyingly bright boy and I see you've become an annoyingly bright young man."

"Dear gods ... Susanna, is this true?" Richard gasped. He never had reseated himself as she'd ordered. One of his hands had risen to his heart in a classic pose of shock.

"Sit down, Richard! And you, too, boy. Neither of you are going anywhere, so you might as well relax. And before you get any ideas of bolting off"—she gave Griffin a pointed look as he edged toward the door—"I already have my personal security team on the way. You won't make it ten feet past that door. And should you try..." She pulled a lethal-looking pistol from her pocket and held it on Griffin.

"That's my weapon," Richard said, staring at her aghast. "From the safe in the outer office."

"Yes, and how convenient you had it there."

"Susanna, no! How could you? He's my son!"

Richard's face was pale and his hands shook. Griffin let down his guard enough to feel fear pulsing off him, although it was hard to tell where his dad's ended and his own began.

"Spare me," she snapped. "You haven't had time for him for years, so why get yourself into a dither now?"

She glanced at her watch and smiled. "In approximately one minute, neither of you will be my problem any longer. I hadn't seen this happening, but in truth, it couldn't have worked out better if I'd planned it myself!" The words were tinged with genuine delight. "The estranged son shows up to confront his murderous father, a struggle ensues, the boy takes his father's gun, shoots his father and then himself. A terrible tragedy, but not unexpected given the hostility between the two men over the years. And then the grieving sister and aunt will graciously soldier on in spite of her mourning and take ownership of the company."

Griffin's mouth was dry with terror. "You are a sick bitch."

He'd give anything to have Jarrah at his side right now, feel his strength. Would he ever see him again?

But he shoved aside the panic and desolation. *Yes, damn it.* He'd get through this. No way was he going down without a fight.

"Susanna, think about what you're doing," Richard begged. "For gods' sake, you can't do this!"

She rose, but the gun never wavered off Griffin. "Richard, my darling brother, *I'm* not doing anything. It's you and your son who have the issues that will, unfortunately for you both, lead to your deaths."

The doors burst open and three heavily armed, burly men dressed in black from head to toe, came through it and stood ready for her bidding. They were of the same ilk as those who'd attacked Griffin in the alley a week ago. Their weapons looked military. This wasn't a private security team ... more like hired mercenaries.

"Excellent!" Susanna said, and if she could have clapped her hands in delight, Griffin was sure she would have. As if she were directing a stage play, she continued, "Now, then, we'll need to mess things up a bit in here so it looks like there's been a struggle."

Two of her minions shoved Richard aside and set to work pulling books off shelves and toppling furniture. The other hovered next to her.

It was now or never. Griffin knew he was probably insane, but the moment his aunt turned to look at the damage her lackeys were doing, he lunged for the doors.

He was grabbed under the arms and shoved against the wall. His head cracked against the corner of a metal shelf. As he sank to the carpet, another wave of nausea churned in him, this time from pain.

"Foul little wretch!" Susanna snapped.

Raising his head from the floor and squinting through fuzzy vision, Griffin saw her turn to the man next to her, the one who'd caught Griffin and thrown him. She pressed her personal weapon into his gloved hand. "Take care of him using this. Of them both. And make it look like the boy killed his father, then himself."

"No!" he heard Richard yell. Saw him, out of the corner of his eyes, lurch toward his sister, but one of her mercenaries caught him around the waist and held him tight.

The mercenary who had Susanna's gun crossed toward Griffin where he lay on the floor. He grasped his arm and twisted it up, then with a brutal grip, put the gun in Griffin's hand, closed tight fingers around it, and made Griffin aim it at his own head.

Griffin fought him, trying to pull it away, but the man was too strong for him. He forced Griffin's finger around the trigger.

*I don't want to die, damn it!*

Unlike the last time he'd been at the edge of death and no memories of his life had flashed through his mind, this time he had intense visions of Jarrah, who had very quickly become so important to him, who had touched something deep inside him. He didn't want to leave Jarrah. He wanted to live.

A new flash of movement filled Griffin's vision, so fast it was almost a blur, although it was probably only his addled brain giving him that impression. A desperate fury filled the room with heat and flashing colors of red and bright orange, taking his breath away with its intensity. It wasn't his aunt's black horror. This was different. Livid. Powerful. And ... terrified. For him.

"Jarrah," he whispered, recognizing his lover's emotions.

The man who held him was bodily lifted in the air and thrown aside. The gun scudded to the carpet several feet away, and Griffin slumped back to the floor.

Another man, the one who'd held his father, went down next, dropping to his knees, then slipping into a heap not too far from Griffin.

Clawing his way to his feet, Griffin stared in blurry, morbid fascination as the third man fired a shot from his weapon, but it hit the ceiling in a harmless burst of sheetrock because he, too, was lifted and thrown across the room to slam into a glass-walled shelving unit. Glass shattered and the man's eyes closed as he slid to the floor.

Jarrah's pale, glowing gaze met his from across the room, assessing him, asking if he was okay. His fangs were bared, and he'd never looked more vampiric, but Griffin's knees almost buckled at the passionate intensity, the concern, and most of all the fear in his eyes.

"I'm okay," he started to say, but a shriek from his aunt stole the words from his mouth.

He turned in time to see his aunt, who'd picked the gun up off the floor, rising to her feet, holding Griffin in its sight. "I will have what I want," she screamed, shaking the gun at him.

As if it all happened in slow motion, Griffin watched her finger flinch on the trigger, heard the sharp report as the gun fired once, twice in quick succession, and stared in horror as his father dove in front of him to block it.

But Jarrah got there first.

The two shots hit Jarrah in the chest and he fell to the floor, his eyes closed. His teeth had retracted and he looked completely human and completely gone.

"No!" Griffin shouted. The leather jacket Jarrah wore parted and dark blood instantly spread across his pale gray T-shirt.

In a blind rage of sick grief, he scrambled over his lover, around his father, and tackled Susanna. She fell backward, Griffin on top of her, straddling her. The gun tumbled out of her hand and she desperately twisted to get it back, but Griffin grabbed it first. With one hand latched around her neck, squeezing, he aimed the gun at her temple. "You are not taking anything else from me," he growled, digging the weapon into her flesh.

She'd grown silent, her eyes wide and pleading, and Griffin read sheer terror twining with her malevolent hatred of him. But he didn't care. In the vague static at the back of his mind he thought he heard his father's voice telling him not to do it, but the only thing that filled his vision was the sight of Jarrah's still, bleeding body.

"He was..." His voice caught and he couldn't finish. "No more, you twisted bitch! You won't ever hurt me or anyone else." He stabbed the gun harder into her. She cried out a, pleading whine, but Griffin was beyond caring. His finger closed around the trigger, grief and fury driving him to a place he'd never been before.

But then solid arms curved around him from behind. "She's not worth it, Griffin."

The soft, raspy voice sent ripples of shock and need through him. He twisted his head to see who held him, even though every part of his being vibrated with the knowledge.

"You...?"

The faintest of smiles curved Jarrah's lips. "She can't kill me. Remember?"

"But I saw you fall. Saw your eyes closed."

"Guns can't kill me, but it doesn't mean it doesn't hurt like hell or pack a hell of a punch." Jarrah's gaze was pain-filled, but still very much alive. His long-fingered hand closed over the top of Griffin's gun hand. "Trust me, you don't want her death haunting you for the rest of your life. The police are on the way. Let them deal with her."

Swallowing hard, and suddenly trembling like crazy, Griffin let Jarrah pull the gun free and help him to his feet.

Susanna saw what she thought was an opening and tried to get to her feet to run, but Jarrah caught her and with only one hand, lifted her by her neck and pressed her against the wall.

"You aren't going anywhere," he growled, and as Griffin and his father, who'd come up to stand beside him, watched, Jarrah's fangs extended and his eyes burned with fury. "You will never again come near or have anything else to do with anyone in this family. If I find out you've so much as thought about Griffin or his father, it'll be your last thought."

He moved closer until his face was inches from hers and she was gasping in panic. "Unlike Griffin, I have no human qualms about murder. Don't ever give me reason to hear your name or see your face again. And don't *ever* come near what's mine or I'll kill you myself." He let the words hang in the air for a few seconds. "Do we understand each other?"

At her whimper and nod, he lowered her back to her feet, and shoved her into a corner, where she cowered and clutched her bruised throat.

The police invaded then, snapping digitally locked restraints on Susanna and her three henchmen, who, Griffin was surprised to discover, weren't dead, only damaged. He shot a quick glance at Jarrah, who'd reverted to his human look the moment the police entered and had zipped up his jacket to cover the blood on his shirt. He smiled at Griffin and Griffin felt him open his mental and emotional walls completely and heard Jarrah say to him in his mind, "I told you ... I have no desire to be a killer."

When questions had been asked and answered, and Jarrah revealed he'd tracked the two men he'd found in the alley last week, the ones who'd tried to kill Griffin, saying he'd found a trail back to Susanna Hilliard, and Richard confirmed he had nothing to do with any of it, the police departed. Griffin, his father, and Jarrah were alone in the upended office.

The silence was awkward, but Jarrah broke it by holding out his hand to the older man. Richard gaped up at him, and Griffin read his fear and uncertainty—the man had seen Jarrah transform and, having never experienced anything like that in his sheltered, privileged life, was quaking in his expensive shoes.

For Griffin, it was a test of sorts. He wasn't sure what he felt about his father, wasn't sure he was ready to forgive him or trust him in spite of what he'd learned about Susanna and her nefarious plans, or the fact his father had tried to save his life by lunging in front of the bullets meant for him. That



meant something, yes. But in spite of all that, his father had still deserted him emotionally years ago, had never been there for him, and shown little interest in his life. He'd indicated remorse for that when Griffin had first arrived, but Griffin wasn't sure how much of that had been blowing smoke and how much had been the truth.

If Richard refused to shake hands with Jarrah, Griffin knew he'd walk out of here and never see the man again because it meant Richard could never accept him for who he was and the life he had already decided he was going to live with Jarrah.

Finally, nodding his head as if he'd come to some decision, Richard held out his own hand.

"Jarrah Kincaid."

"Richard Hilliard. Y-You saved my son's life. Thank you."

It sounded sincere and a tiny portion of Griffin's heart began to thaw.

Jarrah turned and brushed a strand of hair off Griffin's forehead. "You okay?"

His touch was so tender and his gaze so filled with emotion moisture stung the back of Griffin's eyes. He nodded.

"I'm going to give you two some time alone. I'll be right outside the door if you need me."

Griffin nodded again, unable to form words.

Jarrah pressed a light kiss to his lips, then he was gone, shutting the double doors behind him.

Steeling himself against the shock he already felt radiating off his father, Griffin turned to face the older man.

"I ... I didn't know. That you preferred males."

"I don't prefer 'males' in general. I prefer Jarrah."

"H-He's a..."

"Vampire."

Richard nodded. Fear still caused his heart to flutter. "I didn't know such things ... people ... existed outside of stories."

"He's important to me," Griffin said, surprised he was telling his father anything so personal.

"You're obviously important to him, too." Richard's eyes closed for a moment, and Griffin felt old memories stir in the man. "He looks at you the way your mother used to look at me, rest her soul."

Then his eyes opened and his gaze focused back on Griffin. "I don't expect you to forgive me, son. I had no idea what was going on in Susanna's head, nor was I ever part of her plans. But that doesn't excuse how I treated you over the years. It was Susanna's idea to send you away to school, and at the time, you looked so much like your mother—you have her eyes and hair, you know?—and I missed her so much, that it broke my heart to see her in you. It broke my heart even more to send you away, but Susanna insisted..."

He grimaced. "Well, it doesn't matter anymore what she insisted. And the blame for keeping you away falls squarely at my own feet. I know that."

Griffin wasn't sure how to respond to his father's words. Wasn't sure how they made him feel.

Richard sank onto the edge of the desk and rubbed his eyes. "Clearly I have some reexamining of my life to do. This company has eaten away my life, absorbed all my time, and

made me oblivious to everything that's gone on around me. Including my own son." His shadowed gaze met Griffin's. "After your mother died, it was my escape. I used it to stay busy day and night and keep my mind off how much I missed her. But then I guess it just took over."

He sighed. "I can't promise I know how to do everything right, and I know you may very well choose to walk out that door, slam it behind you, and never see me again. I can't blame you if you do. But ... should you ever decide you can tolerate a hopeless old man ... maybe we can leave the door cracked?" he asked.

Griffin swallowed hard and studied the elaborately carved wood sculpture of a swan that lay on the floor near the desk, its head broken off. He picked it up and caressed the smooth, dark wood, then set the two pieces on the desk.

"I don't know how I feel about you. Sometimes over the years I've hated you."

He felt his father wince in pain at that.

"But sometimes ... I've missed you," Griffin admitted. "Missed having a family." He raised his head and met his father's tremulous gaze. "I hear what you're saying, but I honestly don't know if I want or need anything from you at this point."

Richard nodded, his eyes sorrowful. "I understand."

Griffin nodded as well and turned to leave. He paused a few feet from the door when he spied a framed photograph lying on the floor. He bent to pick it up and brushed his hand across the glass, wiping off white dust that had fallen on it from the damaged ceiling. Emotion welled in his chest.

The smiling faces of his much-younger father, his beautiful, gentle-eyed mother, and himself as a curly-headed, pink-cheeked toddler shone up at him.

"May I take this?" he asked, without looking at his father.

"Of course."

He nodded and clutched it to his chest. But he paused, his hand on the gleaming brass door knob, and glanced back over his shoulder to find his father's slumped, defeated form still seated on the corner of the desk.

"I'm okay with leaving the door cracked. Dad."

His dad looked up at him and hope shimmered in his eyes and his aura. "You're welcome anytime. And so is your partner."

Griffin nodded, and a slow warmth built in him.

His partner. Jarrah. He smiled and nodded.

He found the partner in question gazing out the huge window at the darkened megalopolis below that stretched for a hundred miles in every direction. "Everything okay?" Jarrah asked, turning to him.

"Yeah. I think so."

Jarrah took the framed picture Griffin handed him and looked at it with a soft smile.

"Can you put it in your jacket pocket and keep it safe?"

"Of course." He tucked the picture away and reached for Griffin's hand.

"Let's get out of here," Griffin said. "I need some fresh air."

When they'd exited the towering building, Jarrah pulled Griffin around a corner, then grabbed him by the shoulders

and none-too-gently shoved him up against the wall of the brick building, in the shadows.

"Don't ever, ever do that again." His voice was rife with concern and his eyes overflowing with emotion.

"Do what?" Griffin asked, hating that he'd upset Jarrah, but once again not totally sure what he'd done.

"Don't ever go off by yourself into danger like that again, Griffin. Fuck. Do you know what they could have done to you if I hadn't shown up? All you had to do was say something and I would have come here with you. But instead you snuck off and left me to track you down. I only managed to put two and two together in time to get here and alert the police what I'd found." Fear radiated off him with such intensity it completely rattled Griffin.

"I'm sorry," Griffin whispered. "I just didn't want you to blame yourself or feel like you should have been able to prevent it if things went bad. I didn't want you to feel guilty, didn't want you to hurt anymore. You've been hurt enough."

"Do you honestly think if something had happened to you, if they'd killed you, I wouldn't hurt?" Jarrah's voice was raw with pain. "I don't care if I am a fucking vampire and I'm supposed to want to suck your blood and kill you. I don't. I need you. I'm in love with you, Griffin, and I damn well don't want to lose you."

Griffin's insides churned and his chest squeezed so tight he couldn't breathe. "You love me?" he whispered.

Jarrah stared over his shoulder at the wall, clearly trying to master his emotions. "Yes, damn it. And the thought of being

without you is just too horrible to bear. When I saw you there with that gun pressed to your head..." His voice broke.

Griffin reached up and grasped Jarrah's face, turning it so the taller man was looking at him once again. "I love you, too. Everything about you. I'm so in love with you I can't think straight, but I was afraid to tell you ... afraid you'd think I was just a weak, mushy human."

"You are a weak, mushy human," Jarrah murmured, "but that's exactly why I love you." His mouth closed over Griffin's in a hard kiss. But it slowly turned probing and provocative, with hands wandering, caressing, and groins straining together.

When Jarrah flinched as Griffin's hand slid beneath his jacket, Griffin pulled his mouth away.

"Shit. You're really hurt. Tell me what to do," he said, looking up at Jarrah.

"I'll be fine. I'll take the slugs out when we get home."

At Griffin's shudder, he smiled. "You don't have to watch. And don't worry, vampires heal fast."

"You better. I don't like the idea of you being in pain. It hurts me. Here." He pressed his palm against his own heart and closed his eyes. "For the longest time I couldn't feel you at all. But now, I feel you more deeply than I've felt anyone. It's like our souls are intertwined or something."

Jarrah let down his guard completely and emotion flowed from him, swirling around Griffin. Only the tiniest bit was pain. The rest was love and desire and a burgeoning peace.

"I think they are," Jarrah said softly. "I feel it, too." He lifted Griffin's chin so their gazes met—hot, needful, and

loving. "Let's go home. And when we get there, in spite of the bit of doctoring I'm going to have to do, don't think you're not in deep shit trouble for running out on me and putting yourself in danger."

"Trouble?" Griffin asked, his heart suddenly fluttering in his chest. "What kind of trouble?"

"The kind that involves your bare ass and my palm."

Surging ripples of need shot through Griffin. "Fuck," he whispered, his throat so dry he could barely speak.

Jarrah's smile turned his heart upside down. He nuzzled his nose against Griffin's cheek, then whispered against his ear, "That comes afterward. But don't worry, once I have your ass nicely warmed up, I'll kiss it all better, then fuck you so long and thoroughly you'll forget all about anything but the pleasure."

"God in hell," Griffin muttered, quoting Jarrah's favorite phrase.

Jarrah's soft laugh filled him with love. And contentment. And for the first time since he was a kid, Griffin knew he was no longer alone, knew that at last he'd found home.

## **M. L. Rhodes**

Award-winning author M.L. Rhodes has been writing for a living for nearly twelve years. Along with the erotic romance fiction she currently pens for Amber Quill Press, she's also published everything from poetry, to magazine articles, to traditional romance, to steamy romantic suspense novels. In her fiction works, her characterization and emotional storytelling have received high critical acclaim from such places as *Romantic Times Magazine*, *The Romance Studio*, and *JERR* and have garnered her numerous awards in the writing industry.

In her man love stories, she enjoys pairing together strong, independent heroes who are open to exploring both their sexuality and their emotions. Men can and do fall in love with one another every day, and M.L. believes in celebrating that!

If you'd like to keep up with what's going on in M.L.'s world and find out about her new and upcoming releases, surf on over to her website at [www.mlrhodeswriting.com](http://www.mlrhodeswriting.com). She also loves hearing from readers. You can reach her at [ML@mlrhodeswriting.com](mailto:ML@mlrhodeswriting.com).

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