

Ex-Files 4: Vicky the Vixen

Dakota Cassidy

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Dedication

For VB -- In honor of your wacky sense of humor -- your love of anything insane and outrageous -- the support you lavish me with in super-sized portions. You are nothing short of a dynamo! Genuine, true and blessed with eternal optimism. For this, and more than my words can ever depict -- I am endlessly grateful. This last one's for you, darling Vixen...

With love always,

Dakota

Chapter One

Holy fucking hefty bag, Batman.

That's what Maddie would say and she'd have to agree.

Victoria Rawlings gulped and fought back another round of nervous giggles as she wandered through the Bondage Fair with her sexually challenged fellow road trip companions, trying not to gawk at the latex lover's booth. Somehow, she just couldn't summon up a single tingle over being covered in plastic.

What about this particular fetish spoke romantic? Personally, Victoria rather thought one could find the same effect if you wore a pair of rubber gloves while washing the dishes. Speaking of rubber gloves, she wished she'd brought a pair... that way she couldn't get a disease of some kind from all the sweaty exhibitions going on around her. Victoria shuddered just thinking about how unprotected she was from icky *germs*.

She closed her eyes and breathed, once, twice. Ahhhh... When the need to wash her hands or clean *anything* overwhelmed her, her sex counselor said she should breathe and get a grip on what really bothered her. Not being in control of her environment was her *real* problem, especially considering she was at a Bondage Fair. This was about as uninhibited and out of control as Victoria ever hoped to get. Her nice sex teacher said that all inhibitions were to be left at the door.

Or your clothes, whichever you could dispose of first, it would seem.

Victoria chose to keep both, thank you. There were some things one just shouldn't do while prancing about in what looked a great deal like the black plastic bags she used in the kitchen garbage can. However, in the spirit of *vive la difference* Victoria passed each exhibition booth with feigned interest.

Martin bumped into her just as they were passing the rows of floggers. Victoria pondered the floggers' far reaching leather strips and figured she could probably nail a cobweb or two on her cathedral ceilings with one of those bad boys.

Martin leaned over her shoulder and snickered, "I like the purple ones myself."

Yes, darling and you also like a good high heel Prada Popsicle... "They are pretty colors, Martin," Victoria murmured, admiring the detailed braiding on one. She almost reached out to touch it when Martin put his hand on hers and she froze.

"I like *you*, Victoria..."

Victoria fought a shudder and breathed again. This was a situation she *could* control. "No, Martin, you like my *shoes*. Now what did our nice therapist tell us about invading fellow members' personal space? If it's not my kink then you must respect that, right, Martin?"

Martin heaved a sigh and let go of Victoria's hand. "You're right. I'm sorry, Victoria, but they're soooo pretty," he said as he pointed to her perfect black heels.

Yes, yes, they were pretty and she didn't want Martin drooling on them. Martin had a shoe fetish and that was becoming okay with Victoria just so long as they weren't *her* heels he was frothing at the mouth for.

Victoria strolled along as leisurely as one could with all the thwacking of floggers, panting and eyeball popping exhibitions. This was so totally out of her realm of thinking that she didn't even have the wherewithal to be as shocked as she supposed she should be.

Sex.

Victoria really just wanted to have sex. Was that too much to ask? She wanted to roll in the sheets of lust, coming up only for bouts of air and nourishment. She'd even be up for some sweating if it meant she could have what her friends from Divorcées Anonymous had. Maddie, Maxie and Katy all had men in their lives now. Each had completed a journey that left them with the man of their dreams.

When they gathered once a week for their informal meetings at a local bar, Victoria listened with envy to them talk of all this warm fuzzy nonsense that had them gushing and having *sex*.

Gak. Victoria hadn't ever gushed about any man. That could explain why she was divorced, but she'd sure like to have that glow the girls' faces had.

Her cell phone rang from deep within her purse, interrupting her gloom. The theme to *The X-Files'* eerie music was a welcome distraction in light of her surroundings. Victoria chose the tune because that's what her friend Maddie called their group of friends -- using her standard, wise cracking play on words. "The Ex-Files." Suitably dubbing what each of the divorcées were -- ex's. Victoria flipped open her cell and answered, "Victoria Rawlings."

"Vic?"

"Hi, Maddie. It's me."

"How ya doing?"

"Well, darling, as well as can be expected if one takes into account the germ-laden, sweat-riddled, kinky, freaky goings on at a Bondage Fair." Victoria wrinkled her nose as if she could show Maddie how distasteful she found this event.

Maddie barked a giggle. "Oooh, Vic, didja do the nasty yet? I mean, have you found a kink that will really make you lose control?"

Victoria eyed the booth where two women catered to men in oversized playpens. Each were handed bottles and wore diapers.

Attractive indeed. Very appealing on many levels.

Not.

"Um no, darling. Absolutely not."

"Viiicky!" Maddie chided, "are you giving this your best effort, or are you silently mocking them in your head? Not everyone is like Victoria, you know. Different strokes for different folks and all."

Victoria sighed. Different was one thing, but diapers bordered the nut-house if you asked her. She'd overheard someone say it had to do with reliving your childhood

or something therapeutic like that. “Well, I really don’t think I’m comfortable with the idea that someone wants to have sex with a hefty bag on and I don’t know about you, my little sex fiend, but the idea of having someone put one of those -- ball -- er -- ball --”

“Ball gags?” Maddie filled in the blank for her.

“Yes! That’s it. I can’t even begin to imagine how one would disinfect after use.” Victoria groaned. This just wasn’t for her. What had begun as a superhuman effort on her part to gain control of her compulsive behaviors was turning into germ-fest two-thousand-six. Victoria shuddered. This was just so not her. She wanted to go home to her immaculate condo and her bacteria free shower. At least she thought it was bacteria free.

Oh, shit, had she forgotten to spray it down before she left? Oh, God only knew the fungi that might grow while she was gone, simmering like a pot of pasta sauce just waiting to nail her with an infection.

Using the pamphlet from a nearby booth, she fanned herself. Victoria needed a shower.

A long, germ reducing shower.

Her emotions began to run rampant, overwhelming her with the need to escape.

“Vicky honey, calm down. I hear panic in your voice. Listen to me, sweet cheeks. I know this is uncomfortable and I know you might choose to never indulge in any of these things. That’s fine, but try and see this as a learning experience for what you *don’t* want in a new sexual experience, okay?”

“I’m fairly certain a man in diapers is something I do not wish to indulge in, Maddie,” Victoria replied haughtily. Who was she kidding? None of this was appealing to her. Not one single leather-clad, latex-wearing, Depends-sporting thing.

“Diapers? Look Vic, chill out and stop being so damn stuffy. We’re all different. You’ve heard the speech. Just take it with a grain of salt and when all is said and done, you’ll have something to talk about with us on karaoke night.”

Victoria’s bottom lip trembled. “I want to go hooome, Maddie,” she whined into the phone in a hushed whisper, hoping her counselor wouldn’t catch her.

Victoria heard shuffling and then Maxie's voice. "Victoria Rawlings, cut this shit out now. *Carajo!* It's a one-day field trip, for goodness sake. Now listen to me and listen well, *corazon*. Do you want to be a dried up, shriveled old prune, alone with nothing but her disinfectant and a rocking chair? Maybe those goatherds in Tibet appeal more to you? Because that's just what you'll be doing -- herding goats if you don't get a freakin' grip and find some avenue you can take to get to 'Boinking Road!'"

"You know, Maxie, just because you and the Lucky Charms hunk have found connubial bliss doesn't mean that we *all* will," Victoria yelled back, referring to Maxie's hunk o' hubby, Kellen. He was Gaelic or Celtic or some such corned beef and cabbage thing. He'd swept Maxine off of her feet after a horrible ordeal with her ex from an abusive marriage. And that was peachy, but he didn't have a brother so Maxie shouldn't be giving her advice.

"Arghhh! Victoria, stop being a baby and go find someone to 'do' before I drive over there and find one of those ball gags to stuff your mouth shut!"

Victoria gasped into the phone. The horror... "That was cruel, Maxie. I mean, how would you feel if you couldn't have sex with Kellen because you were afraid of germs?"

Maxie sighed in exasperation. "Vic, do you want to have sex?"

Sex, yes. She'd very much like to have sex. "Yes."

"Do you think you can do that with a bottle of Mr. Clean and some rubber gloves?"

God only knew, it just might be a possibility after what she'd witnessed today. "No, I guess not."

Maxie's tone was sharp. "Then pay attention. Hang up this phone and stop judging everyone who isn't like you. God save us all from that. I love you, Victoria, but sometimes you're a whiny, condescending, simpering brat!"

Oh really? "Well, listen up, Ms. Do-it-till-your-toes-curl! I'm going to do just that. I'll show you who's a whiny brat! I'm going to find some man and fuck -- his -- brains -- out! Do you hear me? Fuck till I drop!" Victoria yelled into the cell phone, then wiped

the mouthpiece for fear she might have left her spit behind. Human saliva was breeding ground for germs.

Maxine began to giggle. "Well, good for you. It'll save us the trouble of hiring someone to 'do' you." Victoria gasped again, but Maxie continued, ignoring her. "But you can't do that while we're on the phone with you, now can you? Bye, Vic, we love you..."

The phone went dead.

Well, wasn't this just lovely. Even her friends thought she couldn't get past her obsession and find a man.

Victoria squared her shoulders and huffed again as she marched right toward the flogger section of the Bondage Fair. She was going to buy a flogger and then she was going to find some hot guy to use it on her.

Flog me, baby. But good.

Yeah, that would shut them up.

Chapter Two

Well, it *did* work on the cobwebs. Just like she'd suspected.

Victoria sat despondently on her immaculate white couch, scanning the purple and gold flogger she'd purchased at the Bondage Fair just after she'd picked up some furry handcuffs.

It really was pretty.

Okay, so sex wasn't on the agenda tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

Or not.

She was never going to have sex sitting alone in her perfect condominium with her perfectly clean things. Wait, that wasn't entirely true. According to the "toy lady" she could have sex whenever she wanted to if she bought the multi-colored vibrator called The Winsome Warrior. Victoria groaned and settled back on her couch, running her hands over the pristine fabric. She'd showered twice after the Bondage Fair. Then scrubbed down her shower and showered again just for good measure.

She really was a loser. If all she could find to do on a Friday night was shower and it wasn't even for a good reason, she'd attained a new level of loser.

She wanted to stop this madness, but she didn't know how to keep her fears at bay. Victoria hated anything that wasn't clean and in perfect order. It made most people nuts just to be around her. It was making her nuts. No matter how hard she tried not to play the game she'd created in her head she couldn't seem to stop it. If she didn't wash her hands at least twenty-two times a day, then she couldn't breathe. She'd tried twenty-one once and her hands began to feel like she'd run them through mud even though logically, she knew they were spotless. The number twenty-two was only good if she didn't do something icky like clean the toilets. Then all bets were off and she had to wash her hands thirty times.

If her pillows on the couch weren't diagonally lined up she couldn't sleep. She hated having anyone over because they messed everything up and it took hours to scrub all available surfaces.

She hadn't always been like this. There'd been no doubt she liked order while growing up, but this was a whole new level of order. This was insane and somehow she had to stop it.

Her friend Katy said it was because as her married life careened out of control the only order Victoria could find was in the numbers game she played in her head. It gave her a sense of safety. No one could take her numbers from her even if they could take her couch and her crystal vases from Italy -- they were her life.

Katy was a counselor who used to specialize in obsessive-compulsive disorders. Now she didn't work nearly as hard as she once did since she and her ex-husband Garret had gotten back together. Even Katy had someone.

Victoria wanted someone, too, but not someone like her. Someone who could take her mind off her compulsivity and help her focus on *other* things.

For instance -- the nasty as Maddie called it.

Yep. She wanted to do the nasty and forget that it was unclean.

Vicky wanted to boink -- schtupp -- do the hump-backed beast, and she hoped to do it soon.

Really soon.

Restless, Victoria strolled to her sliding glass doors and listened to the sound of the waves crashing. She loved her condo on the beach. She just didn't like the beach -- it rather grossed her out. It was dirty and sand got in your everything.

Victoria shuddered, but as she looked up at the full moon, something beckoned to her. Sliding open the squeaky clean door, and careful not to leave smudges on the glass, she stepped out on her small patio and took a deep breath.

The salty air clung to her nostrils as the wind whipped at her silk pajamas. Victoria cocked her head and listened to what she thought was the whistle of the breeze.

Tentatively, she stepped out toward the stairs that led to the beach. A dark figure hovered in the distance. Vicky squinted to try and decipher whether it was some lunatic who had a death wish or if someone needed help.

A head bobbed on the horizon, then dipped into the water. The silhouette of arms reached high toward the moonlight, slipped into the dark waves and then she couldn't see them anymore. Whoever it was, they weren't that far off in the distance. About two hundred feet from the shoreline.

Oh, shit. Drowning, someone was drowning!

Vicky didn't know what to do first. Run inside and call 911, scream for help, or worse, run through the icky sand to help.

Icky sand? C'mon Vik, this is someone's life we're talking about here. Okay, that was Maddie in her head.

Oh, God. Yes, someone's life... she had to act and act now. Vicky sprinted down the steps and ran over the stretch of sand, heedless of the shells that tore at her feet and the mess it was making of her silk pajamas.

Her heart clamored in her chest and crashed in her ears, mingling with the roar of the tide. She dove for the water, freezing cold and stinging her eyes.

Victoria hadn't been swimming in a long time because it was just too horrifying to think about what the waters were polluted with, but it was just like riding a bike. She stroked in clean swipes through the water, slicing into it as she searched the water frantically.

He hadn't been that far out when she'd seen him from the patio. Jesus, she had to find whoever it was. Out of the corner of her eye, Vicky saw a shadow and dog paddled to her left to see what it was. A head, sleek and dark, glistened with water as it popped up, then slipped beneath the surface.

Vicky swam frantically toward it, pounding the water and damning her silk pajamas for weighing her down. As she cleared her eyes of water, she bumped into something hard and solid -- warm despite the freezing temperatures of the water.

She jammed her hands down under the water and came in contact with what felt like a biceps. Latching onto it, she tugged, pulling the arm up over her shoulder and scissoring her legs, swimming toward shore. Her fingers slipped down over a forearm and grasped the hand that seemed to have life in it because it was clenching hers. It was a big hand too...

Vicky struggled to pull the weight of the body behind her, fighting the waves and the undertow. Her lungs screamed for air as she dragged herself and her passenger toward the shore.

Her feet touched the sand and from there on out she dug her feet into the sand for leverage as she hauled the heavy body to blissful safety.

Gasping for air, Vicky swung around and, for the first time, got a look at her good deed for the millennium.

Oh, oh, oh...

A sinfully gorgeous, dark-haired man with the smile of an Adonis gazed back up at her from her feet. The moonlight played over his long body with so many muscles she could spend all day counting them and still need more time. He put his hands behind his head and locked his fingers together, grinning. "Um, thanks, I think."

Vicky stood over the body of the most luscious specimen of man she'd ever seen and used her forearm to wipe the hair plastered to her eyes. "You were drowning..." she murmured, her teeth chattering in the cool air.

A low rumble of a chuckle erupted from his throat. "Er, I was surfing and I lost my board somewhere out there. Damn, it was sweet too. Anyway, I'm always up for a little mouth-to-mouth if you are." He sat up and rose to his feet.

Vicky's gaze was forced to move upward as he did, like really far upward, like so far she got a kink in her neck from it.

He smiled again at her. "Hi, I'm Kale," he said all friendly like she hadn't just hauled his hot ass through the water like some *Baywatch* babe, saving a survivor from the *Titanic*. Vicky squinted and glanced again at his smile.

Um, was that like some sort of surfer mouth guard, dude?

Vicky huffed, still trying to catch her breath, and took a step back from tall, dark and stunning, then she took a step forward, unable to draw her eyes from his teeth.

She reached a shaky hand upward and touched the glistening porcelain of his tooth, shimmering in the moonlight.

Omigod. They were long and pointy and -- and -- like, well, like... Vicky couldn't finish the thought because the hunky surfer frowned, the smile leaving his face, and that was the last thing Vicky saw before she hit the sand in a wet lump of silk.

Chapter Three

Kale Ohana paced the clean, white carpet of the hot babe's condo as he tried to figure out what to do.

He glimpsed his teeth in the gold plated mirror she had hanging on the wall over the couch where she lay, prone and naked, but for the blanket he'd covered her with.

Shitpissfuck! How could he have been so careless? Sometimes when he surfed he forgot all about everything and his incisors were a big part of *everything*.

Kale couldn't surf during the day, so he did it at night when no one could see him. Surfing was orgasmic to him, hence his teeth popped out from time-to-time.

Now he'd scared the living shit out of someone as a result.

He smiled. She'd been trying to save him. She was tough as hell, dragging him through the water like Mark Spitz.

Her auburn hair spilled out behind her and the blanket hugged her soft curves.

Kale's groin responded in kind. She was pretty smokin', even wet and bedraggled. The first whiff he'd taken of her had sent him to an edge he'd never wandered even close to. Her scent was musky, sweet, and the blood that coursed through her veins, deliciously coppery. Fighting the impulse to gaze upon her neck, smooth and pale, Kale turned away from her and wondered what to do next.

She had saved him.

She'd been quite the trouper when she did.

Wasn't it courteous to at least thank her for her efforts?

Would she remember his fangs when she woke? That could well put him and her at risk.

He'd avoided trouble with humans. Lusting for a human, well, that was an open invitation for trouble.

Her moan roused him from his worries and Kale went to her, staring down at her while she fought to open her eyes.

If she was freaked out about him, her mouth wasn't what he'd have considered a good gauge.

Cuz it spewed like a volcano.

She sat up, scurrying to the arm of the couch and eyeing him with narrowed suspicion. "Who are you and what are you doing in my house?"

"I am the proud recipient of the fruits of your lifeguard certification," he said, smiling at her.

"You're all wet," she accused.

"Yep. So are you."

She lifted the blanket and screeched in horror. "You've ruined my couch! Do you have any idea how much this cost? The earth is how much it cost! It's chintz and silk and now -- now it's got salt water on it. Oh, God, I'll be here for days trying to clean this and it may never be right again," she accused, her eyes flashing brilliant shades of green in anger.

"It's just a little water. What's the big deal?"

"The big deal?" she yelled at him. "The big deal is it's my couch and it's -- well, it's --" she trailed off and he watched her face. It became flushed with what looked like confusion.

"Yeah, it's a *couch* and a couch can be replaced. You didn't lose a limb. It's not a Ming vase."

She seemed to consider that for a moment before she said, "Who are you and why were you swimming so late at night?"

Sticking his hand out, he offered it to her. "I'm Kale Ohana. It's nice to meet you and I'm a night owl, I guess. I wasn't drowning by the way. Just swimming."

"What kind of an utter maniac swims when the water is so cold and at night, no less, without a swimming buddy?"

The kind that has fangs and is immortal and doesn't feel the cold water and couldn't die if he tried? "I'm new here, so I didn't have a buddy to swim with. You wanna be my buddy?"

"Not likely," she said on a snort. "Well, Kale, seeing as you're not the victim of a potential drowning, you can go home now. Thanks for bringing me inside." Dismissing him as if he were the carpet cleaner, she rose, wrapping the blanket around her and moved with brisk steps to her kitchen. Her immaculate kitchen. Rooting around under the sink, she began taking bottles of cleanser out, placing them on the counter. She didn't seem at all concerned that he might be a serial killer, here to rape and pillage. She seemed far more worried about her chintz couch and the possible damage a little salt water had done to it.

He leaned over the breakfast bar and smiled casually when she popped her head back up. "What's your name?"

Frowning, she waved her hand at him. "What difference does it make?"

Shrugging his shoulders he said, "Well, you know my name and I think it's only fair I know yours because, after all, I did save you."

Shaking her head, her auburn hair still wet and clinging to her cheeks, she clucked her tongue. "No, I saved you."

"Then, I'd like to know the name of the person who put her life on the line for me."

Rolling her eyes, she picked up a bottle of cleanser and read the back while she said, "Victoria Rawlings."

"Nice to meet you, Vicky."

"Victori-a," she corrected.

Well, la-di-da. "Victoriaaaaa," he drawled back.

"Okay, so we've introduced ourselves. Made nice. Thanked each other for the lifeguard antics, now we're done. Go home."

Ignoring her, Kale watched while she frantically read the backs of bottles with wild eyes. "I live just a couple of condos down from you."

"Good, that's nice."

"I just moved here. I like it."

"Excellent. How thrilling."

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough."

He chuckled. "You're not very neighborly."

"I'm not Mr. Rogers."

He threw his head back and laughed.

The shrill of the phone startled her and she tucked the blanket closer to her, flying to the other end of the pristine chrome and white kitchen to get it. Her mood was frantic and disoriented and Kale found that intriguing. He'd never seen anyone get so worked up over a couch. Vicky was quite the little number, with an obvious fetish for order.

For some inexplicable reason, he wanted to mess that order up and he wasn't sure if it was because it would be facetious and fun to watch her lose the order she so obviously craved, or something more.

Victoria grabbed the phone like it was a lifeline. She'd tried to remain calm, but her heart pounded wildly. Kale was big and hunky and potentially on the hunt for his next victim of murder.

A strange man was in her home and for a mere second, Victoria had to ponder how ludicrous it was that she was torn between cleaning her couch and the possibility that this man might chop her up into little pieces.

Pressing the talk button, Victoria answered, "Hello?"

"Vic? It's Maddie. I figured I'd better call. You were pretty upset today and I just wanted to say, you go girl. I'm real proud of you for getting through it without freaking."

Victoria smiled into the phone, but remained silent, watching Kale toy with the bottles of cleanser on her countertop. Seeing his hands wrapped around the bottle made

Victoria want to feel them wrapped around her. Lean, tapered fingers closed over the white bottle and she had to swallow hard.

"Vic? You there?"

Clearing her throat, she coughed. "Yes."

"So talk to me. Tell me how today went. Did you find a kink that you might like?"

"Um, no." Victoria couldn't focus with Kale touching the bottles of cleanser and she had to attribute that to the possibility that he might kill her. Did serial killers use a special brand name to clean up the mess, so when the CSI people showed up there was no evidence?

Maddie sighed into the phone. "That's okay, cookie. You'll find something soon. I know you will. Hey, I have some really great news," she said, excitement clear in her voice.

"Really?"

"Yep. Cole and I are going to tie the knot. All official-like and everything."

"That's nice, Maddie."

"Nice?" she yelped in disbelief. "Nice? Just nice? I just told you I'm going to put the old ball and chain back around my freakin' neck, something you know freaks me out, and you call it *nice*?"

"I'm sorry, Maddie. I think I'm just distracted."

"Victoria," Kale called from the other end of the kitchen. "I think I've found just the thing to clean the couch."

"Who is *that*?" Maddie asked with disbelief lacing her tone.

A mass murderer? No, she couldn't say that, it might tip him off and he'd strangle her with the phone cord. Wait, she didn't have a cord on her phone. It was cordless. "A man," she offered vaguely.

"OMIGOD! You have a *man* in your house? Like a real live, living, breathing guy with something hanging between his legs, man?"

Victoria caught herself looking between his thickly muscled thighs and blushed, looking away. "Yes," she said on a hoarse whisper.

"Oh, Vickster! I'm sooooo proud of you! Wait, tell me something. Why didn't you call us and tell us you were bringing a man home? What's the rule, Victoria Rawlings? You call each of us and give us all the details. We call you to check on you. A lot. It's safe dating in the new millennium, miss. I want to hear all the details, now."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't have any."

Maddie snorted, then laughed. "You can't talk because you had sex, didn't you?" Her words were excited and rushed.

"No," Victoria shot back just as rapidly. "No, I did not have sex!" The word sex came out on a high-pitched squeal of denial and she turned to find Kale watching her. "No," she lowered her voice to a whisper. "No sex."

"How could you have a man in your house and not be at least leaning toward having sex?"

"Beca -- because..."

"Because what?" Maddie prodded. "If he's nice looking and he seems interested, what more can you ask for? You were obviously interested because he's in the Pristine Palace right now. You don't invite just anyone over to Chez Vicky. Hell, you don't invite us, we just barge in. So what gives?"

Gathering her focus, Victoria said, "Maddie? I have to go. I'm fine and I'll have sex when I'm good and ready!" She clicked the phone off in a flurry of fingers.

Kale eyed her from the far end of the kitchen. He smiled, broad and wicked.

Ohhhhh, that smile was so -- so -- knowing. As though it held the secret to all of the wonders of the world.

He cocked an eyebrow in her direction, obviously questioning her outburst.

Victoria took a deep breath and tightened her hold on the blanket around her, remaining silent.

"Sex, huh?" he finally said.

"You were eavesdropping."

"No, I just have really good hearing."

"Well, it's none of your business," Victoria shot back curtly.

"You're right and on that note, I'm going to hit the bricks. It's late and you have a couch to disinfect."

He made it sound so trivial.

Who was she kidding? It *was* trivial.

Jesus, she had a brick shithouse in her condo and she was worried about a dirty couch.

Oh, her issues had taken on new levels of insanity.

In two strides, Kale was standing in front of her, smiling. He placed two large hands on her shoulders and gripped them with light fingers. The warmth of his fingers curling into her shoulders brought with it a burst of electricity. Small pinpricks of a current that almost made her gasp out loud.

Kale didn't just stand in front of her either, he loomed. His frame was intimidating and soothing all at once. It stole her breath and the air between them virtually crackled, humming with something Victoria didn't understand. He looked like the kind of man who could be very pleasant until someone fucked with his chi, as Maddie often said. She'd wager all bets were off then. "Thanks, Vicky, for *almost* saving me. I live just down the beach. Let's have coffee or something sometime." Kale's offer was casual, probably not even worth much, but Victoria clung to it and tried to paddle back to shore, using it as a life preserver.

Victoria looked up into his dark eyes and tilted her head back. A midnight blue, she'd guess, they seemed to change with his emotion. And what was this emotion that had his eyes turning dark and his lips curving into a wickedly secretive smile? If the air had crackled before, it now grew thick, redolent with threads of awareness. The heat he emanated was oddly refreshing, powerful, breathtaking.

Kale captured her lips, fleeting and hot. He lingered for a moment, his warm breath whispering over her mouth, brushing his tongue over her bottom lip with the

merest hint it had even really happened, before he let her go, leaving her condo with the hush of the door closing in his wake.

Victoria put a hand to her lips, running her fingers over them, savoring the memory. It was the first time she'd been kissed by someone of the opposite sex in almost six years.

His kiss left an indelible impression. One she couldn't dismiss.

It was the first kiss ever, casual as it was, that made Victoria Rawlings' knees give out and her libido ask for more.

Deep.

Chapter Four

"Vicky! Victoria! You open this door now," Maxie shouted with her light Spanish accent from behind the door of Vicky's condo.

It was midnight, for God's sake. What the hell was Maxie doing here? Hadn't she just hung up with Maddie?

Victoria rushed to grab the door before her neighbors complained about the little Puerto Rican with the big mouth. "Maxie, what are you doing here? Won't Mr. Lucky Charms and the baby be upset you're out this late?"

Maddie pushed past Maxie, followed by Katy. "Where is he?" Maxie insisted.

"Who?" Victoria asked.

"Don't play dumb with me, *corazon*. You had a man here. I had to see him for myself. Show him to me," Maxie demanded as if this man were a new outfit she'd just bought at the bargain rack in Macy's. Her dark eyes searched Victoria's condo.

"Ohhhh, him," Vicky said with a chuckle. "He went home." She hoped her voice didn't reveal the mess her insides were still in over Kale.

Katy pulled her hands out of her coat pockets and cupped Victoria's cheek. "You really did have a man here?"

"I told you all that. Why would I lie about an event like Victoria having a real, live man in her house? It's too monumental to be believed," Maddie scoffed, her blonde hair mussed and in disarray.

"So where is he?" Katy asked again.

"I told you, he went home."

"Ohhhhhhh, Victoria! I'm so proud of you. So, did you have sex?" Maxie boldly asked.

"Maxie!" Katy chided. "It's none of our business."

"Oh it is too. She involved us in this whole 'I want to have sex again before I'm old and shriveled' adventure, so I have every right to ask," Maxie defended herself.

"You know, Vic, you scared the crap outta me. I call here to see if you're okay after your trip to BDSM one-o-one and you have a man here, but you didn't call us and tell us you were bringing a victim home. The last we talked to you, you were freaking out. You know what the rules are. You have to call us and tell us you've hooked up and you didn't. So what gives? Where's the booty?" Maddie gave her a stern look.

Victoria looked down at their shoes, still on their feet and quite possibly tracking in grains of sand, with an accusatory glance. She raised an eyebrow in reprimand.

The three of them rolled their eyes with a sigh and dutifully pulled off their shoes.

"Where's the man, Vic? What does he look like and was the sex good?" Maxie plowed onward.

"I didn't have sex. The man wasn't what you think and I didn't call because he didn't come from that..." she shuddered and whimpered, "...Bondage Fair."

Katy, always the counselor, asked in a low, soothing tone, "So where did the man come from, Vicky?"

"I saved him."

"From?" Maddie's face held concern.

"I thought he was drowning. I saw him come up for air and then he disappeared. So I ran in after him. I think the water was so cold, I passed out. When I woke up, he was here and I was on the couch. He rather ended up saving me."

Maxie slapped a hand on her thigh. "I should have known. *Carajo!* I rushed over here to see the evidence of this man and there is no man. It just figures. You're going to end up in Tibet, Vicky. You and a bunch of smelly goats."

"Well, I'm sorry to have disappointed you, Mrs. Lucky Charms. Why don't you go on home now, back to your nice husband and baby and I'll make plans for my trip to Tibet!" Victoria shouted with sarcasm.

"Don't you get snippy with me, Victoria Rawlings! I won't have it. I was all aglow about a man and there is no man!" Maxie shouted back.

"No! No, there isn't a man. Now quit harping on me about it and go home!"

"Ladies!" Katy intervened. "Enough. Maxie, stop shouting and keep your impatience to yourself. Victoria will find a man when she's ready." Turning to Victoria she said with sympathy in her tone, "We worried when Maddie called us. She said you didn't sound quite yourself and she did hear a man here. We rushed to judgment, thinking you were maybe being forced to do something against your will. I'm sorry, Victoria."

"Yeah, me too, Vic. I was all puttin' on my cheerleaders outfit and gettin' my pom-poms out until I began to let my mind wander. I got nervous, thinking maybe you were in a situation you couldn't get out of and you did hang up on me. How was I supposed to know it wasn't some murderer making you hang up?" Maddie asked, rubbing Victoria's arm.

"I know, Maddie. I'm sorry. I was distracted."

Maddie's eyebrow rose. "Distracted? Why were you distracted? Was he the cute kind of distraction?"

Cute was a beginning. Cut, ripped, ab-o-licious, just the tip of the iceberg. "Yes," Victoria nodded. "He was definitely cute."

Maxie's eyes grew round. "Wait, girls did you hear that? She didn't even hesitate when she said that. You never, ever say anyone is cute without that statement being followed by the word but. No but? You know, like you always do. Yes, but his nails weren't trimmed. Yes, but his hair was messy. Yes, but, but, but."

Victoria shrugged her silk-clad shoulders. "Nope. No but."

Maddie sank to Victoria's couch, then jumped back up. "Your couch is all wet."

Victoria nodded. "I know."

"So why don't you have the blow-dryer out? Why aren't you cleaning it so it'll be perfect again? Won't it stain? Won't you have apoplexy if it does?"

No, it would seem she wouldn't. Since Kale had left, Victoria hadn't given much thought to her perfect chintz couch or even that it might be ruined. What she had given thought to was that kiss.

The way his lips held hers for no more than a breath. The soft but firm line of them when he'd pressed them to her mouth.

She'd even given her fourth shower of the day only a halfhearted attempt because she couldn't stop thinking about him.

"No, I won't have apoplexy, Maddie." Victoria smiled at her friend.

Maddie approached Victoria, putting the back of her hand to her head. "Who are you and where is Vicky? If we're going to go through another thing like we did with Katy, where you up and disappear and come back all freaky different, I want a heads up. I am not going to ever be as frantic as I was that damned time we couldn't find Katy."

Victoria smiled at Maddie's reference to Katy's week of discovery. It was the week Katy and Garret had made up and gotten back together after divorcing. It had been a week of hell for the rest of them. Katy had come back so different. Victoria had always suspected something much more had happened than what she'd told them.

Victoria grabbed Maddie's hand and giggled. "I'm fine, really. Kale was cute. He was very nice and he lives just down the beach. I guess I got so caught up in the rescuing him thing that I didn't think about the couch after he left."

"You're giggling, *chica!*" Maxie accused. "You never giggle. You do that scathing, sarcastic laugh. You know, the one you bark on occasion when Maddie sings at karaoke and you're mocking her? You do not giggle. And you have a couch that is less than perfect. Lest I remind you, that is usually cause for you to put a paper bag over your face so that you can breathe. That ain't right in my world. So what's up?"

Victoria's face flushed. If she knew what was up, she'd have a better handle on why she could do nothing more than stare at her couch despondently. It *was* chintz... "Nothing is up," she denied.

"Victoria?" Katy smiled. "Are you interested in this Kale? He sounds very pleasant."

"How could I be interested in him? I hardly know him."

"Well, the tone of your voice and the smile on your face says differently, Victoria," Katy cajoled. "If you're interested, that's the start of getting to know him."

If she couldn't tell her three best friends in the world, then who could she talk to about this? Sighing, Victoria looked at them, each expectantly waiting to hear about her sudden change of attitude. "Okay, so this was how it went. I know I should have been freaked out when I woke up nearly naked on my couch, but he didn't seem at all dangerous. Not even a little. At first, I was concerned about my couch and I rushed to the kitchen to see what I could do to clean it. But he was so – soooo..." She paused and considered just what he was that was so. "I don't know. I can't explain it. He's just very cute and very big and very different. There was something about him that made me feel foolish for wanting to clean my couch. That's all I can say. He also said maybe we could get together for coffee or something just before he kiss --"

"He kissed you? Oh-my-God! You let some filthy man put his lips on yours? Catch me, Mad, I think I might faint. *Ay, caramba!*" Maxie sputtered.

Victoria's eyes flashed dark and stormy. "Yes, he kissed me so shut up, Maxie! Here I am, telling you something important and as usual, you're mocking me in that oh, so dramatic way, you Columbian bean!"

"I-am-not-Columbian!" Maxie yelled back.

"She's Puerto Rican," Maddie and Katy said in unison while Maddie moved between them.

"Quit, you two. Maxie, stop making fun of her for finally doing what we've been harping on her to do since we met her. Vickster, rock on, sistah." Maddie smiled her approval broadly, flipping her thumbs to an upright position at Victoria.

"Well, all righty, then. Vicky, this is wonderful. It means you're trying and that's all we can ask of you. You do realize this is the first man you've ever shown any interest in, well, unless it was to find fault with him. Good for you, sweetie. The only advice I'm

going to offer is this. Move at your own pace and only your pace. Don't let any man make you do what you don't want to do, and enjoy this, honey. Try not to pick it apart and disinfect it, okay?" Katy cocked her dark blonde head at Victoria and winked a cornflower blue eye in her direction.

"Nail the man, would you, Vic? He's cute. That's all you need to know," Maxie said caustically.

"Okay, now that I know you're okay, I gotta skedaddle. Cole and I have a wedding to plan," Maddie reminded them.

"Oh, Maddie, I'm sorry I didn't comment on that earlier. I was just --"

"Frothing at the mouth for this Kale," Maddie finished for Victoria. "It's okay, pumpkin. When you get the time, gimme a ring and tell me how you feel about the color yellow..." Maddie wiggled her fingers over her shoulder.

"Oh, no! Yellow is not in my color wheel of life," Victoria yelled after her. "And I'm not wearing ruffles, Madison Blake! No frilly bell skirts either. I swear I'll boycott this thing, Maddie!"

Maxie and Katy both laughed, giving Victoria a quick hug before saying their goodbyes, Katy's reminder ringing in her ears. "Have fun in the getting to know you process, Victoria. Just let it happen."

Squaring her shoulders, Victoria decided to just let it happen.

While *it* happened, she was going to clean that couch.

Chapter Five

Fear held her rooted to Kale's front steps. Fear and the dirt that he'd artfully swept under his welcome mat.

Victoria had done some spying, talked to her neighbors and found out where Kale lived. Now, here she was, hoping he'd meant his suggestion to have coffee.

But the voice inside her head that told her men said things like that all the time kept her finger frozen at his doorbell.

This was insane. How could she possibly hope to invite a man for some coffee when she was so out of practice she had trouble just inviting one of the girls for coffee? She hadn't dated since her divorce. No one asked her out because she didn't give them the chance and now she was going to just ring this man's doorbell like she did this kind of thing every day.

What had she been thinking?

She had better things to do. Like rescrub the grout between her kitchen floor tiles. Separate her canned goods, alphabetically, facing outward.

Ohhhhh, but Victoria, can that possibly be as much fun as, say, having that dark head between your legs? she heard Maxie ask in her head.

Crap. Her carnal thoughts were seeping into her clean ones. That couldn't be a good sign.

That finished that. She was leaving, scurrying back to her hole and her Mr. Clean.

With a rapid retreat, Victoria headed back down the stairs.

"Victoria?" a smooth, deep, lilting voice called from behind her.

Oy, as Maddie would say.

Caught is what she'd say, Victoria, she reminded herself.

Think fast.

"Hey, what's up? Did you ring the doorbell and I didn't hear it? I was upstairs. C'mon in." His voice was welcoming, warm, seeexxyy.

Her cheeks grew hot and her thighs weak.

Victoria peered back over her shoulder and inwardly groaned. Jesus, he was so cute in his Hawaiian print shirt and his surfer shorts cut to just above his knees. Kind of pale for someone who liked to surf, but still, cute. No, handsome would be a better way to describe his chiseled features. Ruggedly handsome with a classic definition to his face.

"No, no. I don't want to bother you, Kale. I was just... well, I was just..." She was just. This would definitely not be heading in the direction of intelligent conversation.

Kale was beside her, his hand on her arm with what seemed like light speed. "Come in and we can just," he teased with a grin.

Whenever Kale spoke, she was helpless to do anything except what he asked. It had happened the other night in her condo and it was happening now.

Victoria let him lead her into his condo. Bright and messy, it was a festive disaster area.

"Sorry, it's kind of messy, but I just moved in. I can tell from your place, you like order. I don't think I have that gene," he joked, moving past the endless stream of boxes and colorful piles of clothing, clearing her a path.

Indeed not.

Where there wasn't a pile of clothing, there was a box and where there wasn't a box, there was a surf board. Victoria kept her thoughts to herself. He already thought she had a big mouth and he knew she was a neurotic clean freak after she'd flipped over her couch.

"So, what's your pleasure?" Kale asked, grinning down at her, still holding her hand. Staring up at those eyes, crinkled at the corners, warm and inviting, she lost her train of thought.

Her pleasure?

What's your pleasure, Victoria?

You?

You and me doggy style?

Oh, wait, no. How 'bout you and me reverse cowgirl?

God, how had this happened? For years she'd had a dormant libido and now? Now she was looking to play Beach Blanket Bingo with a virtual stranger. It happened as suddenly as when she'd decided way back during her marriage that maybe her ex was right about her frigidity.

It made so little sense it was laughable. She was no Lolita, but when Kale stood near her, she couldn't get a grip on her hormones. The icicles were obviously melting.

"Victoria?"

Swallowing hard, Victoria looked back up at him. "Pleasure?"

"Yeah, what kind of beverage would you like? I have coffee, tea, Coke."

He drank Coke? Oh, it was all over now. Victoria was a Pepsi lover from way back. Forget him, the Coke-loving swine.

"Victoria? Are you all right?"

Blinking, she told herself that his love of Coke couldn't be a good enough reason to dump him just yet. She was nitpicking so she could go back home and hide in her perfect house. No, she wouldn't do that anymore. Victoria wanted to know why Kale made her sweat just thinking about him. She wanted to know if she had the guts to discover what had brought her here in the first place. "Er, coffee, please." There, that was very polite. Yay her.

"Coffee it is." He smiled again and headed toward his kitchen, pulling her behind him to a kitchen much like her own. How he'd ever find a cup, let alone coffee in that mess could be fun to watch. "Come sit over here while I make the coffee," Kale suggested, stepping over more clothing and making some room at his breakfast bar. His nearness set her teeth on edge and she gulped for air. He was impossible not to like, but even more impossible not to lust after.

He had an aura about him, something that drew her to him, making her want to cling to him. It was easygoing, but beneath the surface, she felt an authoritative air.

It made her shiver.

"So tell me about yourself, Victoria. What do you do for a living?"

"I'm an interior designer." Looking at the breakfast barstool, Victoria fought a shudder. It had crumbs...

Ah, but they're crumbs from tall, dark and ass-tastic's mouth, Victoria.

Brushing them off with a quick hand, she perched at the tip of the stool, hoping she'd gotten all the crumbs and they wouldn't stick to her white linen pants.

Kale dug around in his cupboards and nodded his head. "I should have known. That's some place ya got there. It's a little daunting for a bachelor like me."

Giggling, Victoria watched his muscles ripple in his shirt and nodded back. "I know it can be for some, but don't let it bother you. It's no big deal."

"Oh, I disagree. It is a big deal. It's perfect. So perfect I was worried I'd ruin it just breathing."

She hated that about herself. She had an inexplicable knack for making everyone feel like she was trying to be superior and worse still, it left everyone uncomfortable. Victoria hated the impression it left with people. It wasn't that at all. It was her need to keep order in her world that was where all of her troubles lay. It had nothing to do with superiority and everything to do with control. A control she didn't know how to give up.

"I know it puts people off sometimes. I'm sorry."

Filling the grungy coffee pot with water, he said, "Nah. I'm not put off. You're just being you. Though, all that housekeeping has to be a bitch."

Victoria threw her head back and laughed. Real, genuine laughter. If only he knew how it interfered with every aspect of her life, he'd understand just how much of a bitch it was. "I'm a little compulsive..."

"I saw that," he said, making no bones about his observation and turning on the coffee pot while grabbing two cups from the cabinet. Some papers fell out, fluttering to

the counter below, and he scooped them up, shoving them back into the cabinet. "As you can see, I'm not too compulsive. Not about cleaning anyway."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I own a catering business."

"You cook?"

"I do, among other things."

"A surfing cook, huh? Where did you move from?"

He cast a quick glance at her, then went back to looking for something in the cabinet. "Hawaii."

"Wow, any reason?"

"Nope, just needed a change of scenery. I own a franchise. My catering business took off and I was lucky enough to be able to hand over some of the reins without micro-managing too much. So, here I am." Pouring the coffee, he set it in front of her.

"Sugar, cream?"

Shaking her head, she took a small sip and rolled her eyes. The coffee was rich and laced with a mellow flavor Victoria couldn't place. "This is great. Where did you get the blend?"

"I make it myself," he stated rather proudly, grinning at her from over the breakfast bar. Their shoulders touched and their proximity lessened. When he looked at her, it was as if no one else in the world existed. Nothing around her was tangible but Kale... his body that radiated man and smoldering embers of power, untapped and prepared to explode with the right prompting. He held her eyes and wouldn't let go.

Lost.

Victoria found herself lost in those eyes. In his scent, all male, salty, clean, fresh and it made her hungry. It made her crave his nearness, the nearness that brought with it a silent command.

His eyes grew serious too. A far cry from the twinkling they'd been doing a moment ago. Searching her face, he ran a fingertip over the slope of her nose. "You're

not here for coffee, are you, Victoria?" His question was husky and undoubtedly meant to shock her.

Victoria's tongue grew thick and stuck to the roof of her mouth. Her heart chugged and her intestines twisted in a knot.

"Tell me why you're here, Victoria," Kale prompted, with words that left his mouth like silken morsels of rich chocolate, slipping off his tongue and out into the space between them. Tipping her chin up with a finger, he waited.

Her mouth fell open to answer, but nothing came out.

"It wasn't for coffee, was it, Victoria?"

The beverage part was a little fuzzy for her right now. "I --"

"Was it for me, Victoria?"

His words were drawing her in, pulling her toward him in a way she couldn't explain. Kale felt like a magnet and she was a helpless bit of metal dragged to him. Placing a hand between them she took a shaky breath when she pressed it to his chest. The hard, sculpted surface beneath his shirt made her want to dig her fingers into it. It was hot and thrumming with sin.

Victoria knew whatever lay beneath his shirt was satiny warm, begging to have her ear rest upon its wide expanse.

"It was for *me*, Victoria, wasn't it? If you hadn't come for me, I would have come for you."

Oh.

"You don't want coffee any more than I do, Victoria."

Finding her tongue wrapped helplessly around her teeth, she untangled it and replied with disdain, "I certainly didn't come for cleaning tips."

Barking a laugh, he threw his sleek head back, revealing his neck, corded with muscle and tendon, appealingly brown and smooth. "No, I realize that. You came here for me and what you and your friend were talking about on the phone the other night."

Fab-u-lous. He'd heard her tell Maddie she'd have sex when she was good and ready.

"Are you good and ready now, Victoria?" he inquired, moving toward her with deliberate stealth.

"It -- it's been, um, it's -- been --"

"A long time," he finished. "I know, Victoria. I know."

Well, how the hell could he know that?

"I know because you're jumping out of your skin and wiping the counter with your sleeve," Kale observed.

Her eyes flew to her shirt. She was making small circles on the countertop, completely unaware of the fact. Yanking her arm back to her lap, she blinked.

"Not everything can be cleaned up so easily, Victoria. Sex can be messy. The best kind of messy."

This conversation was messy. Victoria had no clue how to address this kind of talk. Flirting wasn't something she was terribly good at. If that's what this was... flirting. "I -- I -- know."

"Do you? I have a funny feeling you've spent very little time doing it for the pleasure of just doing it. I do think you've done it out of obligation and what fun is that?"

Talk about nailing the donkey in the ass. Yes, she and her ex-husband, her only lover, had spent endless hours arguing over how she was a dead, cold fish in bed. When the girls talked about their sex lives it wasn't with the obligatory air Victoria had used. She'd considered it just a part of marriage she had to endure. Katy, Maddie and Maxie said otherwise and Victoria wanted that. She wanted to know she was capable of this thing called "the nasty." Remaining silent was the only course of action she could take. To deny what Kale said would be to end up with him not working nearly as hard as she imagined he'd have to.

Victoria had never had an orgasm. At least not if the way the girls described it was any indication of what they really were.

"I'll take your silence as a yes. It won't be like that with me, Victoria. When I tell you that I want to hear you scream when you come, that's an understatement. I won't settle for less. I won't stop until you do."

His words and thoughts, spoken out loud and without misgiving, made her dizzy, weak and not nearly as afraid as she was sure she should be. They slithered along her spine, inviting her to come play. They begged her to dare him to do just as he promised.

"You don't want coffee, Victoria."

No, she didn't want coffee. Not that she had the wherewithal to say differently.

"Come with me, Victoria," he coaxed, trailing a finger down her arm, smiling with the sensuality he reeked of.

As though mesmerized, Victoria followed him to his bedroom. It was dark and as messy as everything else. Yet, the bed was made. Victoria's eyes knew Egyptian cotton sheets and Kale had them, in a rich burgundy. A comforter with bold splashes of green and blue covered the king-sized bed. Pillows, soft and cushiony, were scattered across the headboard that was ornate and a deep, rich mahogany.

His hands found hers and he forced her to look up at him by pulling her close, molding her to his rigid, hard lines.

"Just say yes, Victoria."

Somewhere, she'd have guessed from someone else's mouth if she didn't know better, the word "yes" was heard.

She said it again so she knew it was from her mouth. "Yes."

Yes...

Chapter Six

Suddenly, she was on the bed, lying before him like Christmas dinner and Kale was smiling his approval.

She'd stopped breathing when she'd said yes, and he'd leaned over her, draping himself across her body and whispering, "Breathe, Victoria."

Victoria obeyed with a gasp and watched from beneath her eyelashes while he drew a finger between her breasts. Her nipples beaded, pressing against her bra with painful points. Unfamiliar heat slid along her pussy, leaving a sweet need for something more.

The path he trailed along her breasts was almost without sexual intent and at the same time dripped sensuality. Kale didn't touch her nipple, which now wanted more than anything to be touched. He instead drew his fingertips under her breasts, over the curve of them peeking out from the top of her bra.

Victoria found her eyes had slid closed and her breathing, stilted and harsh, sounded foreign to her ears. She clenched the thick comforter beneath her hands on either side of her and waited.

She waited with anticipation, clenching her teeth together, and Kale must have sensed that when he asked, "Do you want me to touch you, Victoria? Take your shirt off and feel you naked? Do you want me to lick you with my tongue?"

Her head was swirling with his suggestive questions, but words formed, then dissipated. There was no speaking, so she nodded.

The buttons of her silk shirt were easily undone, popping open to expose her lace bra. Her hands immediately went to cover her breasts, but Kale stopped her. "Don't do that, Victoria. Don't hide," he demanded. Moving her hands, he gazed at her and licked his lips.

Her heart crashed against her ribs in time with her pulse, rapidly growing out of control.

As he laid his head on her chest, she felt him smile against her skin. His dark hair fell like whispers of silk over her flesh. Parting her shirt, he splayed a hand over her ribs, calming her instantly. The clasp on her bra fell open next and ready or not, Kale was looking at her, naked from the waist up.

The first press of his lips to her skin, hot and open mouthed, made her jump. She was so sensitive to it, it raised goose bumps along her ribcage.

He swept his hands back over her torso again, following them with his lips. Moving upward, he hovered over her nipple. "Look at me, Victoria," he commanded.

Victoria's eyes popped open and she focused on his face. His cheekbones were razor sharp, his skin stretched tautly over them. His nostrils flared on a nose that was long and straight and his hair fell boyishly over his forehead. The firm line of his lips was sensual and the deeply grooved dimples on either side of his mouth deepened when he smiled at her, wicked and self-assured.

"Don't be afraid, Victoria. Let it happen," he murmured before bending his head to slither over her tight nipple. The peak stiffened even more, if that were possible, but he didn't attack it as though it were a meal he was eating out of starvation. He savored it, dragging his tongue over it with the lightest of licks.

Victoria's hands found the thick expanse of his back and dug her fingers into it.

His head moved over her chest. His mouth explored each nipple and when he finally captured it between his teeth, her sigh escaped without warning.

Holy Moses.

Holding it with his teeth, he swiped his tongue over it, long and deliberate, cupping the other breast and tweaking the nipple with forefinger and thumb.

It was a multitude of sensations that had no words and overwhelmed her when they hit. They left her squirming against him, her hips bucking upward against nothing.

Kale rectified that by swinging his legs up on the bed and lying beside her, allowing her to press her lower body to his.

Yet another new, foreign sensation clutched her pussy when their bodies made contact and she had to brace herself against his shoulders with hands that shook.

Gathering her to him, Kale enveloped her nipple again and she found herself raising her arm above her head, arching upward until her spine felt like it might crack for trying to take more of the lashes from his tongue. His other arm slid under her, spanning her ass and pulling her tighter to his thighs.

Victoria became acutely aware of his cock, bulging against the thin material of her linen pants. The outline of it was thick and the girth wide and if she had time to think about it, she might have been frightened.

Her ex hadn't packed quite like this.

But then, his lips hadn't been quite like Kale's either. Hot, supple, firm and tantalizing, they were driving her mad. Pulling her to a place she wasn't even aware existed.

It tugged at her pussy and moisture gathered between her legs, dampening her panties. Victoria pressed her thighs together to tamp out the torrent rush of heat, but it did nothing to quell her need.

Kale moved away from her nipples, skimming her neck with kisses that seared her skin. He moved over her jaw, nipping it until he reached her lips.

His chest, wide and rock hard, pressed to hers. His grip on her grew possessive and finally he took her mouth.

Capturing her lips, he slithered his tongue along the outline of her mouth, his breath heavy and mingled with her own. Kale's tongue was rapture. Skilled and soft when it moved inside her mouth, growing persistent when she moaned, stroking her own tongue with rapid plunges.

"Take my shirt off, Victoria," was his next demand and Victoria fumbled with the buttons clumsily, her fingers thick and unyielding.

He brushed them away and pulled the shirt over his head, then pushed her shirt and bra over her shoulders.

When their naked flesh made contact, Kale hissed, rubbing his chest along the tight peaks her nipples had once again become. He had but a smattering of hair sprinkled along his pecs and the crisp brush against her breasts made her all that more aware of their half naked status.

Kale's hand went to her zipper and that was when Victoria had a brief moment of clarity. She tore her mouth from his and sought his eyes. Their dark shade mirrored her image, flushed, mussed.

Mussed...

Victoria Rawlings was mussed.

Her hair was out of place and her lips were swollen.

"Shall we stop, Victoria?"

Stop? It hadn't even occurred to her to bring a halt to this miracle that superseded all else. The miracle that Victoria did indeed have a couple of hormones that needed attending. Wordlessly, she shook her head no.

"Take my shorts off, Victoria. Feel what you've done to my cock."

Her hand skirted the space between his legs as she found the waistband of his shorts and tugged them down. A thin line of hair led enticingly to his underwear and she pulled them down too.

Kale's cock sprung forward and grazed her hand. It was solid, the skin soft and flaming hot to her touch. He was long and as thick as she'd first thought. Tentative fingers explored, but Kale grabbed her hand, wrapping it around him. "Like that, Victoria. Hold me with a firm grip. Stroke me with a hand that lets me know it's between my legs."

She shivered at his bold request, but did as he instructed, grasping him firmly and stroking him, reveling in the shudder his body gave in response.

"Take off your pants, Victoria, but leave your panties on," Kale said into her ear, rimming it with his tongue.

She struggled with the zipper on her pants and shook when she shoved them to her feet. Momentary fear hit her again when she realized she was almost completely

naked with the exception of her skimpy, silk panties, but Kale soothed those fears by looking down at her appraisingly.

"Your skin is beautiful, Victoria, soft and creamy. Don't hide it from me. I want to see it all," he mumbled, his eyes sweeping down her length.

It mattered little in this very moment if she believed him or not. Victoria was well aware most men would say anything to achieve their goal. Yet right here, right now, instead of picking this apart, instead of trying to control it, she was going to let the flood of new sensations take her to wherever it wanted.

He smiled at her then, before smoothing a hand over the slight swell of her hip, running it up over her sides and back down to the swell of her ass.

Victoria was immobilized, her hands frozen while she grew accustomed to someone touching her.

"Touch me again, Victoria," he coaxed, then groaned with a low, sultry moan when she took him back in her grip, doing exactly what he'd told her to do before. His hips bucked, and his eyes closed, but he continued to explore her body.

When he slid between her legs, Victoria thought she might faint from the wave of electric currents that swept over her cunt. Yet, he skimmed her panty line, drew small circles over her abdomen, spread his warm hand over her inner thighs.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out. Each time he swept his fingers over the edge of her panties, she lifted her hips to encourage him.

His chuckle was deep and smooth. "You want me to touch you, don't you, Victoria?"

Oh, hell, yeah, silly, misguided man, but her acquiescence remained firmly stuck thick like glue in her throat.

"Tell me, Victoria. Tell me you want me to and I'll do whatever you want."

They lay side-by-side and he peered at her from the far side of the pillow, waiting for an answer. "Tell me, Victoria," he commanded again.

"Touch me," she managed and with a firm statement she could be proud of.

He hooked his thumbs inside her panties and slipped them over her thighs, thrusting them to the bottom of the bed. The comforter was thick and luxurious beneath her back, adding to the heightened state of awareness she was in.

Straddling her, he sat at her waist, cupping her breasts once more. His cock, swollen and hard, lay on her belly. The thick tuft of hair above it was dark and her fingers ached to thread through it. His chest seemed almost broader as he sat above her, his stomach rippled and ridged.

"Open your eyes, Victoria. Look at me. There's nothing to be ashamed of, but remember..." he paused, capturing her eyes when she opened them, "...I'm in control. In order for you to really enjoy this, you have to let go. Agree to this or I won't go any further." He was deliciously heavy, sitting on her, and Victoria found she was squirming, rolling her hips against the weight of him.

"Please," was what she whispered.

He smiled for a moment, his white teeth flashing in the darkness of the room. Moving down her body, he settled between her thighs and Victoria gasped.

He was going to... she'd never... no one had ever... Instinct made her reach down and clutch the tops of his shoulders out of fear of the unknown.

Kneeling between her legs, he asked, "No one has ever been this intimate with you, Victoria?"

"No... no, I --"

"I can't believe any man would choose to pass up the scent of your cunt, the taste of it on his tongue. I won't deny myself that, Victoria." He trailed a finger over the outer lips of her pussy, pushing past the curls to reveal her clit.

A million different thoughts and fears flew through her mind. She wanted to stop him. Encourage him. Tell him she didn't know what to expect, but instead, she held her breath and waited.

"Whoever you were with before was a fool. I am no such animal. That you haven't experienced this aspect of lovemaking amazes me. It would be a sin to let this act be ignored, especially with a woman as beautiful and tempting as you."

This act.

An act she had always been curious about, but had never experienced with her ex.

Sliding down to lie in front of her, Kale let his fingers continue to roam, over the swell of her cunt. Up and down the slit of it, over and over he explored her. When he spread her flesh and the cool air hit her, she bucked and he chuckled again. His thumb grazed her clit, now swollen and aching.

Fire ran like liquid lava in her veins, touching every nerve, consuming her with need.

He snaked his tongue out to swipe the hard nub of her clit and Victoria arched upward, her back bowing, her legs trembling with the foreign touch.

Flattening his tongue, Kale passed over her spread flesh again and white-hot heat tore at her cunt. Her breathing was choppy and might have frightened her if she'd had time to listen to it, but she could only hear the throb of her pulse, feel the growing need for an end to this delicious new sensation.

His finger lay at her passage and now, a whole new thread of feelings assaulted her. Slipping into her with care, Kale hooked his finger and dragged it up and back down while his tongue devoured her pussy.

Victoria's hips shot up, slamming into his face, but he didn't stop. He licked, suckled, savored her all the while, drawing his finger over a spot inside of her that made her whole body react.

Victoria didn't know what it was. She didn't know why it made her shiver and tremble. When he slipped his other hand under her, cupping her ass and squeezing it, it made her literally cry out while she clutched the comforter in her fists.

She was wet, dripping and slippery from his tongue and the juices he stirred with his skill. Her cunt clung to his finger, clenched around it, invited it to stroke her so she might find relief from this sinfully sweet madness.

Kale had found the spot that set her ablaze and he wasn't letting go. Victoria was so close to... to... she couldn't identify it. She tried not to put a label to it in order to do as Kale said and just let go.

The spiral upward yanked her, pulling her toward an unknown force, clinging to her every nerve. It was frightening, exhilarating, filled with rare emotions she didn't know could be combined with the multitude of feelings she experienced.

Lingering, she was lingering on the verge of something so wickedly decadent and she didn't know what. She only knew she wanted it to happen. Every muscle in her body was tense, prepared, and when Kale spoke, it was her undoing. "You taste so sweet, Victoria. I could lick you forever and never have enough."

Falling, she was falling over the edge he held her on and there was no stopping it. Claws of delight screamed throughout her body, ripped at her pussy, shot through her like bolts of lightning.

Her body took on a life of its own, trembling and quaking, rocking against Kale's tongue and finger that kept hitting the spot that left her weak. She no longer had control, Kale did, and he didn't let go until every last drop of energy left her.

Her breathing was labored, harsh and whistling from gasping to fill her lungs. Kale withdrew his finger and for a moment, Victoria felt its loss with an impact that stung.

Kale moved back up the bed and gathered her to him, rocking her with a calming rhythm. His cock was still hard, pressed against her belly, but he continued to soothe her.

Tears stung her eyes for what had just passed between them and she fought to regain her breath, clinging to the width of his well-muscled shoulders.

"That, Victoria, was an orgasm," he whispered against the top of her head.

She burrowed her face against his chest, speechless, befuddled, unable to express her gratitude. Unsure if that was something people did when they'd experienced mind-blowing orgasms.

Tilting her chin up, he gazed at her so intensely her eyes fluttered open. "That your former lovers didn't bother to help you experience that pisses me off. You're too beautiful not to have your needs tended to."

Right now, she felt beautiful, and all because of a complete stranger who made her forget her need for order and control. A stranger who made her forget germs, which she was certain they'd passed to one another. Someone who encouraged her to dig deeper than she ever had before into her desires as a woman.

"I'm sweaty," she said, burying her face back into the shelter of his chest.

"You are," he agreed with a chuckle. "The best kind of sweaty, if you ask me."

Victoria had to agree, it beat the kind of sweat she put out when she was cleaning her bathroom grout.

As he pulled her closer, she became acutely aware of his cock again. Hard and hot against her belly. "Oh, we didn't, I mean, I didn't --"

"Now isn't the time, Victoria. We'll have plenty of time for that. Right now, you've just experienced a first in your life and I gotta say, it's about time. Rest and enjoy it. There'll be plenty of time for us to make love."

His voice soothed her, lulled her and she drifted, her body replete, satiated for the first time in any of her sexual dealings. Her last thought was she needed to go home and shower, but to do that would be to wash away the scent of Kale on her body, the lingering bliss of his tongue, and she wasn't ready to do that yet.

Just wait until she told Maxie she'd forfeited a shower for that.

Chapter Seven

Kale slipped from the bed, silently padding across the room to the connecting bathroom. Victoria slept soundly, her soft intake of breath light and easy.

His cock throbbed, jutting forward with a vengeance, and he knew he needed to relieve the ache. From the bathroom, he watched the soft rise and fall of Victoria's breasts while she slept. The feel of her nipples in his mouth, the taste of her cunt, wet and sweet, made his mouth water. His hand reached for his cock and he began to stroke it with a measured slide.

Her lips, cherry red and full, burned his gut. Kale wanted them on his cock, swallowing every last inch of his shaft, running her tongue over it, lapping at him. The visual in his head drove him to stroke himself harder. He pictured her between his legs, his cock driving into the circle of her lips. His hands would dive into her thick, auburn hair while he plunged into the hot, wet cavern of her mouth, touching the back of her throat.

He'd wanted to drive into her tight, sweet cunt, but Victoria needed to adjust to the firsts in her life. The next first would be an orgasm while he plunged deeply within her snug recesses.

Fighting back a groan, Kale pumped his hand, watching Victoria sleep, her taste, a taste he'd never known in all his centuries, still lingering on his tongue.

The pulse of his cock, throbbing and like steel, signaled his pending release and he gripped himself with two hands to increase his efforts.

Kale came with a fierce, burning heat that jettisoned from his shaft with force. He fought against the satisfied groan that, under normal circumstances, he would have made.

The thought of Victoria's ivory thighs and plump breasts spurred him to drain every last drop of his seed. Looking down between his legs, he chastised himself for making a mess of the carpet. Leaning against the doorframe, Kale closed his eyes and rolled his head.

Victoria Rawlings was the sweetest pussy he'd ever tasted. The most intriguing of all women he'd ever encountered, with her obsessive need for order and her willingness to finally admit it was time to discover something more exciting than rubber gloves and Mr. Clean.

She was also a human.

Kale didn't mess with humans.

Not like this. Not with this degree of interest.

He'd had sexual encounters with humans, yes, but they were all one-night stands. An endless string of nameless women from century to century who'd made their intentions clear.

Victoria was a much different instance. Kale found her innocence refreshing from the hardened women he usually hooked up with. The women he didn't just discard, but discarded him.

And that was a problem.

A problem he couldn't seem to resist. A problem with a scent and taste he couldn't resist.

But he had to resist her.

Humans and vampires just didn't get involved. Not where he came from anyway. They co-existed, they occasionally mated, but they didn't date.

Kale had the feeling Victoria would want to date. Not mate.

Or rather, not only mate.

He also had the feeling that he didn't only just want to mate.

He liked her. He enjoyed her quirks. They were laughable in light of what he'd seen in his lifetime. Victoria was a neurotic mess. It intrigued him that someone could be that concerned over something as replaceable as a couch. He'd almost understand it

if she was financially strained, but the fear he sensed in her went deeper than a couch and the possibility of it being ruined.

He wanted to make all of those fears go away in favor of hot, sweaty, monkey sex and he didn't know why. Kale guessed that would involve dates, if Victoria had anything to say about it.

The thought alone shouldn't even cross his mind, but it was. All those thoughts and more had appeared since he'd first carried her into her condo, soaking wet and unconscious. Apparently, she didn't remember his fangs popping out.

That was another problem -- if they mated, inevitably, his fangs would make an appearance and freak her out but good.

When he'd mated with others, he'd expunged his memory from their minds.

Kale didn't want to do that with Victoria.

This wasn't good.

* * *

Victoria woke, her body pleasantly sore, her first thought *you 'ho*.

Indeed, wasn't that what Maddie would call her? A 'ho? For sleeping with a man she hardly knew? However, she had gotten her freak on, now hadn't she? How could Maddie fault her for that?

Well, she didn't get her freak on, but she'd had an orgasm. A deliciously, decadent, incredibly mind blowing orgasm, and she wanted another one.

Soon.

Rolling over, Victoria stretched and realized she was in her own bed. She'd know her own crisply pressed sheets anywhere.

How the hell had she gotten home and not known it?

Spooky.

This deserved an explanation.

Yeah, sure it does, Vicky. You just want an excuse to call Kale up and talk to him. Who cares how you got home? Just that you did.

Opening her eyes, Victoria realized that was exactly what she wanted -- to talk to Kale -- to talk to Kale and to find out if they could do that again. To find out if there was more to what they might do again.

Maybe Kale didn't want to do it again?

Why wouldn't he want to do it again? What sort of man reaped no satisfaction from a sexual encounter and didn't want to at least try again?

Her head was a little fuzzy on the fine points of sex on the first date. She didn't know the rules. Were there rules?

Her problem was solved when she slid out of bed and saw a note taped to her mirror. Her heart pounded, convinced it was a "thanks, it's been real" note.

Yet, she grabbed the note and read it while she dug her feet into the thick carpeting on her floor. Blowing out a relieved breath, a smile crossed her face. He was going to call her. He'd brought her home because he had some business to take care of this morning and he didn't want her to wake up alone in a strange place. Expect his call.

Well, she could wait around by the phone... but she wouldn't.

She had a mirror with gooey tape marks on it to clean and a shower to take and some thoughts that she didn't quite know how to put into words to mull.

Last night had been a milestone for her. She'd had her first orgasm with a man that made her knees weak and her mouth dry. Victoria couldn't ever remember any man making her feel like that. Kale had wanted her pleasure and had ignored his own. Maybe some men got off on things like that? Then why did he say he'd call her? If he was just playing hero for a night, why bother to put all that energy into another round that left no guarantee it would benefit him too?

Her ex had never been concerned with her needs. Yet, he'd expected her to tend to his without qualm and take pleasure in his pleasure.

Emotionally, he'd left her out of control. She'd chosen to take that control back in the most bizarre of ways and it was time to assert that control in newer, healthier ways.

Her counselor had said she should find out what she might like and pursue it -- even if it didn't involve any kink at all. The Bondage Fair was to broaden her horizons

and while she still shuddered over the things she'd seen, she wondered now if it wasn't something that had led her to Kale and a more open mind.

What she didn't know was if she and Kale would be anything more than fuck buddies. That's what they called them, didn't they? People who hooked up with each other a couple of times a week, had sex and patted each other on the back, then parted ways.

She didn't know if that was for her, but rationally, she had to keep in mind that her behavior last night certainly wouldn't lead Kale to believe she wanted anything else.

She had engaged in oral acts of wowza after only a momentary introduction.

However, Victoria decided that while Kale might not be a kink, she liked him best.

* * *

Her phone rang three hours later, after she'd showered and cleaned the mirror in her bedroom. Only once. Victoria found she was preoccupied with naughty thoughts that made her face flush and her you know what, well, you know what.

"Victoria," Kale said into the phone, smooth and sounding like one of the deadly sins.

Taking a breath, Victoria wiped at her perfectly clean coffee table with a chamois cloth. "Hey, how are you?" She tried to keep her voice even, but her relief, mingled with the excitement that he really had called, was hard to contain.

"How are *you*?" he asked, obviously wondering if she'd recovered from last night.

"I'm great, thanks." And she was. She was also nervous and freaked out and calm and worried and, mostly, unsure.

"Good. I would have left you at my place to sleep in, but I didn't want you to wake up alone and freak out with the mess."

She giggled. Like a girl. A schoolgirl. Good hell. "How did you manage to carry me all the way over here and keep me from waking up?"

"You're light as a feather, Victoria, and I think you were spent."

Oh, yes, she had spent it all. "Well, thank you. I appreciate it."

"How was your day? Did you clean things?" he joked.

Laughing she smiled into the phone. "Among other things."

"I'd like to see you tonight, Victoria. How does dinner sound?"

Would it be forward to ask if they could do the oral thing again after dinner? She frowned. Probably. "I'd like that."

"I'm cooking. Come on over to my place around seven. We'll watch the sunset together."

"Do you want me to bring anything?"

"Just you, Victoria, just you." He hung up before she had the chance to respond. Just her.

She and her raging hormones would be there.

* * *

Knocking on his door at a few minutes after seven, Victoria found she was jittery and nervous. She'd fluffed and primed and fluffed again for nigh on three hours. She wanted to be perfect.

So what else was new?

No, this was a different kind of perfect. She wanted to be seductive perfect and she'd tried on twenty different outfits in her quest.

When she'd finally settled on a turtleneck in emerald green and some slim fitting black slacks, all that digging through her closet seemed ridiculous for an outfit so simple.

Kale answered the door dressed in another tropical print shirt and surfers' shorts with a smile and a long glance. His eyes roving her body with obvious appreciation and he made no bones about it. "You're lookin' pretty hot there, Victoria." Her name on his lips sounded so formal.

"You can call me Vicky," she offered, stepping inside his messy condo and fighting off her nerves.

"I thought it was Victori-a?"

"I think I was just being a bitch, well, just to be a bitch," she answered back truthfully.

"Well, then, Vicky, let's go out onto the deck and enjoy the sunset."

The deck was dirty, wasn't it? With sand and gunk.

"I swept, I promise." Kale winked at her, offering her his hand.

When he held his hand out, large and long-fingered, Victoria was helpless to deny him. Placing her hand in his, she said, "Yes, but the question is, did you sweep it under the welcome mat?"

His chuckle was amused. "Caught," was the confirmation.

The deck on the back of his condo gave them a beautiful view of the ocean. He'd set up a small table with two chairs placed intimately together. The table was beautifully set with china Victoria immediately recognized as very expensive, a long white tablecloth that shifted in the gentle ocean breeze and candles in glass, their glow adding to the spectacular colors in the sky.

"Wow, you went all out."

"Well, I can't lie. I didn't do the frou-frou flower arrangement. One of the girls who works for me did that. I'm a paper plate kind of guy."

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

Pulling out a chair, he offered it to her and she took it with shaky legs. "Yeah? Well, wait until you see the girlie soufflé I made."

Victoria laughed and fiddled with her napkin. "I think it's a very admirable thing to be able to cook, let alone cook anything girlie."

"I love to cook. I love to try new things. I just don't love to clean it up."

Her smile turned genuine. "Well, I love to clean up."

"I know," he leaned forward and whispered in her ear, letting his lips brush the outer shell. "I'm going to go get that soufflé and we'll eat," he said, pouring her a glass of wine before going back inside.

The breeze was warm and the twilight of evening cast a purple haze over the sky. It calmed her nerves a bit to watch the colors play out. Swirling the dark liquid in her glass, Victoria took deep breaths, finally relaxing a bit.

"Dinner is served," he called, carrying out a platter with the soufflé and green salads. The smell that wafted under her nose on the evening's breeze was tantalizing.

Kale took his chair opposite her and stabbed the soufflé with his fork, pushing it into his mouth with a smile. Victoria did the same and rolled her eyes. It was fantastic, melting in her mouth.

"You were married," he said between bites.

"Yes, I was married." Crap, she didn't want to talk about her marriage. It would lead to her long, downward spiral into what she was today.

"How long?"

"Long enough to know I didn't like it much."

"I take it he wasn't very good in bed."

Victoria sputtered on her gulp of wine. "Er, well, he was -- was --"

"A selfish prick."

Why was she always stuttering around him? *Because he asks very personal questions you don't know how to answer, Vic.* "I guess that's how one would classify him. Yes, he was selfish," she confirmed, avoiding his eyes, once again penetrating hers, always searching.

"Is that why you like to clean so much?"

Who was he, a friend of Katy's? He made it sound so simple, so easily dismissed.

"It is, isn't it? Your marriage was out of control, so you took it back in your mind by making your external surroundings as perfect as you could. Do you count stuff? Like, do you have to wash your hands a certain amount of times?"

He'd been reading up on her condition and it made her uncomfortable. "Sometimes," she answered vaguely.

"I'd say all the time and that's cool. I think if I'd been married to a selfish prick, I'd count too. Seeing as I couldn't count the orgasms I should've been having..."

Victoria laughed, holding her stomach and covering her mouth with a napkin to keep from snorting. Simplifying her obsessive compulsions made them appear very rudimentary and incredibly foolish.

Kale smiled over the dim glow of the candle. "Have you always been compulsive or did it begin when you married the prick?"

The prick. Tom had definitely been a prick. Selfish and egotistical, he'd used Victoria and her connections to move in circles he never belonged in. Never would have been in without her. They were the golden couple on the outside and she was Tom's eye candy. Pretty and intelligent and able to leap tall conversations with big words.

He'd also been unfaithful. Something she'd never once shared with anyone. Not even the girls from Divorcées Anonymous, who were now her closest friends.

Not even Tom. He had no idea she knew about his infidelities. She'd taken it as a personal attack, rather than the philandering bullshit it was. She'd been imperfect and Tom had gone elsewhere to make up for her inadequacies. To admit what he'd done was to admit she'd been anything but a perfect wife.

Yes, Tom had probably always been a prick, she just hadn't seen it from the start and when she did, it didn't matter because she'd been lost in her own madness. Creating order in her head, where there was none in her life.

When her marriage careened out of control, she had her pillow counting and hand washing to count on. Tom left her because of her compulsions, or so he claimed. But Victoria knew that wasn't true. He'd left her for greener pastures and better connections.

Blatantly laid out like this, it was absurd.

"I think it began when Tom was unfaithful. I kept thinking it was something I'd done. That as perfect as I tried to be, it wasn't enough."

"So you took control by organizing and turning the light switches so they'd all be in a downward position." Kale stated it rather than asked and he was right on the mark.

"Yeah, I think I did," she admitted and not without some pain.

She decided it was time to change the subject. She felt foolish and silly, exposed, and she didn't like it, even if Kale didn't seem to be mocking her for it. "Have you ever been married?"

"Nope."

"Long term relationship?"

"Nope."

"Girlfriends?"

"Once or twice."

"An eternal bachelor? Sworn to never be caught by a woman's charms?"

"Nope. Just haven't found the right girl."

Good. Victoria found she was glad he hadn't found the right girl.

Wiping his mouth, he pushed back his chair. "Dessert?"

"Depends on what it is," Victoria offered with a smile.

"White chocolate cheesecake with raspberries."

"I'll help clean up."

He laughed while he gathered dishes. "I'm a sucker for chocolate, especially white chocolate."

Victoria followed him into the kitchen, which was a disaster. Pots were everywhere. Ingredients for the soufflé were strewn across the granite countertops with careless abandon.

Victoria immediately rolled her sleeves up and prepared to dive in, but Kale caught her by the arm. "Leave it, Vicky. There's dessert to be had. Cleaning up can wait."

He pulled two small serving plates from the refrigerator with slices of the cheesecake on them. They were decoratively drizzled with raspberry syrup and fresh raspberries.

Plopping them down on the breakfast bar, he handed her a fork. "Whipped cream?" he asked, shaking a can of it.

"No, thanks. My thighs and all," she joked with an uncomfortable blush.

"I didn't mean for your cheesecake, Victoria," he said in just the way he had the night before when he'd reminded her that she hadn't come for the coffee.

Victoria gulped. Then what was it for?

Kale pulled her to him with a suddenness that made her gasp. "Take off your clothes, Vic." He grinned slyly and wiggled his eyebrows.

In the kitchen? Right here in the kitchen? That couldn't be sanitary.

As though he'd read her mind, he grinned again. "Right here in the kitchen, Vic."

Chapter Eight

She knew her face betrayed her surprise. Her mouth was definitely hanging open because cool air rushed into it, leaving a tingle on her tongue.

Kale's fingers went to her turtleneck, lifting it to just over her breasts.

Again, Victoria found herself helpless to say anything, but when she tried to, Kale pressed a finger to her lips. "Work with me, okay?"

Um, okaaaaay.

How could she not work with him when he was peeling her shirt off and skimming the tops of her breasts with his tongue?

It seemed only natural for her to unbutton his shirt too. "You're taking initiative, Vic. I like it," he said, nuzzling the valley between her breasts.

She immediately pulled her hands away, but Kale put them right back. "Don't do that, Victoria. Do what you feel, not what your proprieties tell you to. Take off my clothes, Victoria, and you'll see how difficult it's been for me to keep my hands to myself during dinner."

He'd lusted for her... and he'd admitted it. This was such a new concept for her that it frightened her, and invigorated her. An odd combination for Victoria.

"I'm not the kind of man who holds back, Victoria. I want you and I wanted you the other night too. I'm not ashamed to admit it and I don't want you to be the kind of woman who is either. If you want me, I want you to eventually be able to say the words."

Victoria gulped. How did one become so free and easy about their sexuality?

And what was eventually? Did that mean a long-term gig?

Skimming the tops of her breasts again, he whispered, "It'll happen, Vicky. Give me some time to show you."

And how was it that he could read her thoughts, for God's sake?

While his lips made light passes over her skin, Victoria clung to the breakfast bar countertop with her fingertips. It pressed into her back, reminding her that they were in the kitchen again.

That obviously troubled Kale little.

Unclasping her bra, Kale pushed it to either side and teased a nipple while unbuttoning her pants, sliding deft fingers along the zippers and buttons to delve his fingers into her pussy.

Naked was so uncomfortable for her that her first inclination was to cover herself, but Kale looked up from a breast. His dark eyes held a warning that hiding wasn't an option.

The bulk of his body was so hot and tempting Victoria couldn't keep herself from reaching out to touch a sculpted pec. Running her hands along his muscled sides, she massaged the firm skin with fingers that shook.

The first squirt of the whipped cream on her nipple made her gasp. It was cool and silky and somehow, followed by the hot warmth of Kale's lips, the sticky residue it would leave was the last thing on her mind.

The mixture of his tongue and the creamy substance was sensual, slippery, and Victoria moaned while he swirled his tongue over first one rigid peak and then the next.

Kale moaned too when she swept over his abdomen, deliciously hard and lined with ridges of muscle.

The first tentative touch of her hands to his cock was hesitant and unsure. Victoria grazed the outline of the bulge through his pants and with each press of her hand, she grew bolder, stroking him, luxuriating in the hiss of his breath from her whipped cream covered breast.

His hold on her became firmer, tighter when she reached between them and ran a finger along his cock. The jolt of his body, coupled with the tensing of his muscles, made her aware of her effect on him, spurring her on.

Raising his head, he looked into her eyes and drew a finger over the outline of her lips. "I want those on my cock," he said bluntly, honeyed words, dripping with conviction.

Victoria couldn't stop her eyes from flying open in surprise.

A blow job...

She'd never given one of those either.

Hoo boy.

Kale cupped her chin. "Vic? All you have to do is say no."

Yeah, sure. No. No, Kale, I will not blow you after you spent an hour between my thighs last night, making my eyeballs wobble with no relief in sight for yourself. No, Kale, I won't do this because I've never done it and I'm afraid you'll laugh yourself senseless if I do it and get it wrong.

Oh, God.

"I'm so inexperienced, Kale," she said thickly, heat coursing through her with anticipation and the fear of the unknown threatening to make her legs buckle.

His smile was knowing and wicked with a flash of white teeth. "I know. It's what I like the most about you, Vic."

Yeah, well, if he liked her now, she imagined he'd loooove her when she was done ineptly blowing his mighty fuck stick.

Yet, she was curious. Incredibly so. Squaring her shoulders, Victoria smiled back at him, trying to hide her fear of rejection, and decided it was time to indulge in all of the things she'd wondered about but never even dared to try.

Without another misgiving, Victoria said, "Sit on the stool." Kale complied with a grin as she tugged his underwear and pants off, then grabbed the can of whipped cream, giving it a brisk shake.

The first hiss of the spray was sharp to her ears, piercing the silence between them. She left a line of whipped cream along his cock, holding it in her hand and standing between his spread legs.

Victoria hadn't been able to see his nakedness last night and it was impressive indeed. His thighs were well muscled and sprinkled with dark hair. Thighs a girl might be inspired to clamp onto, rugged and thick.

Kneeling before him, Victoria took a breath and bent to press her lips to the sticky mess she'd made. Slicing through the sweet cream, she pressed her tongue for her first taste of his flesh, solid and hot against her lips.

Kale moaned with approval, so she ventured further along his shaft, laving the whipped cream off him with light strokes.

Capturing the head of his cock, mushroom-shaped and slick with her saliva, Victoria surrounded him with her mouth, moving at a slow pace, enveloping him between her lips. She took her time, inch-by-inch, taking as much as she could and then, she drew back upward again.

Kale's hiss from above her signaled she must be doing something right and when his hands dug into her hair, imprisoning her between his legs, she felt the flush of heat between her thighs.

Kale slid forward on the stool until he was almost standing, rocking against her mouth. He gripped the top of her head, thrusting against her, rolling his hips while with each pass she took him deeper.

Swirling up and over his cock, Victoria cupped his balls, drawn tight and firm, rolling them with care between her fingers, reaching around him and clutching the hard globe of his ass.

Deeper and deeper still he drove between her lips as she dragged her tongue over his cock. She felt it jerk, tighten, pulse against her tongue and then he pulled away from her abruptly. "Stop, Vic. I can't anymore. Your lips are so good. I'll come in your mouth if you don't stop." Hauling her up against him, Kale crushed her lips to his, the taste of whipped cream still on both their tongues.

Victoria swayed against him, heady with the notion that she'd given her first bit of pleasure to Kale and he hadn't been turned off.

“Nothing about you turns me off, Victoria,” he spoke through clenched teeth, skimming her waist with his fingers. “Nothing,” he reiterated with a fierce hiss.

There it was again. It was as if he knew what she was thinking, but she lost that niggle of wonder when he yanked at her slacks, pushing them off with force, followed by her panties.

His hands wasted no time in spreading her flesh, leaving her open and exposed. He rolled her clit between his fingers and Victoria bucked against his hand as wet juice ran from her cunt. Kale used that to lubricate her, roaming over her pussy and then sliding a finger into her. Setting her on the narrow stool, Kale smiled at her before dropping to his knees, his finger still in her, and running his tongue over her inner thighs.

Her hands went to his head and she found herself encouraging him to lick her, sliding forward on the stool until her pussy was flush with his face, until she could feel his hot breath sear her aching flesh.

Looking up at her, Kale’s eyes were dark and reflected his desire. “Watch, Victoria. Watch when I lick you.”

Victoria swallowed hard. She couldn’t... well, she could, but she’d never...

“Watch my tongue slide into you,” he demanded with words that were thick and like hot chocolate, inviting her.

Popping an eye open, she found herself biting her lip at the image of Kale between her legs. His hair was rumpled and satiny against her skin. His finger slid in and out of her with a wet suction that left her breathless at the sound. His kisses were light, skittering over her hot skin with abandon.

The first swipe of tongue was long, lingering, slow, and she responded by gasping into the silence of the kitchen.

Again, he lapped at her, slithering his tongue in a zigzag of motion, up and over her clit, circling it with a tongue that was like silk.

Whatever it was that assaulted her when Kale pleased her hit her in her gut, hard and without warning. She needed more. She wanted to drown in the sensation of

his finger in her, driving with slow, measured force. She wanted to revel in his tongue, hot and slick against her cunt. Gripping the counter for leverage, Victoria lifted her hips, riding Kale's finger, pressing him between her legs while he licked her.

The force of heat she'd felt the other night doubled in impact, slamming into her with a tidal wave of electricity, jolting her from her place on the stool.

She came so suddenly, she lost her balance, but Kale held her in place by wrapping an arm around her waist and clamping her to his lips and tongue.

His dark head against the white of her thighs made for the most carnal of images. His long, hot tongue swiped at her each time he pulled away, slick with her cream. Victoria couldn't hold back anymore.

The muscles of her cunt tightened, clenching his finger, and her nipples beaded, sharp and tight. Her stomach contracted and with a long, keening moan, Victoria came again, undulating against Kale, writhing with the urgent claw of orgasm biting at her.

Kale held her firmly, rising to meet each thrust of her hips with his tongue and mouth until she slowed, leaning back against the counter, weak and boneless.

He slid up her body and held her, letting her burrow her face in the hard width of his chest to catch her breath. Kissing the top of her head, Kale stroked her back with his large hands, over her shoulder and back down her spine.

Victoria fought to push air into her lungs, to calm the dizzy, heady threads of relief that coursed through her body.

When she finally looked up at him, Victoria knew it was time to give Kale the relief he needed too. Stooping down, she plucked her pants up and dug in her pocket for the condom she'd brought. She didn't care if it seemed presumptuous to have done so either. She had never understood how anyone could be so caught up in an encounter that they'd forget a condom, but she did now.

Placing it in his hand, she whispered thickly, "Condom."

Kale took it from her and gave her a lopsided grin, breaking open the foil wrapper and sliding it on his cock.

The condom meant she was ready and Kale took that opportunity to sit back on the stool, pulling her to him, pulling her shirt over her head and pushing her bra off. Her spine lay against his chest, and her legs shook with the fear that it'd been so long, she wouldn't remember how.

"I would never hurt you, Victoria. We'll take it slow. Lean back against me and spread your legs. Let me touch you." His hands swept over her, skimming her breasts, tweaking her nipples.

Arching against his hands, Victoria let the heat of his back seep into her, using it for support when his hands found her clit again, stroking it lightly. Kale's cock throbbed against her ass. Thick and full, it was hot and straining upward.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Victoria rolled her hips, lifting them, inviting him to enter her.

His groan of satisfaction was followed by him sliding his shaft between the slick folds of her cunt, sending a heat wave of shivers along her spine. The friction was titillating and sizzling hot. When he was poised at her entry, Victoria slid onto his cock, taking him inch by inch, breathing with each increment.

Kale's teeth ground in her ear and his breath was harsh and ragged. His hold on her tightened and it encouraged Victoria to brace herself on his strong thighs, gripping them as she descended on his thick cock.

It stretched her, filled her with its searing heat and her groan was a mixture of wonder and fear.

"Take it slow, baby," he whispered with heated encouragement. "You have the control," he added, encircling her waist and cupping her breast.

When Victoria finally sank down on him, allowing the width of his cock to settle within her, her heart crashed against her ribs with excitement and pleasure. A combination of the joy only having a man in you can bring and the sensual knowing a woman garners from reducing a man to quivering. It riveted her, held her captive, gave her a power she'd never known until this very moment and her chest tightened with the discovery.

Victoria wasn't thinking about the sticky mess they'd made. She wasn't thinking about the germs she could get from this coupling. She was thinking of the hold she had on Kale now. She had the control, he told her, but it meant that she was also letting go of it too.

She was allowing herself to take joy in something again, to revel in the pleasure of lovemaking.

It wasn't in the hope she might rectify a wrong she'd made by marrying the wrong man.

It wasn't in the hope that she'd be something she wasn't.

It wasn't in the hope that she'd maintain her illusion of perfection.

It simply was.

And Victoria wanted it all. She wanted the next level of committing to this newfound pleasure and she wanted it now.

It superseded all else.

With thrusts that picked up in speed, Victoria found a rhythm and rode Kale's cock, letting it expand within her, pulsing and hard.

Their flesh clapped together in scintillating slaps, her cunt wet with need, swallowed his shaft with each downward thrust. Kale's hands gripped her hips, driving upward, and each thrust brought with it a groan from his chest, deep and vibrating.

Victoria was mindless of anything but the hard cock that would bring her satisfaction and she focused only on the sensual plunges she took, the heat of his chest against her back as she reached up and wound her hands around his neck.

When his fingers found her clit, Victoria's focus was lost and she exploded. The swell of hot need drove into her and took over every one of her senses, wreaking havoc with her balance, making her dizzy with its intensity.

Kale blew out a gust of air and threw his head back against her hands and they came.

Together.

His cock shuddered deep within her, jerking against her tight captivity, and her body flooded with incredible, delicious relief.

Gathering her close, Kale held her, rocking her back and forth as they both gasped for breath.

Withdrawing from her, he turned her in his arms and held her to him.

His hiss of obvious pain washed away the glow and Victoria pulled away with a rough jerk. "What's wrong?" she asked, looking down between their bodies. Her hand immediately went to his chest, where an angry red mark lay just between his pecs.

"What the hell?" she croaked in surprise. Inspecting it closer, Victoria's hand went to her throat.

The mark looked just like her necklace.

Her crucifix.

Chapter Nine

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She had a damned crucifix on and now it was emblazoned on his chest. Explain that, Kale.

"Oh, my God. I'm sorry," Victoria whispered from behind her fingers, her eyes wide and filled with fear.

Damn it all. Of all the times to have something like this happen. He ran a hand over his chest and cupped her chin. "Forget it. It isn't your fault." His mind rapidly sought an answer to a question she was sure to ask.

He read the confusion in her eyes when she asked, "Are you allergic to fourteen carat gold? I mean, it's real, not cheap gold," she assured him.

Would he have expected anything less with a woman like Victoria? "Er, yeah." Good, that was good. He was glad she was doing the thinking for him. Shit, shit, shit.

"But look, it's going away," she pointed out, running a light finger over the mark as it lessened in severity.

Well, Vic, that's cuz I'm a vampire and we self-heal. You know, just like we read minds and drink blood.

Cheerist, this was bad.

Victoria was obviously puzzled and her concern sent her into a flurry of action.

"Let me get a cloth for it. Maybe something cool will help?" She went off in search of a washcloth and another thought occurred to him. He had a fresh batch of blood in his fridge.

They really needed to move their encounters to her house. There was too much here for her to find.

Following after her, Kale rushed to keep her from going near the refrigerator, which was just plain paranoid, considering a washcloth in the fridge would just be crazy.

Grabbing her by the arm, Kale stopped her from looking any further. "I'm fine, Vic. Besides, you can't really think you'll be able to find a washcloth in this mess of mine, can you?" he joked, hoping her OCD would kick in and she'd realize looking for something like a washcloth was plain crazy in his condo.

Slapping a hand to her forehead, she nodded and smiled. "What could I have been thinking? Men probably don't even use them. Only prissy girls like me do."

Relieved, he chuckled and ran a finger down her pert nose. "Know what?"

She frowned. "What?"

"You, Victoria Rawlings, are a mess. Your hair has whipped cream in it and know what else?"

Her hands flew to her hair, attempting to smooth out the auburn mess that was clumped together. "What?" she almost whined, wrinkling her nose.

"You're still naked," he said with a wink of an eye.

"Oh!" Victoria tried to cover herself, hands everywhere and a pretty flush on her cheeks.

"Don't hide," he scolded, pulling her into his arms and letting the tips of her breasts graze his chest, careful not to press against the crucifix at her neck. "You're much prettier naked, if you want an honest opinion."

Flattening her palms against his chest, she balked, "I am not, but I am a mess."

"Yeah, you are," he confirmed. "But you know what else?"

"Now what? Do I smell? It can't get much worse, can it?"

"Nope. You smell delicious. I was just noticing that as much of a mess as you are, you're not getting out the rubber gloves and bottle of Lysol. That's progress, Vic."

It seemed to dawn on her that he was right, but then she frowned again. "I don't need a lesson in my OCD, if that's what you're implying. Quit playing teacher with me."

I'm not your student. I know I've gone overboard, but I didn't need your anchor to keep me in place, got that, Don Ho?"

His chuckle was throaty at her reference to the Hawaiian singe. "I know you don't. I'm just pointing out that it's a good thing, is all. Now, how about we go make some tiny bubbles and clean up?"

"In the shower?" Victoria's tone held astonishment.

Kale scooped her up, his laughter grew heartier. "Oh, yeah. In the shower, in the bed, with some whipped cream, but *not* with Fred."

Victoria's giggling was infectious as Kale carried her off to the shower, turning the knobs and growing harder by the moment at the idea of her soapy curves pressing into his body, sliding against his cock.

Taking her lips with his, Kale shoved aside the notion that this had to come to an end, no matter how much he enjoyed Victoria, physically, mentally. *Vampires and humans just don't belong together*. The tightening of his gut reminded him that. When he had to let Victoria go, it was going to be one of the hardest things he ever had to do.

He'd never become this attached to anyone in his long-lived centuries, but with each new milestone, he found he wanted to be there to experience the next one and the next one...

But he couldn't.

He would live for eternity and Victoria would grow old and die.

Vampires and humans just didn't belong together.

Even if he'd never found another of his kind who intrigued him as much as this human did.

They just couldn't be.

* * *

Victoria straightened her coat jacket while she waited outside the Ex-Files' favorite pub. Kale and Victoria had been seeing each other for almost a month now and Victoria could no longer keep missing her meetings with the girls.

She missed their weekly night out, but the nights spent with Kale tended to make her forget everything else.

Each moment they spent together was a new experience. Each sexual encounter grew in heat, and Victoria was finding that amidst all of the dinners they shared, the movies they went to, that she was letting go.

Well, if the condition of her condo was any indication of letting go, anyway.

She'd found a stack of mail by her foyer table she'd forgotten about and she hadn't waxed her toilet seats in over a month. Her house looked lived in now. Much more like the person she struggled to find inside and much less like the ideal she'd projected. The idea that she was perfect.

Where once her days had been filled with organization and numbers, now they were filled with thoughts of nothing but Kale.

Kale and his lips.

Kale and his hard, tight buns.

Kale and his dimpled grin.

Kale, Kale, Kale.

She'd yark if it weren't so damned hard to stop thinking about Kale in order to do so.

Victoria knew what was happening to her, but she couldn't admit it. *It's too soon.* They'd only known each other for a month. How could someone fall in lo -- er, lo -- er, a whole lotta like this quickly?

They hadn't agreed to see one another exclusively, though she couldn't imagine when he had the time to see anyone else. She wouldn't think about him seeing anyone else. They hadn't spoken a word about this thing between them or the emotions it was coming to involve. Yet, when they were together, they were *simpatico* in a way she hadn't know really existed between a man and a woman until she met Kale.

The girls talked about it all the time and now, for the first time in her thirty-seven years, Victoria Rawlings was finally experiencing it for herself.

She was afraid, excited, unsure and, mostly, worried about losing the last bit of control she had, only to end up dumped.

Taking a chance had never been her thing.

Unless it was taking a chance on a new cleaning product.

"Hey, beautiful. Whatcha hidin' under your coat?" Kale said from behind her, slipping his arms under hers and hugging her close.

"It's a secret called Victoria and if you get lucky, you just might find out what the hush is all about," she chuckled, turning in his arms and giving him a quick kiss on his lips.

Kale captured them, holding her there. "If I ever tire of those lips, knock me in the head, would ya?" he joked.

"Are you nervous?"

"About meeting your friends? No, not really. Not after what you've told me about them."

It was true. Victoria had told Kale all about how she and Katy, Maddie and Maxie had met through their Divorcées Anonymous meetings. She'd told him many things in their hours together, yet he said little about himself or his family.

"Good. I know they'll like you," she assured him, absently fixing the collar on his shirt.

"Vickeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" Maddie yelled as she and Cole made their way across the street, dodging cars. Maddie threw herself at Victoria, giving her a sloppy kiss on the cheek. "Where the hell have you been? Jesus effin', I can't ever get a hold of you anymore!" she chastised.

"I know, I'm sorry, Maddie. I've been busy..."

"Busy doing what? Hunting dust bunnies?"

Victoria's face flushed. "No, I --"

"Kale? Kale Ohana? My man, 'tis indeed a pleasure to see you again." Kellen and Maxie came from the right side of the pub and Kellen had a smile on his face. He slapped Kale on the back.

The Lucky Charms hunk knew Kale?

Kale looked taken aback momentarily, but he held his hand out to Kellen and shook it with gusto. "Kellen, it's good to see you too. What brings you, er... here?"

Kellen held Maxie closer to his side. "My wife," he said with the obvious pride he always wore when he spoke of Maxie.

"Your *wife*?" Kale looked rather stunned to Victoria, adding to her already overactive imagination.

Kellen's smile was casual and easy. "Indeed. Maxie is my wife and has given me a son. My seed is healthy as ever," he joked and Maxie swatted his arm.

"*Carajo*, honey! How many times do I have to tell you that you don't just announce the strength of your sperm in public? I'm sorry, Kale. So you and Kellen know each other?"

"In a roundabout way, yes," Kale acknowledged with an easy smile. Yet, it was uncomfortable, almost surprised, and Victoria could sense it. "It's nice to meet you too, Maxie. How did you manage to nab a guy like Kellen?" he joked, slapping Kellen on the back jovially.

She rolled her large, brown eyes. "It's a long story. Let's just say, I'm his kind of wench."

"Kale? Cole. Nice to meet you and this is my fiancée --"

"Maddie, I'm Maddie. Now I know why you've been so busy, Vickster. Wow, you're a hunk, huh?" She winked at Kale and held out her hand.

"He certainly is," Katy beamed. "Kale, this is my husband Garret. It's so wonderful to finally meet you. We've heard a great deal about you from Victoria. She just glows when she --"

"Katy!" Victoria almost shouted. Pulling Katy closer, she whispered in her ear. "Remember the personal boundaries talk we had," Victoria reminded her, swishing the space between them.

"Well, of course I do. Why just the other day you said I was nosy --"

Vicky made a zipper motion with her hand to her mouth.

"I think that means shut up, Katy," Maddie said with a chuckle.

"I was being a counselor again, wasn't I?" Katy said with chagrin.

"Yeah, babe, you were. Kale, I'm Garret, Katy's husband. Good to meet you."

"How about we all go inside and find a table. I need to get this show on the road. If I'm going to cinch that ball and chain around my neck, I want to do it in colors that are in Victoria's 'palette of life'," Maddie said, pulling at the door to the bar they frequented for karaoke and laughing when Cole swatted her butt playfully.

"I will not be called a ball and chain, woman!" Cole teased.

"You know Kale, honey? How can that be? How do you know him? I thought you were --"

Kellen cut Maxie off. "Move thy butt, wench," he said, and then whispered, "We will talk about this later."

Victoria looked to Kale for an answer, but he shrugged and politely held the door for her. She followed Maddie and everyone to their favorite table and Kale held out a chair, sitting next to her and putting his arm around her with casual ease.

"Dayum, Vickster -- this Kale is off the hook hot," Maddie mumbled in her ear as the karaoke geared up.

Victoria smiled. "He is, isn't he?" It felt incredibly good to not be the seventh wheel. Even if she was only part of a couple for tonight, it made her feel less like she was alone in the crowd of happy couples.

"You like him, don't you? I mean, really like him."

Victoria couldn't help but smile broadly at Maddie. "I think I do."

"I know I tease ya a lot, Vic, but I'm so glad for you." Maddie squeezed her shoulder and turned toward the table and slapped her hand on it. "So let's get down to business before everyone has too much to drink and you guys end up in yellow taffeta with a flouncy skirt."

Katy's smile was wistful. "Do you remember our first gathering here, Maddie? When we brought you for karaoke after our first Divorcées Anonymous meeting? You got drunk and -- and -- you were siiiing," she hiccupped, "iiiing," Katy finished on a

sob. Garret put his arm around her to console her. "And now look at you. You're getting mar -- mar -- marrriiiied."

Maddie got up and gave Katy a hug. "Yep, I am and I probably wouldn't have if not for all of you. So, I'll have all of you to blame when Cole grows tired of me and trades me in for a sports car and some teenybopper."

Laughter ensued and the women gathered 'round to get down to the business of planning Maddie and Cole's wedding, while the men went off to collect beers.

"Kale, my man. Dost thou know of this strange American pastime called karaoke?" Kellen asked, chuckling with Cole and Garret.

* * *

Kellen shook his mock pom-pom/napkin along with his butt and bellowed the words to Toni Basil's *Mickey* into the microphone. Cole, Garret and Kale sang backup, twirling first to the right and then to the left, bumping into each other as they belted out the chorus. "*Oh, Mickey, you're so fine. You're so fine you blow my mind. Hey, Mickey!*"

Two hours later and the final bridesmaids' dress color, a pale pink, chosen, Victoria couldn't help but comment, "God, they're loud." She stuck a finger in her ear and twisted it around.

"Yeah, but look at your man. He's really got the cheerleader thing down, Vic," Maddie snorted. "Gawd, who knew the Lucky Charms hunk could shake a pom-pom like that?"

Maxie laughed out loud over the caterwauling. "*Ay, caramba!* my friend. And Kellen says we're horrible?"

With Kellen in the lead, they sang one song after the other, Kale joining in like he'd always been a part of their group.

"He does seem to be enjoying himself, doesn't he?" Katy chuckled. "You look good, Victoria. How do you feel about this budding relationship with Kale?"

Well, Katy, it's like this. He's the orgasmatron. I just look at him and I could drench a pair of panties. God, she was so embarrassed and she had no reason to be. In fact, she

should be shouting it from the rooftops. The girls would cheer her on, no doubt, but she just wasn't ready. "It's going nicely," was all she could politely offer right now.

"Oh, plueease, Vic. Tell us the truth. Did he bone ya yet?" Maddie prodded in typical, in your face Maddie style. "He looks like he'd be good for a spin around the block, if you ask me."

"Well, no one asked you, now did they, Madison Blake?" Victoria huffed, running a hand over her already smooth auburn hair.

"Ahem," Katy interrupted. "Ladies, must I remind you about our *personal boundaries*?"

"Oh, fine. Don't tell us if you're boning him," Maddie said, sticking her tongue out at Katy.

"Maddie? Come to the bathroom with me, will you? I need someone to stand watch," Katy said.

"Do you think they're ever going to fix the lock on that piece of shit bathroom stall?" Maddie asked, overly loud. She followed Katy to the bathroom, leaving Maxie and Victoria alone.

"Vic?"

"Yes?"

"Where does Kale come from?"

"Hawaii."

Maxie frowned and leaned over the table toward Victoria. "Are you sure?"

"Well, yes, I'm sure, Maxie. That's what he said. I didn't interrogate him, if that's what you're wondering." How irritating to have Maxie, of all people, question Kale. She was, after all, married to a man who sounded like he'd come from the Renaissance Fair and called Maxie a wench.

"You're sure?" she said once more, frowning.

"Well, I don't know, Maxie. I'm as sure as I can be! What's the matter? Have you and the Lucky Charms hunk lost that lovin' feelin' and now you need to rain on my parade?"

“Victoria Rawlings! How dare you imply I’d do any such thing? No one is happier than I that you aren’t going to end up some mountain man’s bitch!” Maxie’s voice had risen to a decibel that Victoria might find belligerent if it weren’t for the fact that it was Maxie.

Ever dramatic, ever a pair of legs with a mouth.

Just as she was about to respond, the men made their way through the throng of chairs. “Vicky? Is everything all right?” Kale asked with concern on his face.

Victoria clamped her mouth shut and sent daggers at Maxie with her eyes.

Maxie flipped her the bird.

Kellen grabbed her finger and kissed it. “Put that away, wench,” he scolded. “Aye, the females can be most disagreeable, Kale. Pay them no mind. My Maxie here is the feistiest wench of them all.”

Kale laughed when Victoria stuck her tongue out at Maxie and rose. “Let’s go, Kale. I’m pretty tired.”

Kellen’s raucous laugh singed her ears. “’Twas good to see you again, Kale. Don’t be a stranger. Stop by the restaurant sometime and we will break bread.”

Kale smiled and shook Kellen’s hand, taking Victoria’s as he did. “I’d love to. It was a pleasure to meet you all.”

“Yeah, same here. Don’t let Maxie scare you off, Kale. She’s just flappin’ her gums,” Maddie said, putting her hand on his arm and reaching up to kiss him on the cheek. “You come back next week when we plan the music. Now *that* should be interesting.”

Everyone said their goodbyes and Kale ushered Victoria out of the pub. Her feelings still stung from Maxie’s words, but Kale wouldn’t allow it to dampen his spirits.

“I had a great time,” he said, twirling her in a circle and kissing her on the lips. He pulled back as if she’d thrown water on him, wiping his hand over his mouth and turning away to spit.

Victoria putting a hand on his shoulder, her concern ringing in the crisp air of night. "Are you all right?"

"What did you eat in there while we were singing," he gasped.

Her hand flew to her mouth. "I -- I had some of those cheese sticks with pasta sauce."

"Garlic." He spat on the ground again. His eyes watered with a fury, red and blazing.

"Y-yes, I suppose so. I don't know what they put in it! I'm sorry," she answered back.

"I'm allergic to garlic," he sputtered.

That was some allergy. To react like that to just the hint of it on her lips?

"It's okay, Vic. I'm just sensitive to it. C'mon, let's go home and wash your mouth out," he chuckled through a cough.

How incredibly bizarre.

There were so many things that were bizarre about Kale. If she let herself think about them for too long, they bordered on unexplainable. Before this went any further, she had some questions that needed answers.

Soon.

Chapter Ten

"Victoria?"

"Maxie?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk?"

"Talk."

"I'm still mad at you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, guess what, *chica*?"

"What?"

"I don't give a goat's ass."

"Don't you swear at me, Maxine Rodriguez. Don't you dare."

"Goat's ass, goat's ass!"

"I will not be taunted by you!"

"Oh, yes you will!"

"Potty mouth!"

"Ooooh, that was harsh."

"Maxie! What do you want?"

"To talk to you."

"So talk."

"In person, Vicky."

"I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

"None of your business."

"That means you're waxing your gutters."

"No, no, it does not."

"Victoria?"

"What?"

"I'm coming over. Get your 'ho's ass dressed and tell Kale to go home."

Had she just called her a 'ho? "He's not here."

"Good. I'll be right over."

"No! I'm still mad at you," Victoria yelled into the phone, but she only heard a dial tone.

Damn it. She didn't want Maxie to rain on her flipping parade. Not now, not when she was already suspicious of Kale. She knew Maxie was coming to tell her something she didn't want to hear.

Her gut was on fire with it.

When the phone rang again, Victoria snatched it up and yelled, "Maxie! I'm busy. Do you hear me, you enchilada lovin', salsa eating pain in my Anglo Saxon ass. I don't want to hear whatever it is that you're going to say! I --"

"Vic-kee!"

"What?"

"It's Kale."

Oh.

"Vicky, we need to talk."

Her gut, which had already been on fire, now sunk like a ship without its rudders. Kale's tone of voice was heavy and Vicky knew something she'd never forget was about to happen. "Do you want to come over?"

"No, Vicky. I can't right now. How about we have coffee tonight?"

He was breaking up with her and he wanted to prolong the pain over coffee? What kind of moron wrapped in stupid did that? "Sure," she said with slow hesitation. "Coffee. Okay."

"I'll see you tonight, Vicky."

Just as Kale hung up, Maxie beat on her door.

Victoria didn't have time to give any more thought to Kale. She rushed to get the door before Maxie knocked it down. Throwing it open, Victoria crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her gaze. "What is wrong with you, Maxie?"

"Get the hell back inside and shut the door," Maxie said briskly, spouting orders at her, and shoving her inside.

"What is wrong with you, Maxie?" Victoria turned to face her, shouting the question.

"Look, I'm not going to sugar coat this. I'm just going to say it because it's too unbelievable to hem and haw over."

"Is this about Kale?"

"Yes. Yes, Vicky. It's about Kale."

"It's bad, isn't it?" Victoria could tell by the concern that mottled Maxie's face it wasn't good. Her stomach turned.

"Give me your hand, Victoria."

"No."

"Victoria, I washed mine just a few minutes ago. Give me your hand, *now*," she said through clenched teeth, her accent growing thicker.

Victoria placed her hand in Maxie's and she pulled her to Victoria's couch.

Taking a deep breath, Maxie said, "I have something to tell you, Vic. Something you're going to find incredibly hard to believe, but I'm going to say it and just get it over with."

Kale *was* a serial killer... no, he was married. Of course he was. How did a hottie like that not end up in some woman's greedy hands?

"Look at me, Victoria." Maxie grabbed Victoria's chin, her chocolate brown eyes piercing Victoria's. "Kellen..."

"Mr. Lucky Charms?"

"Yes, Victoria, Mr. Lucky Charms isn't what you all think. Well, I mean, he is, but he's not. Look, Kellen speaks the way he does because he's not from this century. He's from 925 AD."

Oh, Maxie had spent far too much time frying tortillas.

Maxie plowed forward without letting Victoria interfere. "Don't say a word until I finish, okay?"

Victoria nodded, too afraid not to, for fear Maxie was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Look, do you remember when I met him? I was in the last vestiges of my bout with Juan. Remember how I told you all I was having dreams after Juan beat me and left me for dead? Erotic dreams and the doctors all thought it was brain trauma?"

Juan had beaten Maxie to within an inch of her life and she'd almost died. When Maxie got back on her feet again, she began having dreams that were very graphic in nature. That was just before she met Kellen. Uh-huh. She sure had. Victoria could remember thinking she was a nut.

Now, she was convinced.

"It wasn't a dream, Vic. It was real and Kellen was the man in my dreams, but he had no physical form until he fell in love with me. He was cursed to travel in the shadows by a horrible witch who was angry with him for essentially dumping her. He was sent here, to our time, to avenge wrongs done to women because this witch who cursed him thought he was a cad. She claimed he used women for his own pleasure and discarded them callously."

Naturally. Wasn't that how everyone met a man? Through a curse and a wet dream?

"That's why he talks the way he does, Vicky. Don't you see?" she said with such insistence, Victoria was literally frightened. "He knows Kale, Victoria."

The words dropped like a lead balloon between them.

And how did Kellen know Kale again? Had Kellen been skipping the time-space continuum on over to the land of pineapples and macadamia nuts?

"Victoria, what I'm about to tell you is almost more unbelievable than Kellen's story."

No. Really, then? How much more unbelievable was a witch and a curse and no body and shadows and cads?

"Kale is a *vampire*."

Victoria's mouth dropped open.

Maxie closed it for her. "Don't do that Victoria. It's so un-lady-like and not at all like you." Maxie let her mouth go.

Victoria's mouth fell open again.

"Victoria! Pay attention. Kellen knows Kale because they met way back in 925. You know the stories about vampires, right? They're immortal. Kale is a vampire and he and Kellen were once friendly acquaintances."

So who are the people in *your* neighborhood?

Victoria stared hard at her friend and decided Maxie really did believe Kale was a vampire and Kellen was from a century that Victoria never gave much thought to.

Maxie's brain trauma was very real and obviously still a problem.

"Vic?"

"To quote Maddie, you are a whack-job, Maxie, and you need help. I'm going to call Katy right now and we're going to see what we can do. Does Kellen know you think he's from some long-ago century? I can tell you for sure, he'd agree you need help."

Maxie's lips formed a thin line. "Victoria Rawlings, you listen to me. I don't need any help. I'd bet I can prove it. Let's go to Kale's and look around. He's a vampire, Vic."

Victoria didn't know whether to dial 911 or run out of her condo screaming. "Let's call Katy, Max."

"Get up, Vic. Let's go see Kale, right now." She yanked Victoria's arm. "Get up now!"

Victoria let Maxie drag her through her condo and out the door, but not before Victoria covertly grabbed her cell phone. She pressed speed dial and hoped Maxie wouldn't notice her fishing around in her pocket in her very worked up state.

"What did you say Kale was again, Maxie?"

Maxie swung around while dragging Victoria down the beach. "A vampire, Victoria. Kellen says he's a nice guy, but I couldn't let you go on not knowing. It was pretty evident you didn't know at the pub the other night. I didn't tell you all about Kellen, well, because look at your reaction now. You would have had us locked up, but it's all the truth, I swear. Kellen was a warrior in his time and Kale is a vampire!"

"Say that again, Maxie," Victoria coaxed, hoping Maxie wouldn't catch on.

Finally, she did just as Victoria hoped she would. She got spitting mad. "A vampire! Bats and blood and sleeping in coffins and immortality and all sorts of crazy shit," she screeched. "Now where is Kale's condo?"

Victoria pointed to Kale's door and Maxie dragged her up the front steps.

"He's not home," Victoria told her.

"Good, now let's see if we can get in."

Victoria gasped. They were breaking and entering. It was wrong. They could be arrested. Oh, God, they'd go to jail. Jail had germs and plenty of them. Prison guards made you do horrible things so you could have commissary privileges. Oh, this was soooo bad. She'd end up being someone's bitch.

Maxie popped Kale's lock with a credit card and pushed her way in.

"Maxie! We could be arrested. This is breaking and entering!"

"No shit, Vic," she replied sarcastically. "I don't think Kale will give us up. He's a vampire. A vampire. I'd bet the cops would love to hear that if he decided to snitch. He's not a bad guy, Vic. Kellen says he's a great guy, but he didn't tell you he was a great *vampire* guy."

God, Victoria hoped that Katy had answered her call and heard Maxie ramble her crazy musings. "I heard you, Maxie."

"Yeah, but do you believe me? Now, c'mon, let's start looking."

She had to stall Maxie. “What exactly are we looking *for*, Maxie?”

“Don’t appease me, Victoria, with that soothing, complacent tone that Katy does so well. We’re looking for vampire things, like a coffin and I dunno. Vampire things.”

Okey-doke. Just keep her talking, Victoria thought.

Maxie began to tear through the cluttered living room, peeking in boxes and flipping up cushions.

While Victoria watched, her mind finally began to wrap around this vampire thing. Her hand went to her throat and she was reminded of her crucifix chain and the pasta sauce with garlic she’d eaten and the fact that she and Kale always met at night and... and...

Oh, my.

Maxie was in the kitchen rummaging around when she yelped a triumphant “Aha! I told you, Victoria. Get your OCD ass on in here and look what I found.”

Victoria gulped hard and threaded her way through the clutter back to Kale’s kitchen. Kale’s kitchen where they’d made love. Kale’s kitchen where they’d used whipped cream and made love. Kale’s kitchen where they’d made love and Maxie was holding up a plastic bag with some red stuff in it.

What was it that Maddie said?

Oh, right.

Jesus fucking Christ in a mini skirt!

Blood.

Maxie was holding up a bag of blood like it was a juice box.

Victoria felt woozy, lightheaded, and she grabbed the counter she’d once held in passion for stability.

“Did I tell you, Vic? I’m not a nut. Kellen is a warrior from 925 AD and Kale is Count Dracula!”

Maxie brought the bag to Victoria and her stomach did a flip. “Don’t you pass out on me now, Queen of Clean. I knew it. I knew it. Now, what are we going to do about it?”

Do?

Do?

What did one do when they discovered a vampire?

The door of Kale's condo flew open and both Victoria and Maxie turned to the sound of Katy and Maddie's voices, worried and anxious.

"Maxine Rodriguez, what are you doing?" Katy yelled, very much unlike her calm, rational counselor's voice. Ohhhhhhh, Maxie was gonna get it now. Katy was going to make her go to her thinking spot.

"I'm proving a point. What are you two doing here?" Maxie asked.

Maddie strolled over to them and cocked her head, a wry smile plastered on her face. "Hmmm, let's see. I get a phone call from Victoria. I know it was her, cuz her number showed up on my caller ID. It's kinda muffled, like she's got the phone underwater or something, but I distinctly hear some kinda freaky stuff. I hear the words *vampire* and *warrior* clear as day. I hear them with Ms. Puerto Rico's accent. A girl tends to wonder if her fucking friend hasn't lost her bloody mind, ya feel me here, Max?"

"I have not lost my mind, Madison Blake," Maxie said with indignation, turning her chin up in her defiant way. "I know what I'm talking about and Victoria can tell you all about it. I haven't been truthful with you all and I just told Victoria why. Now, what are we going to do about Kale and his visits to the blood bank?"

Katy, Maddie and Victoria all stared at Maxie.

The silence stretched unbearably.

"Um, we're going to check you into the nearest place that has the very fashionable white jackets, in your color wheel, I might add, and then we're going to have you heavily medicated," Maddie said. "I volunteer to watch the baby. I'll take first shift," she added.

"Maxie. Maxie. I -- I -- what can I do to help?" Katy said, seemingly at a loss for words.

Maxie slapped a hand to her forehead. "Pay attention! Kellen is a warrior from 925. Didn't you all wonder why he speaks the way he does? Why he appeared out of nowhere? *Mi amigas*, he's a time traveler."

Maddie frowned. "Is this post-partum depression, Max? Cuz you've cinched the deal for me about having kids. I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't need some therapist to tell me Maxie has gone 'round the bend."

Victoria was beginning to doubt that statement. As incredible as it sounded, she had some strange facts to back up what Maxie was saying. It was far easier to believe she was losing her mind, but what Maxie claimed added up to the odd experiences Victoria had been busy shoving to the far regions of her brain. Still, words escaped her.

"All right, Maxie. What's say we leave the nice Kale's house and you come with me," Katy coaxed, ever calm, ever in charge when necessary.

"Yeah," Maddie snorted. "Let's take her to the drive thru therapy by the hour place and see if we can figure this out."

"Figure out what, ladies?"

Hoo boy.

Kale stood in the doorway, the light of the day fading behind his broad shoulders, waiting for an answer.

Hoo boy.

Chapter Eleven

Okay, it was time to wrap this up. Just spit it out. "Maxie thinks you're a vampire," Victoria said, the words simply spilling out.

"It's true!" Maxie shouted, pushing her way past the girls and pointing up at him. "Show them your fangs, Kale. It's okay, you can come clean now. Kellen told me all about it," Maxie assured him with a smile. "I told Victoria because, well, she's one of my best friends and I *had* to. I hope you understand."

Kale looked down at Maxie and then back up at Victoria. "Victoria?"

Rooted to the spot, she sputtered. She was in her squeeze's condo with her best friends, accusing him of being a vampire.

It didn't get much kookier than that.

"Forget them, Kale." Maxie smiled. "They think I'm nuts. Tell them. C'mon. Show them your fangs. I know you have them. Kellen said so."

Kale moved toward Victoria, who couldn't take her eyes off of him, but she cringed nonetheless. "Don't be afraid of me, Victoria. Please."

Okay, so why would he ask her not to be afraid of him if what Maxie was saying wasn't true?

"Vic, look, I know how you feel, but it really is okay. Kellen and I adjusted. You will too."

Adjust this.

"Is what she says true, Kale? I -- I -- what the hell is going on?" Victoria shouted, hysteria rising in her voice.

"Vic, I was going to tell you. Well, I wasn't going to tell you all of it. Tonight, over coffee. I was going to break it off and let you move on," Kale said, moving closer to her, his eyes compelling her to look into his.

"Wait one friggin' second, Mr. Honolulu. You were going to break up with Victoria because you think you're a vampire?" Maddie said with disbelief. "Are you on some form of medication?"

Kale's face held a myriad of emotions. One of them was defeat. Victoria was certain of it. "No, quite the contrary, what Maxie says is true," Kale said, quietly, firmly, convincingly.

Turning to face them, Kale flashed his teeth.

His big teeth.

Er, his big fangs.

A whoosh of air forced its way out of Victoria's lungs and she swayed.

No one moved.

No one but Maxie, who smiled arrogantly, nodding her head. "See?"

Maddie was the first to react, making a cross of her fingers and shoving them in Kale's direction. "You stay the hell away from us!" she screamed. "I don't know what the hell is going on, but Katy?" she yelled, her voice bordering manic. "Get the fucking garlic," she ordered. "Maxie? Call Ghostbusters or something! Vic? You get the hell over here before he bites you. They bite, you know. If he bites you, you'll be a vampire too!" Maddie's panic was evident while she tried to get the girls behind her. Her eyes were wide with fear, but she held strong. "Back off," she spat in Kale's face, holding up her crossed fingers. "Or I'll -- I'll -- I'll, well, I don't know, but it'll be drastic!"

Maxie slapped at Maddie's hands. "Stop it. He's not dangerous, you idiot! *Carajo*, he's a nice vampire, Maddie."

"A nice vampire? Are you on crack? Haven't you seen *Interview with the Vampire*? There's nothing nice about vampires!" Maddie shrieked.

Katy finally took the opportunity to speak and it was with measured words. "Maxine, do not hit Madison. Victoria, come over here near me. Kale? You stay there with your -- your -- teeth," she wobbled on the last word.

"Maxie?" Kale said.

"Uh-uh?"

"I have to do something I know Kellen can explain to you later. Ask him, won't you? For now, just take my word for it, okay?"

"Sure, Kale," Maxie replied sweetly.

Kale stood in front of Maddie and stared at her, his eyes compelling hers to look back at him. Raising a hand, he touched her forehead and a glazed look washed over her face. He did the same to Katy.

Maxie giggled and asked, "Did you do the mind control thing?"

"Something like that. They won't remember any of this." He smiled at Maxie. "Could you take the ladies home, Maxie?"

"I can. I will, but can I ask you a favor?"

"Shoot," he said affably.

"Can you do that forgetting thing to Kellen the next time I hit a sale at Macy's?"

Kale laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

"C'mon," Maxie called to Katy and Maddie. "Come with me, my little zombies. Let's go hunt werewolves or something." Her chuckle was giddy. "Victoria," she said before closing the door, "I promise you, it'll be fine. Just listen and don't freak out. Byyyyyyyyye."

Victoria's head spun and her heart throbbed in her chest. Her friend, one of her *best friends*, had left her with a vampire and to top it all off, she'd let the *vampire* wipe her other best friends' memories clean.

It was too much.

Victoria wobbled and felt herself falling, but was helpless to do anything. She was fleetingly aware of strong arms catching her.

Vampire arms.

However, she was helpless to stop that too.

* * *

"Victoria? Victoria, wake up." Kale's warm voice, rich and thick like dark chocolate, washed over her.

No, waking up meant she had to acknowledge what had happened and she just wasn't willing to do that. She was forever passing out around him. It was humiliating.

"Victoria, we have to talk."

Yeah, you talk. I'm going to play dead and hope you don't consider that an invitation to suck me dry.

"Victoria? I would never suck you dry. I like you too much."

Victoria popped her eyes open. There it was again. His uncanny ability to read her thoughts.

"Vampires can do that, you know."

What?

"Read your thoughts, Vic."

Well, sure and they can fly and they live in big scary castles in Romania and they drink blood and that author writes books about them.

"Anne Rice."

Who?

"Anne Rice is the author of those books."

Nice. Maybe I'll check them out sometime when I need some info on how to date a vampire and what to expect in a budding relationship with a guy who drinks blood.

"Victoria?"

What!

"Talk to me."

Victoria felt around her and realized she was on Kale's bed. The thick comforter gave it away. "Forgive me if I'm a little freaked out right now, Kale. I don't know if I am capable of talking."

"Victoria. I'm a vampire and I was going to break up with you tonight because of it."

Well, how lovely. He'd just toss her to the wind, letting her believe it was once again her imperfections that kept her from hanging onto a man. That was just fabulous for her damaged psyche.

"I know it was wrong, Vic, but wouldn't it have been better than this?"

"Stop reading my thoughts," she demanded.

"I can't. It's the nature of the beast."

"You know what? I can make my own decisions about whether I want to date a vampire. I don't need you to do it for me and who said we were a couple to break up, anyway?"

"Oh, we're a couple, Victoria."

"You never asked me to be your steady. So we're not a couple. You can walk away at any time."

"You want my class ring to prove it? It's sorta old. Like centuries old, but you can have it," he offered, smiling down at her.

"So what Maxie says is true, then?"

He nodded his dark, yummy head. "Yep."

"It's a pretty incredible tale."

"Yep and I wouldn't blame you a bit if you walked away. If you'd like, I can even wipe out all memories of me."

Victoria's heart lurched. No, no. She didn't want that. Why would she want that when she hadn't found anyone who made her as happy as Kale did? Not any humans anyway. She'd just go back to cleaning and organizing things again. It wasn't nearly the fun she'd had with Kale. "Where is this going, Kale?" she finally asked. For the first time in their month together, she wasn't afraid of the answer. It was time to take a big girl pill and get the truth. She couldn't hide from it with a bottle of Mr. Clean and some rubber gloves. Kale had changed many things for her, but the most important thing was, she'd allowed him to.

"I don't know, Vic. I never wanted to be involved with a human. I'm immortal. I'll live forever. Eternally, you know what I mean? It means someday, I'd lose you to death unless I turn you. But we share something I've never experienced in all of my lives, Vic. We're *simpatico*. That's the only word I have for it. We're as different as night and day. I'm a slob, and you have a sick fascination with perfection. I have no

explanation for why or how we ended up here. I only know what we share is so good. If we can't take the leap of faith on that premise, then everyone and everything else seems impossible."

Victoria didn't know how to respond. It meant Kale felt the same way she did. Of course, he probably knew that because he could read her damned mind.

"Yeah, I knew," he chuckled.

"You know, that's very arrogant of you. Not to mention very unfair. You have an advantage I don't," she pouted, running a hand over his forehead, furrowed with worry.

"I know. I'll try to stop. We have a lot to talk about, Vic."

Indeed, they did, but not now. Victoria didn't want to talk and she didn't want to organize her thoughts. Thoughts that were flying in mindless circles.

"What kind of woman doesn't want to talk?" Kale scorned with a chuckle.

"The kind that has decided she's talked and organized plenty in her life. The kind of woman who now just wants to breathe. With you, I can finally breathe," she said, before capturing his lips and kissing him with fierce possession.

Kale pulled her closer and groaned into her mouth and Victoria responded by showing her need for him.

She unbuttoned her blouse, rolling off the bed and standing in front of him while she took the rest of her garments off. "Get undressed," she said, husky and with breathless anticipation. Suddenly nothing mattered but solidifying her feelings for him.

Kale stripped his clothes off and Victoria straddled him, looking down at the hard length of his body. Lifting her hips, she slid onto his cock, holding him with a firm hand, stroking him while she positioned herself and then waited for a moment, letting the width of his shaft fill her.

Kale's hands went to her breasts, cupping them, using his forefingers and thumbs to bring her nipples to tight peaks. She rocked against him, rolling her hips, letting the slick juice of her cunt moisten her thrusts.

Kale pulled her forward, taking a nipple between his lips and sucking it with force, sending a bolt of pleasure to her pussy. Her clit scraped deliciously against his pubic hair, rubbing against the aching nub, and Kale slipped a hand between them to fondle it, rocketing her toward release.

She clutched his head, pulling him as close to her chest as she could, pressing her breast against his tongue and letting the clap of their joined flesh mesmerize her.

Laving her nipple, Kale nipped at it, and the silken glide of tongue followed by the graze of his teeth sent her over the edge.

She gripped his hair, bucking against his cock, hard and pulsing in her. The last swipe of his tongue against the hard peak of her nipple sent Victoria over the edge and she came with a muffled yelp. It was over as quickly as it had begun.

Kale came too with a roar of release and a shudder of hard muscle.

They sat that way for a very long time, catching their breath. Kale held her close, rocking her while he remained inside her.

"Um, damn," Victoria finally said.

"I'll say," Kale muttered from below her with a chuckle.

"No, not that kind of damn, Kale. Damn, we didn't use a condom, damn. I'm sorry, I never forget. Never, but this time, well, you were so cute and all I kind of --"

"Vic?" he interrupted.

"What?"

"Vampires don't need condoms. We don't get diseases and we rarely, if ever, reproduce."

"I can see some of the advantages to this vampire stuff," she giggled, burying her face in his hair.

"Ya think?" he asked and Victoria knew it was time to reassure him.

"I think. How about we talk about this vampire stuff and you can tell me about the real Kale and what to expect as the girlfriend of a vampire?"

"Sure and then, you can tell me how nuts you are about me," he said, confidence oozing in his tone.

"You're very sure of yourself, buddy."

"No, Vic, I'm letting go of my misgivings and banking on us. I'm very sure of *us*," he whispered.

Epilogue

Maddie and Victoria held their stomachs laughing, while Kellen sang lead karaoke to Kool & the Gang's *Celebration*, followed by his backup singers, Cole, Katy, Maxie and Garret.

Held under the twinkle of stars and the silken dark of night, Maddie and Cole's wedding was simply beautiful. Maddie looked stunning. Victoria had cried when Cole placed the ring on Maddie's finger with such pride. It had taken him a long time to get her to the altar and the love he'd so patiently displayed for so many months finally found fruition.

"I think we're missing a good time," Maddie commented.

"I think Kellen should go on the road," Victoria laughed.

"Where's that hunky caterer of yours," Maddie asked, scanning the crowd at the reception.

"I don't know. I can't believe he's not up there with them." She pointed to the dais where they were singing karaoke.

"Are you happy, Maddie?" Victoria asked, giving her a hug.

Tilting her blonde head, Maddie smiled wistfully. "Happier than I can ever remember. I didn't think I'd ever do this again, but --" she wiggled the ring on her finger, "-- here I am and I can't remember when I was happier." The glow that Maddie wore said it all.

"Can you believe how far we've come from our first Divorcées Anonymous meeting, Vickster?"

Victoria laughed. No, she couldn't believe it. Maxie and Kellen, Katy and Garret and now, she and Kale -- all together -- finally, all happy.

She and Kale spent a lot of time talking about the issue of Kale and his vampire status.

Still, Victoria had moments of disbelief. Well, except for when Kale flashed his incisors. Then, she knew he wasn't screwing around. True to his word, Katy and Maddie remembered nothing. Maxie kept her lips sealed, but she and Victoria had talked long into the wee hours these past months about her fears.

"No, I can't, but I'm so happy for everyone."

"Be happy for you too, Victoria. Kale's a great guy."

"He is, indeed," Kale said, coming up behind Victoria and putting an arm around her.

"Hey, Big Kahuna. How come you're not up there with your posse?" Maddie asked with a chuckle, patting him on the back and giving him a kiss.

"I didn't want to show up Kellen," Kale joked. "You look beautiful, Maddie. Really beautiful. I hope you and Cole are always this happy."

"Yeah, so how about you make Victoria just as happy?" Maddie poked him in the arm.

"Maddie!" Victoria chastised. "Hush!"

"Oh, I can promise you, Maddie. I intend to make Victoria very happy."

"That's good to hear. I'm going to hold you to that. And now, I'm going to go join my partners in crime," Maddie said on a laugh. "Hurry up, so you don't miss Diana Ross and the Supremes," she giggled, moving toward the dais as a new song struck up.

"I'm sorry, honey. Sometimes Maddie can be so bold." Victoria scoffed, snuggling next to Kale and hiding her face in his tuxedo.

"Know what, Vic?"

"What?"

"I think it's time for a new karaoke song. I've been practicing," Kale whispered in her ear, sending immediate shivers she always got when he was near running down her spine.

"Like what?" she asked, squirming against his lips and giggling.

"Like 'Goin' to the Chapel'."

Victoria's head snapped up.

"So, whaddya say?"

"I -- I -- say -- I say, wait one minute! I don't recall hearing, 'I love you, Vic'," she accused.

"Okay. I love you. Now, whaddya say?"

Victoria kissed Kale's lips and smiled. They'd come so far. She'd come so far. Without a doubt in her mind, she said, "I say, I'll race you to the karaoke machine!" she laughed, taking off toward the dais with Kale hot on her heels.

Kale, her lover, her friend... her vampire.

Isn't it ironic?

Don'tcha think?

The End

Dakota Cassidy

Dakota Cassidy found writing quote by accident and it's been madness ever since! She loves anything funny and nothing pleases her more than to hear she's made someone laugh. You can find Dakota online at dakotacassidy.com or email her at Dakota@dakotacassidy.com.