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Sharon Cullen
NIGHT SONG



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Sharon Cullen

Dedication

To John, for all those nights we sat on the back deck, looked into our trees, and talked. I love you. ~ Sharon

Chapter One

“I hafta go potty.”

Aiden’s alarmed gaze swung down to the China doll standing in front of him. He’d been sitting in the shadows of his porch, so engrossed in studying the fine legs of the woman in the driveway next door that he hadn’t seen the munchkin arrive on his step.

Great going, Reed. If she’d been an enemy, you’d be in trouble. But this was no enemy staring him in the eye. The little tyke, not much over three feet tall, shifted from one foot to the other and Aiden’s alarm grew.

Oh, no. No way. Not on my porch.

“Lydia.”

The little girl didn’t so much as blink at the impatient call. She stuck her fingers in her mouth and shifted again. She and Aiden stared at each other for several long moments while her jaws worked their back and forth motion on her fingers and her toes did a little dance every few seconds.

“Hey, idiot, mom’s calling you.”

A tow-headed boy bounded up Aiden’s steps. The girl didn’t take her eyes off Aiden and he had an almost uncontrollable urge to shift in his seat.

“Gotta go potty,” she said around her fingers, her big, China blue eyes staring at him, as baby-fine blond curls floated around her pink face.

And you expect me to do something about this? The words almost left his mouth, but he mentally stuffed them back down his throat.

The boy snickered and turned blue eyes exactly matching the little girl’s to Aiden as if asking, *so whatcha gonna do now?*

“Lydia.” The impatient, feminine voice came from the side of his house.

The boy grabbed the girl by the upper arm, causing her fingers to slip from her mouth.

She opened wide, emitting the loudest “Ow” Aiden had ever heard.

“Come on,” the boy said over her protest. Aiden almost rose to pull the two apart. By sheer force of will, he made himself remain in the deepening shadows and away from the waning sun’s rays.

“Stop your yellin’,” the boy said with a roll of his eyes. “You want the boogey-man to know you’re outside and come and get you?”

She immediately stopped screaming and shot a frightened glance at Aiden, as if *he* were the boogey-man. He suppressed a smile.

“He’ll suck your blood,” the kid added and Aiden’s smile faded.

Now that wasn’t funny.

The girl’s eyes filled with tears as she stared at him over her shoulder while her brother dragged her down the steps. Aiden had been watching this little family long enough to get the dynamics down. There was one more sibling somewhere and a mom who heated his blood every time he looked at her.

So far, he hadn’t seen a dad or husband.

“You the boogey-man?” Lydia asked from the bottom of the steps.

Aiden opened his mouth to deny the charge, but closed it just as fast. Lydia would do well to hold on to her fear of monsters. They were closer than she thought.

The boy made high-pitched ghost sounds, letting go of his sister and curling his hands in the air as if to grab her. “See my fangs. Maybe I’m the boogey-man. Maybe you shouldn’t sleep at night in case I come in your room and suck *your* blood.”

Lydia shrieked and took off running, a dark stain spreading down her jean-clad legs.

Aiden rose as the boy doubled over and laughed. “That’s not funny,” he said, using his best glower to intimidate the little punk.

The kid, who couldn’t have been more than ten, straightened and looked at him with a belligerent expression. “Yeah? So what’s it to you?”

“Maybe you’re the one who shouldn’t sleep at night.”

The blood drained from the boy’s face and Aiden licked his lips, then gave him a lop-sided grin.

“Robby Carmichael, what have you done?” The mother came striding across Aiden’s driveway. Parts of her long, dark ponytail had come free of its elastic band and fell over her shoulder.

He’d always been intrigued by humans and enjoyed watching them. There was something fascinating about this one. Her gaze narrowed on her son and Aiden had to bite back a laugh at her obvious frustration. This was why he preferred to stay single and had successfully avoided parenthood for the past three hundred years.

But the mom... Wow. She could make him seriously forget his single lifestyle and that was dangerous. Dangerous to his peace of mind. Dangerous to the community. People’s lives depended on his concentration right now.

Maybe even *her* life.

Or her kids.

He’d told himself that’s why he’d kept an eye on her over the past weeks. To protect her. It was all a lie, of course. He watched her because he wanted her.

She stared up at him with tired amber eyes. “I’m sorry. I hope they weren’t bothering you.”

“Not at all.” He kept himself in the shadows, his gaze flickering to the horizon where the last rays of the setting sun blanketed the sky in roses and violets.

She turned and grabbed her son’s elbow. “What am I going to do with you? I swear to God, Robby, stop scaring your sister with these stupid tales of boogey-men. They don’t exist.”

Aiden watched the soft sway of her hips as she walked away. Tanned legs peeked out of worn, denim cut-offs. Never ending legs. His mouth watered. His hands shook

He continued to stare long after her garage door shut and the crickets picked up their night song.



Amy rested her head against the back of the chair and savored her sip of wine. God, she was tired. Just ten more minutes. Ten minutes of peace and quiet wasn’t asking for

much, was it? She opened her eyes and stared at the star-studded sky. It wouldn't be too long before she wouldn't be able to sit on the back deck, drink her one glass of wine, and watch the stars. Already the wind was turning brisk. Fall was fast approaching and with it came those famous New England winters, but right now she wouldn't think of that.

For several moments her mind wandered. Would her oldest, Claire, pass her math test? If she didn't, it wasn't for lack of studying, but the poor girl struggled so hard with math. And science. And language arts. Amy sighed in frustration. She felt for her daughter, truly she did, but sometimes getting the girl through a grade was like pushing that famous rock up that slope. Hard. Frustrating. Impossible.

Now Robby. That boy was a genius and it got him into trouble every single time. He was too damned smart for his own good.

Her mind continued to drift and eventually it landed on the image of her new neighbor. She should really introduce herself formally; take him something homemade to welcome him to the neighborhood. It'd been three weeks since he'd moved in, but she just didn't have the time. Or the energy.

But, holy cow, what a man. He'd stuck to the shadows so her quick, curious glance only revealed a tall form—wide shoulders, narrow hips, long, long legs. His voice, though... She shivered, remembering the deep musical quality, and he'd only said three words, for heaven's sake. But those three words had poured over her like melted butter on hotcakes and made her feel just as delicious.

Stop right there, Amy Carmichael. She didn't want to feel like warm butter over hotcakes. She didn't want to feel delicious. She didn't have time for such feelings and she sure as heck wasn't going to fall for another man. Not after dealing with her ex-husband. The jerk.

She took a healthy swallow of wine. She wouldn't go there. Rob Carmichael—the snake—didn't deserve her thoughts and he certainly didn't deserve the energy it took to hate him.

She stood so fast wine sloshed over the rim of her glass and splattered her hand. Sucking the liquid from her skin, she looked out toward the woods that grew behind her house, then turned and headed inside.



Aiden stood frozen just inside the line of trees. She hadn't known he was there, watching her. She couldn't have known. He'd been too quiet. But still, it seemed as if she'd stared right at him as she sucked the spilled wine from her fingers. He shifted uncomfortably. As soon as her tongue flicked out, he'd grown hard. How the hell was he supposed to deal with this attraction?

His inflamed erection pressed against the soft denim of his trousers and he almost groaned with a need so strong, so powerful it almost scared him. A light went on in the house and she appeared in the kitchen window. The warm glow of the light threw her into silhouette as she reached into a cupboard and pulled something out. He was the worst kind of voyeur. His hands clenched at his sides. His jaw muscles ached as he ground his teeth together.

For a small moment, he pictured himself inside the house, helping her with the dinner dishes, tucking her kids into bed.

Taking her to bed.

He jerked himself back to reality. What the hell? Where had *that* come from? He didn't do kids. And he didn't do domestication. No way. He spun on his heel and fled back to the safety of his own home, where he had plans to make.

A boogey-man to catch.

Chapter Two

“How’s the search?”

Aiden downshifted to second gear as he took the turn in his SUV, and tried to keep his cell phone shoved between his ear and his shoulder. “Not good,” he said, his gaze scanning the streets. “He must’ve gone to ground.”

Damn. And he’d been so close, too.

Ben, the man in charge of running the complicated network of Rogue Hunters, and Aiden’s best friend, sighed in resignation. “Just keep at it.”

They signed off and Aiden spent the rest of the night searching, his sixth sense telling him time was running out.

The sun began to peek over the horizon and he cursed, glancing at the digital clock on the dash. He’d stayed out way too long. Even with the darkly tinted windows, the interior of the SUV started to heat up with the first rays of sun poking through the lavender sky. Swinging the car around, he headed back to his house, sweat beading on his forehead even as his mind went to the sexy mom next door and the uncontrollable thread of excitement winding through him at the thought of maybe catching a glimpse of her before he headed to bed.

Man, he was pathetic. And ridiculous. He wouldn’t be catching a glimpse of anything if he couldn’t outrun the sun. His SUV rocked back and forth when he reached the driveway and stomped on the brakes. He rounded the front of the vehicle, raced against the curling fingers of new sunlight, and vaulted up the porch steps, hissing at the fiery path the sun burnt from his shoulders to his heels. A sigh of relief escaped him as he stumbled inside the cool, dark interior of his house.

He rolled his shoulders and grimaced. He’d be red for sure in a few hours. Checking his watch, he headed for the kitchen and the already brewing pot of coffee, inhaling deeply the scent of the percolating, rich Colombian beans. If there was one thing he loved

about his life, it was the creature comforts he was able to afford, like great coffee and electronic gadgets.

After pouring a cup, he went into the living room and looked out the dark-tinted glass of his front window.

Her van still sat in the driveway. He settled a shoulder against the wall and waited. For the most part, being a vampire wasn't all that bad—he loved it, in fact. Except for times like these when a certain human woman caught his fancy. It'd happened before, this attraction to a human, but he'd been able to fulfill his needs and move on.

Getting involved with a human was a bit tricky because they went out in the daylight and that wasn't something he could do. He could only use his job as an excuse for so long before they started getting suspicious.

He took a sip of coffee and waited for that one glimpse of her. No way would he get involved with her. For one thing, he didn't have the time, and women demanded inordinate amounts of time. For another, he didn't get involved with women who had kids. The thought alone made him shudder. Except when he pictured that little one, Lydia. She was a cute one, all right.

No, there weren't many downfalls to being born a vampire. Except the sunlight thing. But since he'd never experienced it, he wasn't sure what he was missing. He guessed the only reason he'd want to go out was to see the human population during the day.

And really, humans weren't much different than vampires, except they ate food and died a lot younger. Yet they'd always held a certain amount of fascination to him that he'd never been able to figure out.

His stomach grumbled and he realized he'd put off feeding, too concerned with searching for Cerian, too preoccupied with watching his beautiful neighbor. Tonight he'd have to feed first thing or he wouldn't be able to concentrate on his search for the rogue vampire.

His patience was rewarded when she came striding out, Lydia on her hip, Robby racing ahead and the oldest one, Claire, dragging behind.

She looked good this morning, her hair brushed until it shone with red highlights, her charcoal skirt riding just above the most delicious knees he'd ever seen. And he wasn't a knee man by any stretch of the imagination. She laughed at something Robby said and bent into the mini-van, her skirt hugging her rear end, hitching up until he thought for sure he'd glimpsed black, satin panties. His fingers tightened on the coffee cup as his body hardened. She lifted one foot, a high heel dangling from her toes, revealing an arch he longed to kiss. Aiden groaned, certain he would explode right then and there without any contact.

Suddenly she straightened and looked toward his house. He took a quick step back. An instinctive reaction since she couldn't see him through the tinted window anyway. Robby and Claire climbed into the car after a quick squabble with a lot of poking at each other.

The van's motor sputtered, then reluctantly turned over. Aiden shook his head and took another sip of coffee. She needed a new car. That one had definitely seen better days. The paint had peeled in spots, the hubcaps were long gone and most days he could hear it choking and shuddering down the road.

Then, in a swirl of exhaust fumes, they were gone, and Aiden breathed out a sigh, not of relief but of regret.

He turned from the window and made his way to the bedroom when a pang of hunger no human food could quench nearly made him stumble. Damn, he needed to feed.

It was a little different if a vampire needed to eat. Humans got grumpy but vampires got mean. As in violent mean, and that wasn't a good thing for the people nearby.

Starving, a vamp could suck a human dry in minutes and kill his unintended victim. Since killing humans was against vampire law, there were some serious consequences to that. Also, a hungry vamp was just itching for a fight and, more often than not, tended to start one. Some turned those fighting instincts toward sex, not caring if their partner was willing. So, all in all, it wasn't good for a vampire to go hungry—he could wreak all kinds of havoc that would draw attention to his race. And if there was one thing the Vampire Council hated, it was unwanted attention.

Plus, Aiden had enough violence in his job as a Rogue Hunter. A special division of the Vampire Council, Rogue Hunters were a few select vampires who hunted and eliminated those who consistently stepped over the boundaries of propriety to draw unwanted attention to the vampire race. Because of his elite training, Aiden was very careful to feed every few days so he never got overly violent.

His gaze darted to the windows. He swallowed and ran a shaky hand through his hair. He'd waited too long to feed and, damn it, he'd forgotten to restock the refrigerator. Ben was always telling him he needed an assistant for these things but Aiden figured he'd gone hundreds of years without one, he could go longer. He probably should have listened to Ben.

Weak with the need to eat and unable to go anywhere to get nourishment, he slipped naked between the cool satin sheets. It was going to be a long, torturous day before the sun sank below the horizon and he could go out into the streets in search of food.



Amy took the steps to her new neighbor's house, a plate of homemade cookies in her hand. When the beautifully restored Victorian had gone on the market a few weeks ago, her kids had hoped a family with children would move in but that hadn't happened. One day there was a for sale sign on the lawn, the next there wasn't. One day the house was empty, the next it wasn't. And there certainly weren't any kids.

She'd come home from work a few days later to find that the new owner had replaced all the windows with specially tinted ones, like the kind found on cars. Strange.

She raised her hand and knocked. Curious, she took a step to the side and tried to peer through the large picture window beside the door, but couldn't see anything in the dark glass other than her own reflection.

She cast a quick glance out to the street. The sun was sinking fast and she had to hurry or she'd be late picking Claire up from choir practice. Maybe she should just leave the cookies on the doorstep and come back later. She bent down to place them on the

porch when the door swung open, nearly silent on its hinges. She craned her neck and looked up. Her neighbor stood in the shadows, well away from the door.

“Hi.”

Unable to make out any of his facial features, just the tall silhouette she’d seen the night before, she straightened and peered through the shadows. He stared at her and a dark tremor shot up her spine, but she couldn’t tell if it was apprehension or just an appreciation for his wonderful physique.

“Come in,” he said, and she silently added, *said the spider to the fly*. But she took a step in anyway. The tinted windows made the inside darker than usual, but she could still see that he had one of those plush leather couches and matching chairs. A plasma screen TV sat in the corner, next to a beautiful stone fireplace. Modern art hung on the walls.

“Could you shut the door, please?”

She jumped and pulled her gaze from the expensive furnishings to him. He lurked in the shadows, his skin ghostly pale.

“Uh, sure.” She reached out and pushed the door just enough for it to close slightly. She wasn’t stupid enough to close off her only exit.

“I brought you cookies.” She held the plate up. “To welcome you to the neighborhood.”

His dark-eyed gaze dropped to the plate in her hand, then came back to her. He stepped closer and her breath caught in her throat, her mouth dried up, and the extended plate wobbled.

Oh. My. God. The man was just about as perfect as perfect could be. Her eyes began to water because she forgot to blink. She licked her lips and his almost-black eyes followed the movement. Geez Louise. Her knees knocked in sexual excitement and she almost groaned. Dark blond hair flowed well past his shoulders. Well-chiseled cheekbones and a strong jaw completed the look.

He took the plate without taking his eyes off her. Heat radiated from those black depths, warming her until she was so hot she thought she’d combust. His fingers brushed

against hers, sending fiery tingles shooting through her arm straight to her stomach. *Get a grip, Amy.*

“Thank you,” he said, his voice smooth as warm honey. Bedroom eyes. Bedroom voice. Her gaze lowered to the sweatpants riding low on lean hips that flared to muscular thighs. Bedroom body.

Holy mama.

He placed the plate of cookies on a chrome and glass side table, his biceps bunching and flexing with the movement. He took another step forward and suddenly she felt as if she were the last endangered dodo bird being stalked. He kept staring at her, a strange mix of hunger and desperation burning in his eyes. His glance slid to her throat where she thought for sure he could see her pulse on overdrive. Her hands began to sweat and her back tingled.

He raised his hand and let it hover between them. She couldn’t move, could barely breathe as she waited for him to do something. With one long finger, he hooked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. His hand skimmed her throat and stopped for a moment on her pounding pulse.

It was an intimate touch, too intimate for people who hadn’t met, yet she found she couldn’t step away.

The tip of his tongue shot out and caressed his lower lip. Amy was helpless to pull away, could only stare, her insides turning to mush. Never before had a man turned her on as much as this one. Never before had a man mesmerized her to the point that she lost all rational thought. His hand fell to his side where it curled into a fist as if he were hoarding the heat from her skin. The movement broke the spell he’d woven around them, jerking her back to reality.

“I, uh, should go. I need to pick Claire up from choir practice.” She stared at him a moment longer, memorizing his muscular form, the mix of emotions in his eyes, the way his gaze caressed her as if he wanted her. Ridiculous, of course. She was an overworked single parent. No man looking like *that* would want her.

“Wait.” His hand shot out and clutched her upper arm. She looked at him, attempting to ignore the spark of electricity that ran through her body. “You didn’t tell me your name,” he said, those dark eyes penetrating her.

“Amy. Amy Carmichael.”

He held his hand out to her. “Aiden Reed. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He drew the word *pleasure* out until it wrapped around her, silently promising things she could only dream about.

“Me too. A pleasure that is. To meet you.” Sheesh, she sounded like she was in high school. “I have to go.” *For my peace of mind, for my sanity, and before my daughter pitches a fit that I’m late again.*

She opened the door to a night that had fallen since she’d been inside. He—Aiden—walked her to the door, leaning a bare shoulder against it. The streetlight illuminated his skin and the mat of dark blond hair that sprinkled his chest, tapering down his torso and disappearing into his sweatpants. She jerked her eyes back up to his. Amusement twinkled in the black depths and a small smile hovered over his lips as if he knew the attraction she felt for him. Her face heated in a blush.

“See ya around.” Her brain suddenly stalled for something more mature to say. She ran down the steps on wobbling knees, praying she would make it to her car before she melted into a puddle.

“Amy.” His warmer than warm voice followed her, quiet yet commanding. Automatically she turned. His brows were drawn down in a frown. “Be careful out there.”

Chapter Three

Amy reached the safety of her car and locked the doors. That woman who'd entered her neighbor's house wasn't her. No way. She didn't react to men like that. She was a cold fish, an ice princess. Frigid. Rob had told her that and sometimes she still believed him. But even she had to accept that she was too busy, too overworked and too stressed to feel anything remotely sexual.

She pumped the accelerator and started the ignition, listening to it sputter before it decided to fire up. But, oh man, the reaction she'd had to Mr. Aiden Reed scared her to death. He was cotton candy, chocolate chip cookies, and gooey butter cake all rolled into one fine looking male and her mouth watered at the sight of him.

Stop this, Amy Carmichael. What has gotten into you?

She groaned and forcefully pushed Mr. Reed from her thoughts, concentrating instead on the housework piling up, the work she'd brought home, and the batches of lemon poppy seed bread she needed to make for Mary.



Aiden leaned his forehead against the closed door and groaned. That had been close. She'd woken him from a deep sleep and as soon as he'd seen her, his hunger had taken on a life of its own. He'd used every ounce of his willpower to fight the craving and the need to feed on the woman. He'd won the inner battle, but now he couldn't avoid his hunger. He tilted his head back, his body straining.

Blood. He needed blood.

Thoughts of the little girl and boy next door rose to his mind and a small part of him screamed *No*. Aiden raced into his bedroom and tore off his sweatpants, pulling on a pair of balled-up jeans and a wrinkled t-shirt. His chest heaved and he licked his fangs as he

ran out of his house, pushing the remote starter on his SUV and hopping in the front seat to head to the seedy part of town. In this sleepy, New England burg, 'seedy' meant a few streets where the down and out congregated.

Aiden patrolled the area, searching for his meal. Feeding off humans didn't bother him. It was the intense hunger he suffered before he fed that made it uncomfortable. The actual feeding was finished in a few minutes. The human walked away with no memory of it and Aiden walked away well-nourished.

He spotted his mark on the street corner. A punk kid with too many piercings and a too large ego with hunger in his eyes. Aiden stopped the SUV a few blocks up and walked toward him. He'd feed, then regain control of himself, then he'd hunt Cerian. After that he'd return home to his addiction—watching Amy.

Her scent stayed with him, a warm, floral vanilla mixed with fear. The fear had called to his dark side, the vanilla and flowers to the other, larger, part of him—the man that wanted her. He wanted to smell that again, to inhale it until nothing but her crowded his mind.

He approached the kid and held out two twenty-dollar bills. Quick as lightening the boy snatched the money and they both melted into the shadows of the alley. The feeding was quick and painless for the victim. Tomorrow he wouldn't remember what happened and he'd be forty bucks richer.

Having fed, Aiden's thoughts sharpened, his senses became honed. He left the teen lying in the alley and tucked another twenty in the pocket of his denim coat. When he emerged he felt more alive than he had in days. Automatically his mind turned to Amy.

Amy.

He had a name to put with the sexy brunette. Amy Carmichael. Mother of Claire, Robby and Lydia. She wore no wedding bands. So what did that mean? Where was Mr. Carmichael? Aiden licked his lips and smiled. He would find out.



Two nights later Robby stomped through the house, his face set in a fierce scowl. Claire, quiet as always, trudged along behind him.

“Hey, sweeties,” Amy sang out while stirring her chicken and rice in the Crock-Pot. Robby mumbled something as he banged up the stairs, while Claire sank into a kitchen chair and pulled her books out.

“How was school?” Amy asked. She hated this part of the day. Claire was at the age where any little thing would set her off on a bout of tears and recriminations usually aimed at her mother. When Rob left, Amy couldn’t afford the pricey private schools they’d been sending their kids to. She also couldn’t afford the mortgage on the house he’d so generously left her. She almost snorted at that. Generous, Rob was not. He left her the house knowing she couldn’t afford the payments and would have to sell.

She’d taken the proceeds from the sale of her dreams and left Washington DC, heading for the small town she’d used to visit every summer with her family. Now the kids went to the local school and Amy worked there several days a week as an aide. Although she liked to think they were settled, they really weren’t. Claire was constantly moody, her grades sliding. Robby, lacking a strong male influence, was out of control, and Lydia... Amy smiled. Lydia was her rainbow in the downpour that had become her life. Lydia didn’t remember much of her father and she was okay with that, adjusting her world to fit her personality and showering all her love on her mother.

With dinner still a few minutes from serving, Amy pulled out the chair across from Claire and sat. “So how was school?” she repeated.

“Fine.” Her daughter didn’t raise her head, didn’t look at her. Her long hair shielded her face but Amy knew from experience she would have a sullen look.

“Much homework tonight?”

One small shoulder lifted, then fell. Amy bit back a sigh. Being a single parent was almost impossible. Frustrated and knowing she wouldn’t get any further with her oldest, she stood and checked on the bread baking in the oven. Robby came trudging back down the stairs, his backpack trailing behind him, thumping on each step. He thrust a piece of paper in her hand, then lifted his chin.

Amy read the paper and her eyes started watering. *Damn. Damn, damn, damn.* “Oh, honey—”

“I don’t care,” he cried. “I don’t wanna go anyway, but my pack leader said I have to show you this paper. So there—” he snatched the sheet from her hands and balled it up. “I showed you.”

Helpless, her hands fell to her sides in defeat. There was nothing she could do, nothing she could say that would heal her son’s wounds. Robby’s Boy Scout pack was holding its annual weekend Father-Son Camp Out and they both knew Rob wouldn’t show for it.

She did all she could to be both mother and father. Robby hadn’t been in the pack long and so far she’d managed to step in and fill the gaping hole his father had left behind. But this she couldn’t do. A mom was neither wanted nor needed at a father-son event.

She somehow got through dinner, helped Claire with her homework, and read Lydia a bedtime story while hiding her tears and fighting her grief and anger. When the house was quiet and the last of the bread in the oven, she took her glass of wine and went to her private retreat—her back deck—where she finally let the tears fall. Silently they slid down her cheeks, a concrete reminder of how screwed up her life had become and how little control she had over it. This happened every time. Just when she thought life was on an even keel—*bam*—a curve ball threw her for a loop.

She tilted her head back, the tears streaming into her hair and ear. How much more could she take? When was her life going to even out? When would she be happy again? She sniffed and wiped her nose with the back of her hand, then wiped her hand on her shirt.

“Amy?”

Heart hurtling into her throat and her stomach dropping to her toes, she jumped and looked around. Aiden stood at the bottom of the stairs, one foot on the last step, a hand resting on the railing. Night had fallen long ago and the only light came from the tiki candles she’d lit earlier. Their flames cast his face in shadows and flickering orange light.

How long had he been standing there? How much had he seen? While privately Amy didn't mind an occasional crying jag, she'd never allowed herself to show such emotion in public.

"Aiden? What are you doing here?" She sat up straighter and surreptitiously wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"I was walking in the woods and saw the light from the tikis." He climbed the steps, never taking his eyes off her.

His total concentration unnerved her. He'd done that the other day when she brought him the cookies.

"What's wrong?"

She laughed, but quickly cut off the sound when it threatened to move into hysteria. "What makes you think something's wrong?"

He reached out and touched the damp hair where her tears had run. "You're crying."

"Am not." The response was automatic and sounded just a tad bit like Robby. She rolled her eyes while he smiled a tight-lipped smile. "Okay, so I was. Nothing major, okay?" *Drop it, please.*

He folded himself into the chair next to her, his long body all grace and poetry in motion. "So what made you cry?"

She sniffed, and to her utter mortification, the tears threatened once again. He sounded so sincere, like he really, truly wanted to hear her problems. And the need to talk to somebody almost overwhelmed her. She had no friends here, was too busy trying to make ends meet to take the time, and she so needed a friend.

But not this man. No, this man was more suited to hot, wild sex. Slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am. Not cozy little chats that emptied your soul.

He stroked the top of her hand, his warm calloused fingers doing funny things to her insides.

"Tell me."

The soft words almost broke down her defenses. No, they did break down her defenses.

“Life,” she admitted, looking out over the trees, not daring to look at him.

“Life had you crying?” He shifted so that he too stared out over the trees and she was glad he wasn’t looking at her. Those dark eyes disturbed her, making her want things she couldn’t have.

“Yes.”

“Care to elaborate?” His voice held a touch of amusement and she found herself smiling.

“Not really. Would you care for some wine?”

He turned to look at her, his silky hair tied back in a ponytail sliding over his shoulders. She clenched her fingers in her lap, wanting to touch it, to pull the rubber band from it and sift it through her fingers then bury her hands in it. Instead she looked away.

“I’d love some wine,” he said.

She closed her eyes against the sexy voice that floated to her through the darkness.

Oh, God, what was she getting herself into?

Chapter Four

Aiden hadn't lied. He *had* been walking in the woods. What he didn't tell her was that he timed his walk to coincide with her nightly ritual of sitting on the deck with her glass of wine. She'd been late tonight and he'd almost given up, but his patience had been rewarded when the sliding door opened and she stepped through.

He'd been more than stunned to see the shimmer of tears on her cheeks and could no more have stayed away than deny his insatiable hunger for blood. He had to know what was wrong, what made her sad.

But she was reluctant to talk and her mortification was apparent, so he let it go for the time being. That thought alone should have been enough to send him running for the hills. She was human and she was a mother on top of it. A bad combination in his book. But this woman was different and that both drew him to her and made him step back.

It was insane to get to know her.

Yet he couldn't stay away even if he wanted—and at the moment he didn't want.

She left the deck to get his wine. He followed and stood just outside the sliding glass door, surveying her kitchen. It was everything his home was not. Lydia's drawings covered the front of the refrigerator held there with big, colorful magnets. An overlarge calendar was taped up, each day marked with different colored pens. Papers had been pushed off to the side of the kitchen table. Cooling loaves of bread littered the small space. Aiden took a deep breath and held it. Lemon bread, if he wasn't mistaken.

He rarely ate food, and only then to appease the human he was with, but the scents coming from Amy's kitchen made his stomach grumble. His gaze went to her as she bustled around the cluttered kitchen. Just like the other night, he wanted to step inside and just *be* with her. But, as a vampire, he wasn't allowed inside unless invited. The ruling went back thousands of years and had begun as a protective measure for his people. The vampire community had been determined to keep their race pure, free from

human blood. Nowadays both species intermingled on a frequent basis, even if the humans didn't know it. And though the ruling was outdated, vampires still had to follow it or face the Rogue Hunters.

Amy shot him a warm look over her shoulder as she pulled more loaves from the oven. "Come in," she said with a smile. "Sorry about the mess."

He stepped inside, savoring the smell of warm lemon bread, entranced at the sight of her rear end bent over the open oven door. His breath caught in his lungs and he stepped even closer. She closed the door and opened the refrigerator, pulling out a bottle of wine.

"It's so hard to keep the kitchen clean," she said. "Seems every time I straighten it up, it's a mess again."

She chuckled and turned around, then gasped when she knocked into him. Wine splashed out of the glass and splattered her hand.

"Oh." Her face turned red. "Sorry."

He took the glass in one hand and her fingers in his other. Lifting her hand to his lips, he kept his gaze trained on her wide, amber eyes. Slowly he sucked the sweet liquid from her fingers and palm, running his tongue along her palm. He closed his eyes, biting back a groan at the salty-sweet taste of her skin. He skimmed his fangs across her palm and she inhaled. His gaze flew to hers where a desire mixed with trepidation and a longing that nearly matched his shone back.

Quickly, before he lost control, he let go of her hand. She held it to her body, cradling it close to her breast. Aiden licked his lips, wanting more. Wanting it all. He took a step back and sipped his wine, studying the rise and fall of her breasts, hearing the small little pants that escaped from between her lips. He could smell the heat rising from her body, the woman scent that had him rock hard.

Not tonight. If he were smart, not ever. But sometimes his intelligence took a back seat to other, baser instincts, and he had no doubt this would be one of those times.

She wanted him. He could see it in her eyes and in the way she leaned toward him. But she also didn't want him. That was in her eyes as well, evidenced by the confusion. He placed his glass on the kitchen table and took a step in her direction. She held her

ground but her eyes grew wider and the pulse in her carotid picked up speed. Keeping his mouth shut, he licked his incisors, nearly tasting her warm, sweet blood. Would it taste like she smelled? Vanilla and flowers? God, he wanted to know.

He reached her in another step and stood so close her warm breath heated him through his shirt. With slow movements, he lifted his hand and caressed her neck. There. Right there he could kiss her, feel her pulse, know that her blood flowed through her. His mouth watered. He was so hard now that his erection strained against the zipper of his jeans. She licked her lips and he groaned, bending his head and taking her mouth with his, licking the line where her upper lip clamped over her lower, asking for entry.

She opened and he dove in, tasting her, testing her. He was a master at kissing while hiding his elongated and very sharp fangs. His hands cupped the sides of her face while his body screamed for him to drill his hips into her. He didn't. He stayed his course, unwilling to frighten her. Tentatively, slowly, she raised her hands and placed them on his waist. Her fingers stroked little circles, making his skin tingle where she touched him.

"Mama?"

With a gasp, Amy pushed away, staring at him with wide eyes, her lips rosy and soft. She swiped a hand across her mouth and tore her gaze from his. With a muttered curse, Aiden ran a shaky hand through his hair and turned away in an attempt to hide his arousal.

"Lydia, what are you doing up?" Amy asked her daughter.

"Why are you kissing the boogey-man?"

Aiden spun around, the question hurting more than it should. Lydia stood in the doorway in feeted pajamas two sizes too big, a ratty blanket clutched in one hand with the two fingers of the other inching toward her mouth. She looked at him with wide blue eyes.

"*Lydia*. Apologize to Mr. Reed. You don't go around calling people boogey-men." Amy turned to him, her look apologetic. "I'm sorry. Robby likes to fill her head with scary stories until she's seeing monsters around every corner."

He lifted a corner of his mouth in a semblance of a smile. "It's okay."

Amy waved her hand toward her daughter. "I, uh, need to put her back to bed."

"Take your time. I'll refill our wine and meet you on the deck." Maybe by then he'd have control over his body.

She stared at him for a moment. "Are you sure? I mean, it might take a while."

He reached out and tucked a stray hair behind her ear, loving to touch her. "I'm sure."

Ten minutes later she stood at the sliding glass doors, hovering between the outside and inside. Aiden looked up at her with a closed-lip smile.

"She won't go to sleep. Says the boogey-man's here. I'm sorry, Aiden, but I'm... She won't go back to sleep unless she knows you're gone."

His smile faded and he got to his feet. "Sure. No problem."

Amy placed a hand on his arm, her expression regretful. "It's the age. And her brother's influence. She doesn't really think you're the boogey-man."

If only she knew. He patted her hand and stepped away. "I understand." Better than she thought. Lydia wasn't too far off the mark. The boogey-man was here.



Over the next several days, Aiden threw all his pent-up sexual energy into pursuing Cerian, but the rogue vampire couldn't be found. The good news was that no bodies had been found either. So that meant Cerian had either left the area or was biding his time. If he had left, then Aiden would be forced to follow him.

He wasn't ready to walk away from Amy or her kids. Each morning he stood at his window and watched them leave for school in their beat up van, and each evening he watched Amy run herself ragged picking kids up, dropping them off, and hauling in groceries. Yet he knew he didn't belong in their life. It'd taken a four-year-old's honest words to make him understand that. He was here only on a temporary basis. As soon as he eliminated this newest threat, he was on to the next assignment, the next killer who stalked the innocent.

And even if he didn't travel, what business did he, a vampire who killed other vampires, have getting involved with such a normal family?

Despite those thoughts, he went to her anyway. Four days of being apart didn't cool his need for this woman. It went beyond sex to something he wasn't ready to identify, but knew he couldn't live without. She didn't see him at first, but then he felt her eyes on him, tracking him. Both remained silent, he because he wanted to enjoy the sight of her wind-blown hair, the reckless abandon in her eyes.

He wanted to lean down and kiss her but sensed she still reeled from their kiss days ago. He stopped at the top step. "Are the kids in bed?" He didn't want to scare them, especially Lydia.

She nodded and he walked toward the chair next to her, folding himself into it, and took her hand in his.

"I missed you," she whispered, as if she were afraid to make the confession.

He brought her knuckles to his lips and kissed them, flicking out his tongue and tasting the salt of her skin. "I missed you too."

"I thought you would come back."

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips to her fingers. "I had work to do," he said. How could he tell her that it scared the crap out of him to return? That *she* scared him?

She angled her body to look at him, curiosity in those amber eyes. "And what do you do for a living?"

He settled their joined hands on the arm of the chair and looked out over the trees. "I work security for a private company." The lie easily tripped over his tongue because it was the line all the Rogue Hunters used.

"You work at night? What are you, some kind of security guard?"

He smiled. He was far from a guard. "No, I'm not a guard and sometimes nighttime is the best time to work. So you never did tell me, what had you crying the other night." Her tears had stayed with him all the days he'd been away from her.

"I told you, life."

Sharon Cullen

“That tells me nothing. I want to know. I want to help you.” *I want to spend eternity with you, learning about you, raising your children with you.*

Chapter Five

Amy laughed, certain Aiden didn't want to hear a list of her mundane problems.

"You laugh," he said, little crinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes. "Why? You don't believe I want to know?"

She shook her head, feeling for the first time in years like the weight of the world didn't sit on her shoulders. "Exactly."

He held his free hand to his heart and gave her a shocked look. "You wound me."

She snorted. "Hardly."

"And why, sweet lady, would I not want to hear your tale of sorrow?"

She wanted to giggle, wanted to feel like that young girl she'd been oh so many years ago. Instead, she frowned and looked down her nose at him. "Because it's boring and mundane."

The teasing fled his eyes and his expression turned somber as he squeezed her hand. "Somehow, I doubt anything having to do with Amy Carmichael is boring and mundane. Tell me. I really want to know."

She didn't want to think about the last several nights, how she'd sat on her deck, telling herself she needed the peace and quiet but secretly waiting for him. Secretly disappointed when he didn't show up. Secretly reliving that kiss. The man sure knew how to kiss, but it went beyond the physical. For the first time in a long time, Amy felt protected. Ridiculous, considering she didn't even know the man. And what was she doing kissing a man she barely knew anyway? But tonight wasn't about kissing. Tonight Aiden was a different man, concerned about her. When was the last time someone had been concerned for *her*?

She stood, pulling her hand from his. "How about that glass of wine we never got to finish the other night?" She hurried into the kitchen without waiting for his answer, trying to control her erratic breathing. What was she going to do? This man touched things deep

inside her that she'd walled off the day Robert walked out. He was a threat to her well-being yet something she feared she needed in her life.

When she returned with his full glass of wine, he was staring out at the trees, his long legs stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. He'd left his hair down tonight and the blond highlights caught the flickering light from the tiki candles.

She handed him his wine and settled into the chair beside him.

"So where's Mr. Carmichael?" he asked, his voice tight.

Startled, she stared at him until he turned to look at her with heated eyes that melted her every single time. "Uh. Mr. Carmichael is with the current Mrs. Carmichael."

He raised one blond brow in silent inquiry, and to her great horror and relief, she found herself spilling the entire story. "Robert got bored with our marriage, deciding kids and a wife were passé. The day he walked out of our front door for the last time, he walked into his mistress's. They married several months ago."

She'd tried to keep the hurt out of her voice but it cracked on the last word, destroying her composure. Those hated tears returned. She'd cried buckets in the months after Robert deserted her and the kids, but occasionally they would return, usually when she least expected it.

"But you said he thought a wife and kids were passé."

"Yeah, that's what he told me. I guess *I* was just passé."

"I'm sorry." Aiden's voice was devoid of the pity that she'd feared hearing.

She shook her head, wiping her tears with her fingers. "Don't be. Not for me at least. It's the kids I get angry for. Robert didn't just leave a marriage, he left parenting behind as well. The kids don't see him. He doesn't pay child support."

"Was child support part of the divorce settlement?"

"Yes."

"Then you need to take him to court. Force him to pay up."

Her laugh was bitter and she took another sip of wine to keep from getting too hysterical. "Yes, well, that's all well and good in the fantasy world. But in real life I can't

afford the fees. It's everything I can do to make the mortgage payment, put food on the table, and pay for extras like scouts and soccer."

Amy cringed and stood, too mortified to believe she'd revealed so much. Again she hurried into the sanctuary of her kitchen, afraid what would spill out of her mouth next. For several long moments she stood in the darkness, head bowed, trying to regain her composure. God, she was so stupid. Men like Aiden didn't want to hear about her problems.

"Amy?"

Aiden stood at the threshold, his expression concerned. She wiped away the tears but couldn't stop the sniffles. He moved to step in then stopped. With a wave of his hand he indicated her kitchen. "May I?"

She nodded, appreciating his gallantry and good manners. But he didn't step inside. A pained expression crossed his face as he hesitated. He licked his lips, his gaze devouring her. "I don't want to intrude on your grief."

She laughed, the sound bitter. "It's not grief. Not anymore. Come in, Aiden."

He stepped inside and quickly gathered her in his arms. Against her better judgment she tipped her head forward and rested it on his chest, inhaling his woodsy scent. He placed a kiss on the top of her head and rubbed his stubble-roughened cheek against her hair.

"Amy." His voice was tortured, strained, revealing his pent-up emotions. The same emotions that assailed her. She didn't know why or how this man had found her. She just knew there was something in him that called to her. She wrapped her arms around him, pressing her cheek against his chest, feeling the rapid beat of his heart.

She could come to love this man. That thought was so ridiculous she wanted to both laugh and cry. She didn't even *know* him and her younger daughter was convinced he was the boogey-man.

He tilted her head up by placing a finger under her chin. His black eyes flashed a fire of sexual need so intense it stole the breath from her lungs. For so long, she'd relied only

on herself, carrying the burden of raising her little family and making sure they had decent clothes, a hot meal, and a roof over their head, that she'd neglected herself.

She stood on tip toes and placed a kiss on his jaw, then another farther down, feeling the rapid beat of his pulse beneath his skin. He groaned and his erection pressed against her stomach, inciting a riot of butterflies inside her. This was insane. This was ridiculous.

This was so right.

"Please, Aiden."

He took her mouth with his, delving deep. Teeth scraped against teeth, tongues mated, danced together, then retreated. Need roared through her, turning her insides to liquid and her knees to jelly. She both feared and needed this.

"This is nuts." He barely pulled away from her, murmuring the words against her hot skin.

"I know."

"But I can't stop."

"Please don't."

He groaned, the sound rumbling through his chest, into hers. "I won't. God help me, but I can't."

God help them both.

Without breaking the lip seal they had on each other, Amy reached between them and unbuttoned his shirt, plunging her hands inside and feeling the silky soft chest hair and the hot skin underneath. She teased his nipples, bringing them to hard points. His breaths hitching in his throat, Aiden pulled her shirt up, breaking away only to pull it over her head and toss it. Swift movements had her bra unhooked and, with a reverence that brought tears to her eyes, he touched her breasts, fondling her nipples until she moaned with the need to experience more.

She reached for the button of his fly, her hand skimming his erection. With a strangled breath, he pressed his hips against hers. She made short work of the fly and pushed his jeans down. Good Lord. He wasn't wearing underwear. That turned her on

like nothing ever had. If she'd known that while sitting on the deck with him she wouldn't have been able to concentrate.

The hard length of him sprang forth into her hands. Satin over steel. She caressed it and he clenched his eyes shut, his breath raspy, hips bucking until his hand snaked down and grabbed hers.

"Enough," he panted. But she didn't stop and he groaned again, his head dropping so their foreheads touched. His complete lack of control inflamed her, making her hot, needy. She'd never had this much power over anyone.

With a feral growl and a flash of teeth, Aiden pulled away and shucked her pants. Amy stood there, stunned. For a moment, a small moment, she'd thought she'd seen a wild beast in his expression, complete with fangs. Then it was gone and Aiden took its place, his eyes heavy-lidded with sensual yearning.

He backed her against the wall and placed small kisses down her neck, stopping at her pulse and licking, then grazing it with his teeth. She shivered as her blood turned to burning embers and she tilted her head back, wild with a longing she didn't understand but that drove her to heights she'd never reached before. For some unknown reason she wanted him to bite her. She'd never been into that kinky stuff before, but then again she'd never had wild sex with her next door neighbor before either. Come to think of it, she'd never had sex in her kitchen.

Once again he pulled away and Amy whimpered at the loss of heat. He made short work of donning a condom he'd pulled from his wallet, then had her pinned against the wall while he lifted her and slid inside. She wrapped her legs around his waist and gasped as he filled her to capacity and then some, stretching her until she feared she would rip in two. But it didn't hurt. Oh, far from it.

He pulled out, the muscles in his neck straining, eyes tightly closed, lips locked in a grimace of pain and pleasure. Amy followed the movement, meeting him thrust for thrust.

She could count the number of orgasms she'd had on one hand. One finger actually, and it hadn't been with her ex-husband. This time her orgasm came out of nowhere,

exploding around her in a bright light that stole her breath and made her cry out at the same time. Aiden locked his lips with hers, swallowing her cry of release. Still he rocked into her. In and out. In and out until another orgasm built.

She shook her head. “No. Please. Aiden—”

“Shhh, sweetheart. Ride it out. I’m right with you.”

Her head whipped back and forth. No. She couldn’t take another one. Not like the last. She whimpered as he pulled out again and thrust forward. This one built and built and built until she couldn’t stand it anymore and begged him to release it, using words she’d never let pass her lips before.

Her talk seemed to inflame him for he grew bigger, harder, and he increased his pace. She threw her head back as her world exploded, bright colors flashing behind her closed lids, her nerve endings singing with such intense feelings she feared she’d go crazy if it kept up. Her muscles contracted around Aiden and he arched his back with a feral growl, then froze, his penis throbbing, stroking her already tender muscles, inciting her to a smaller but no less intense orgasm.

Then he collapsed, holding her up by pinning her to the wall. Amy sagged and buried her head in his chest.

“Ohmygod. Ohmygod. Oh. My. God.”

Aiden skimmed his hands up her sides. “I know—” Amy shook her head. “No. Oh. God.” She couldn’t stop saying it. “I just had *sex*. In my *kitchen*. With my *kids* upstairs.”

He pulled away, his expression wary. “Amy—”

“You don’t understand. What if one of them came down? What if one of them saw us?” She pushed at him, clawing to get away, her embarrassment so acute she couldn’t look at him. He stepped back, holding her steady until she found her balance. “You have to get out of here.” She bent down, scooped up his clothes, and thrust them at him. What the heck had she just done? This wasn’t like her at all.

“Amy, please—”

“Please, please, just go.” She shot a panicked look toward the steps leading upstairs. How would she ever explain a naked Aiden to her kids? The thought had her mind spiraling out of control.

Anger tinged Aiden’s face pink and he raised his powerful body to his full height. “Now just wait a damn minute—”

“Shhh. You’ll wake the kids.” She tried to shove him toward the sliding glass door, not caring if he was still naked, her only thought on getting him *out*.

Aiden stepped into his jeans, grabbed his shoes and shirt and headed for the door, but not before looking back at her. “We will talk about this,” he warned as he stepped outside and slid the door shut.

Chapter Six

Aiden paced a circle from his dining room to his kitchen to his living room and back again, his head bent in concentration as he and Ben discussed Cerian's whereabouts over the phone. His anger at Amy was still sharp. Too sharp to seek out her company and talk to her. And, if he were to be honest, it hurt too.

That had been the best, most profound, life-altering sex he'd ever had, and to be kicked out of her house before his heart had even stopped pounding had been humiliating and painful.

"I think he's gone," Ben said.

Aiden blew out a breath, tilted his head back, and rubbed his neck. "I agree." He cursed in his native language. Cerian had been a pain in his ass for far too long. The man terrorized the world, flitting from one place to the next, wreaking havoc, killing innocents in the most sensational way, then moving on. Aiden and Ben had been tracking him, slowly closing the net around him, until they'd cornered him right here a month ago.

Now he'd disappeared again.

"I'll see what I can find out," Ben was saying. "Be prepared to pack up and move again."

Aiden nodded as Ben gave more orders, but his mind was far from Cerian. Maybe that was the problem, he hadn't been concentrating and the rogue vampire had slipped away. But, damn, he couldn't keep his mind off the woman next door. The woman who'd turned his world upside down, then just as easily thrown him out.

Ben was right. It was time to leave.

They said their good-byes and Aiden flipped his phone closed just as the doorbell rang. Automatically he took a quick glance out the window to gauge the level of the sun and to his surprise found it had set long ago, plunging the street into darkness. He yanked the door open, neither needing nor wanting company at the moment.

Robby stood on the other side, looking a little sheepish and a lot scared, a lock of pale blond hair sticking up in the back. Startled, Aiden stared down at him. The boy hadn't gone out of his way to be friendly, giving Aiden sullen looks and mumbling hello only if Aiden said it first. Of course, their schedules were a little off and they hadn't seen each other all that much. What the hell could the kid possibly want with him?

"What's wrong?" he asked sharply. "Is your mother okay?"

Robby's eyebrows dipped in confusion. "Yeah. Why wouldn't she be?"

Aiden blew out a breath and scraped his hair away from his face. *Get a grip, Reed. Amy's scared to death her kids'll find out you two have something going on. No need to tip him off.* But they didn't have anything going on because she'd thrown him out the minute they'd finished making love. Jerking his thoughts back to the present, he stared at Amy's son, seeing her in the tilt of Robby's head and the shape of his nose. Somewhere in the region of his heart, a pain ripped through him. What would it be like to see bits and pieces of Amy in his own child? He pushed the thought away, back to the far recesses of his mind. Thoughts like that were counterproductive and impossible.

"What can I do for you, then? Would you like to come in?"

Robby threw a worried glance at his own house. "Uh, no. Thanks though."

Aiden looked at the house too, noted the lights on and the van gone. "Your mother know you're here?"

The kid flushed and looked down at his worn sneakers.

His curiosity piqued, Aiden crossed his arms over his chest and waited. Robby looked up at him, then away. For the first time, Aiden noticed a piece of paper balled in the boy's hand. It'd been nearly three hundred years since he'd been a youth, but the memories never went away. Aiden sensed the kid had to screw up his courage to ask something big. Stepping out on the porch, he sat on the wooden rocking chair, propping his bare feet on the railing and indicating with a wave of his hand that Robby was to do the same. The boy shook his head and remained standing, staring at his shoe, the paper in his hand becoming more and more wrinkled.

“I came to ask you somethin’,” he finally said, his blue eyes rising and meeting Aiden’s.

“Okay.”

He looked away, the flush turning into a full-blown, bright-red, blush. “Will you, uh...will you be my dad?”

Silence fell between them except for the crickets’ night song and a car that passed one street up. Aiden couldn’t have found the words if he wanted. He was so shocked, so stunned that the breath caught in his lungs.

“I mean—” Robby looked at him with something close to panic. “Not all the time. Just for a weekend.”

“A weekend. You want me to be your dad for a weekend.” Robby nodded, and as much as the boy’s question stunned him, the thought also warmed him. This kid actually came to him, asking him to be his *dad*. For a weekend.

Then all his good feelings came crashing down as the memory of Amy pushing his naked ass toward the door, panic just a breath away, intruded. If she didn’t want to admit to herself that she felt something for him—even if it was just physical—she sure as hell wouldn’t want her son calling him dad. Even temporarily.

Dad.

Of course he could never do it. How could he raise a human child when he couldn’t even go out in the sun?

“Look,” Robby said, his tone hardening and his face closing off all expression. “If you don’t wanna, that’s okay.” He turned on his heel and headed for the steps, his shoulders stooped.

“Why do you want me to be your dad?” Aiden asked, raising his voice just enough to reach the boy.

Robby glared at him over his shoulder. “What do you care? You obviously don’t want to do it.”

“I never said that.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t have to. Not saying anything is as good as saying no.”

“Who told you that?”

“No one.” He lifted his chin and glared at Aiden.

“Why do you want me to be your dad?” he asked again.

Robby’s bottom lip quivered before he sucked it between his teeth. Finally he shoved the crumpled paper at him. Aiden took it and smoothed it out over his thighs, tipping it toward the street lamp to read. Ah, now he got it. The Boy Scout’s Annual Father-Son camp out. He raised his eyes and looked at Amy’s son, but Robby refused to look back, staring at the street instead, his lip still firmly held between his teeth.

“Did you tell your real dad about this?”

Tears popped into the kid’s eyes but he quickly knuckled them away and Aiden didn’t mention them, preferring, as Robby probably did, to ignore it.

“Yeah.”

Rob not only left our marriage, he left parenting behind as well. “And?”

“H-he said he w-was too b-busy.” Robby sniffed and wiped his nose with his hand, then wiped his hand on his shirt. Aiden grinned at the boy-like gesture even as anger boiled in his blood at a father who refused to accept responsibility. If he had a son like Robby he sure as shit wouldn’t blow him off and he’d never make it so the kid had to ask strangers to be his dad.

“I c-called his house and...and I heard a baby c-crying in the background.” The tears, too many to wipe away, began dripping. Aiden had to put a tight lid on his rage. The son-of-a-bitch.

A look of panic crossed Robby’s face. “Don’t tell mom. Please. About the baby, I mean. She’ll cry and I don’t like it when she cries.”

Aiden had no intention of telling Amy that her ex had sired another offspring. He couldn’t bear to see her tears as much as her son couldn’t. Instead he held up the paper. “Have you asked your mom about this? Does she know you want me to go with you?”

Robby shook his head and scuffed the toe of his shoe on the wooden planking, sniffing.

“Maybe we should tell her.”

His head shot up and he bit his lip as he stared at the paper in Aiden's hand. Anticipation scorched a path through Aiden at the thought of seeing Amy again, of inhaling that warm vanilla scent and hearing her voice. Hell, he'd been a fool if he ever thought having her once would quench his desire. Once wasn't enough. A thousand times wouldn't be enough. Only a lifetime would slake his hunger.

And he couldn't do that.

Not living as a vampire.

Not with Cerian to catch.

His gaze swung to the paper. Oh, holy hell. Cerian.

It all made sense now. Why the rogue vampire had 'disappeared' so suddenly without his usual killing spree to precede his departure. He wasn't gone. He was still here. Hiding. Biding his time. What better note to go out on than to hunt and kill a bunch of boys on a camping trip.

Aiden licked suddenly dry lips as the paper crinkled in his trembling hand. He turned to Robby, the words on the tip of his tongue to tell him he couldn't go, that the pack needed to cancel the trip.

But, no. That wouldn't work. Cerian would get wind of that and plan something worse, something more diabolical than this. At least now Aiden had an idea of where the rogue would strike. And he could catch him. Eliminate him.

He stood just as Amy's van rumbled down the street. Robby shot it a glance filled with dread. Aiden needed to call Ben and they needed to gather reinforcements if they had to protect a pack of boys and their fathers.

Terror clenched his belly at the thought of Robby in danger. Amy would kill him for sure if she knew. Hell, Amy would fall over in a dead faint if she knew the entire truth about him. But he wouldn't tell her. He'd make damn sure her son remained safe.

Then he'd get the hell out of town.

Chapter Seven

Amy couldn't miss seeing her son standing on Aiden's porch, because every damn time she drove down the street her gaze went to that porch.

"What have you gotten yourself into now, Robby?" The van lurched and sputtered as she took the turn into her driveway. For several long moments she sat inside, unwilling to get out, unwilling to look in the direction of Aiden's house.

Sex with Aiden had been incredible. More than incredible. Fantastic. Mind-bending. And as physical as it had been it had also been warm and intimate, something she'd sorely lacked in her life. And then she'd panicked and kicked him out, using her kids as an excuse when in fact, she was afraid of her own burgeoning feelings.

She was falling in love.

Aiden was everything she wanted—warm and funny, sexy and thrilling. Never mind she'd only just met him, never mind her daughter was scared of him. She closed her eyes and groaned. Why couldn't life be easy? Why all these struggles? All this heartache and pain?

With a fatalistic shake of her head, she grabbed her purse and shoved her shoulder against the car door to get it to open. She climbed out and resigned herself to walking across the lawn and over to her neighbor's porch to find out exactly what her wayward son was up to. She stopped at the bottom step and looked up at a Robby, who looked too guilty for his own good, and an Aiden who looked too delicious for *her* own good.

He stared at her with those dark chocolate eyes that always seemed to probe the secrets of her mind. She'd expected to see anger in them tonight, but she didn't. Just curiosity. And hurt. She'd never meant to hurt him, merely to protect her own fragile feelings. Her hand trembled and she tightened it on her purse strap. He looked so good, so delicious, so what she needed after a week without him. A week filled with fights with her children and the realization that her bank account was bled dry.

She ached to lay her head on his shoulders and knew if she did she'd feel so much better.

"We need to talk," he said in that warm butter voice that invaded her dreams in the deep of the night. Yes, they needed to talk and she acknowledged that with a nod of her head.

"Can he come to dinner, mom? Please? Please?" Robby looked at her with hope and excitement, emotions she hadn't seen in him in a long while. She shot Aiden a confused glance but he merely shrugged.

Her heart constricted because for the five billionth time she realized that what Robby needed more than anything was a strong male influence, someone who could understand his mood shifts and direct some of that intense energy into pursuits other than terrorizing his sisters. *Aiden could be that man*, a little voice inside her whispered.

She wanted to laugh at such fancy-schmancy ideas. Aiden never once let on that he wanted a ready-made family. *You merely had sex, Amy. Don't go making it into something it isn't.*

Her son's cajoling voice brought her back to reality with a thud. This was what her life was—demanding kids, dinner to put on the table.

"Not tonight, honey. I'm sure Mr. Reed has other things to do."

Robby turned to Aiden. "Do you? Have other things? Can you eat dinner with us? Please?"

Aiden didn't pull his gaze from her and she both liked that and hated it. Liked it because when he stared at her she could believe she was the center of his universe. Hated it because she had this uneasy feeling he could read her most secret thoughts and right now those thoughts centered on him and the last time he'd been in her kitchen.

"I'd love dinner."

"Yippee!" Her son swung to her. "What're we having? Something good?"

She groaned in silence. Tonight, like a lot of other nights, was going to be what she and the kids termed a "Whatever Night", meaning they ate whatever they wanted. Within

reason. Now she would have to fix something and a mental tour of her freezer resulted in nothing. Nada.

“How about I order pizza?” Aiden asked, his eyes still firmly fixed on her. God, did the man know what she was thinking or what?

“Yay!” Robby jumped up and punched his fist in the air, then went flying down the steps, his sneakers slapping against the hard wood. “I’ll tell Claire and Lydia and I’ll even set the table,” he yelled over his shoulder.

Amy smiled as she turned back to Aiden. “You don’t have to do this,” she said.

“I want to. Is that so wrong?”

No. Yes. Why was it so hard to let this man into her life? Probably because the last man ripped her life apart and left her alone with three kids, a huge mortgage and no money.

“We need to talk, Amy.”

“I know. But not until the kids go to bed.”

“Good enough.” Silence descended as his gaze roamed over her, starting at her dirty Keds and traveling up her faded Levi’s to her oversized polo shirt and finally resting on her eyes. “I missed you.”

“Aiden—”

“It’s just a statement of fact, nothing to get excited about.”

But it did excite her and made her want things that for a long time she told herself she didn’t want or need anymore. Now she wondered if she’d been lying to herself.

“I missed you too. I’m sorry about the other night. I—”

“Mo-om. Come *on*.”

Her gaze swung to her son leaning out the screen door, hanging on it like a monkey, waving his free arm at them.

Aiden appeared at her side and grabbed her hand. “Let’s go. The natives are restless and hungry. What do you like on your pizza?”

She allowed him to lead her back to her house. Just five fingers intertwined with hers and she was jelly, all quivering and jiggly inside. Thoughts of their last night together, of

her pinned to the wall while he plunged inside her, flew through her mind. Her face heated in a flush while her body turned to one big nerve ending, yearning for his touch, for his lips upon hers.

She stepped through her front door and had to stifle a groan. Aiden's fingers slipped through hers and he hung back. If he'd harbored any thoughts of spending time with her, they were surely shattered now. Two baskets of laundry sat in the middle of the floor, one needing folding, the other waiting to go in the washer. Two weeks worth of mail and bills covered the little table by the couch. The floor could have used a good vacuuming, but first she had to find it under the Polly Pockets, Legos, My Little Ponies, markers and paper.

"I'm sorry, the place is a mess," she said, turning to him, totally understanding why he wouldn't step inside. Once again he stood just on the threshold, poised to enter. A question hovered in his gaze, one she didn't understand. For several long moments they stared at each other and she got the feeling that he needed something from her but she didn't know what. With a resigned sigh, she figured he probably didn't want anything to do with the chaos of her life.

Robby appeared beside her, jumping like a pogo stick. "Come on, Mr. Aiden. Come in and order pizza."

Aiden's gaze had gone to Robby, then flew back to her and she feared he'd changed his mind. "Come on in," she said.

He stepped in and reached for her hand, squeezing her fingers. "It's wonderful, Amy. My house is so quiet compared to this."

She stared at him in astonishment, only able to dream of quiet.

"Pizza," Robby yelled and they got down to business, arguing over the toppings and how many to order. To her surprise, Aiden jumped right into the fray, throwing his two cents in whenever he could, then declaring that since he was paying, he was picking the pizza toppings. The kids groaned when he recited all the vegetables he would get, but then they caught on to his teasing and teased right back. Even Claire, who normally was too quiet around strangers, hanging back until she felt comfortable, gave as good as she

got. Amy stepped back and watched, amazed at the change in her oldest. For the first time in forever, the girl flipped her hair out of her face and her eyes shown with something other than disdain.

After Aiden ordered the pizza, Amy made the kids settle down to homework. Again Aiden pitched in, pulling a chair up with Claire and explaining decimals in a way Amy hadn't thought of. Her heart turned over at the look of excitement on her daughter's face when she finally understood the concept she'd been struggling for weeks to conquer.

Her little pack of wolves consumed the pizza in what seemed like two and a half seconds and Amy sent Robby and Claire up to get ready for bed, then straightened the kitchen. When she stepped into the family room, tears sprung into her eyes. Aiden held the TV remote control in his hand, flipping through the channels while Lydia lay fast asleep in his arms, her little mouth open and small snores escaping.

She stood there for the longest time, taking in the scene, reliving the entire night. They'd never had nights like this when she was married to Rob. He was always too busy climbing the corporate ladder to that ever-elusive partnership and when he was home, more often than not, he was in his office on the phone.

She pushed the pain away, no longer willing or able to carry around such hatred and anger. Especially when the scene before her was so much more precious. For a small moment she allowed the hope that maybe they could have more nights like this, but quickly dashed it. It was one thing to involve her heart in another relationship, but she wouldn't involve her kids. Not unless she was absolutely sure this one would last.

Aiden looked up and smiled that strange smile that never really revealed his teeth but always his emotions.

"She's fast asleep," he whispered.

Amy walked over to them and bent down, lifting her baby into her arms. She wasn't much of a baby anymore with her long legs and strong body. That thought was bittersweet. Her kids were growing up and nothing she could do would stop it.

"I'll put her to bed," she said, heading for the steps, her stomach fluttering because after the kids were in bed, there would be nothing to distract her. And Aiden had said he

wanted to talk. More than likely about her stupid actions the other night. What an idiot she'd been. But she'd reacted out of pure panic. Panic at what she'd felt. What Aiden had begun to mean to her, what her actions meant and what he thought her actions meant. Life was never easy.

It took her longer than normal to get Claire and Robby settled down. They were both wound up after having Aiden with them tonight and Robby's eyes sparkled with something that Amy was afraid to identify. Sometimes her son scared her with the things he came up with and she still hadn't discovered why he had been over at Aiden's tonight. But eventually they calmed down and she headed back downstairs.

To find Aiden gone.

Her stomach lurched as she looked around the family room just as her excitement and hope plummeted. Then she heard a scraping sound coming from the kitchen and she headed that way to find Aiden on the back deck, lighting the tiki candles, two glasses of wine sitting on the small table between their chairs.

"Pretty soon it'll be too cold to sit out here," he said as she walked out on the deck. He turned and indicated her chair, then took a seat in his. *His and her chairs. Oh, Amy, you've got it bad.*

They sat in compatible silence for several minutes, listening to the crickets and the night sounds.

"So." Amy was the one who broke the quiet. "What were you and Robby conspiring about this evening?"

Aiden sighed as he gazed toward the trees. "Robby asked me to be his dad."

Chapter Eight

Amy almost spit her mouthful of wine out. As it was she inhaled a little bit of it and choked. “*What?* Please, tell me he didn’t say that.”

“Oh, he did.” Aiden grabbed her hand and curled his fingers around it. “I love touching you,” he said, staring down at their joined hands.

“Thank you. I, uh, like when you touch me.” Too much. “Now, about this...”

He raised her hand to his mouth and pressed his lips to her knuckles, then turned his head so her fingers brushed his stubble-roughened cheek. The action was so intimate that Amy couldn’t breathe for the emotions crowding through her. Oh, my, she loved him. She couldn’t deny it. Not anymore. She loved him and that terrified her because the last time she’d thought she’d loved like this, she’d been wrong and three other people had to pay for her mistake.

Hand still pressed to his cheek, his eyes met hers. “I want to touch you more. All over.” That beautiful voice flowed over her, mesmerizing her, putting her under some spell she neither wanted to get out of nor could if she tried. Because she wanted the same thing.

“Aiden—”

“Shhh, Amy-mine. No second-guessing tonight. I love being with you. I love touching you. I love...everything about you.”

Her breath came out in one big whoosh because she thought for sure he was going to say he loved her. But it was close enough. It would have to do.

He leaned over and put his free hand on the back of her head, nudging her forward until their lips met in an electrifying kiss that had her body humming with a need stronger than any she’d felt before. Even the one time they’d been together. Then she didn’t know what Aiden Reed could do to her. Now she did and it made the excitement that much more intense. The wait that much more brutal.

Aiden broke away first. He stared at her, his eyes dilated with desire and so much more.

He ran a finger down her cheek to her pulse point. “God, woman, what you do to me.” His voice was raspy, ragged, breathless. “You bring out the beast in me. I want to claim you as mine. Brand you so no other man can touch you.”

Tremors ran up her legs and into her stomach. She’d always considered herself a modern woman, but these words uttered by this man, and in this way made her *want* him to brand her. Never again would she want another man to touch her.

“Only you, Aiden. It will only ever be you.”

One corner of his mouth lifted in a grin. “If only it could be,” he said.

Her stomach twisted in knots. What? What did that mean? “Aiden.” Desperation drove her words. A desperate need to never lose him. “I lo—”

He placed a finger on her lips. “Shhh, Amy-mine.” Then he pulled away, both physically and emotionally, and Amy was left shivering in cold and dread. What the heck had just happened here?

“Robby wants me to be his father for the Boy Scout camp out,” he said.

For a long moment Amy’s brain couldn’t process the words. What? What camp out? Then, slowly, sluggishly, her memory returned. “Ah. Now I understand.”

“He said he’d called his father.”

Her heart ached for her little boy. She hadn’t known he’d called Rob, but could only imagine what her snake of an ex had said.

“I can’t take him to the camp out, Amy. I’d love to, but I just can’t.”

“I understand. You have a life and Robby isn’t your son.”

He turned to her, his dark eyes smoldering. “That’s not why I can’t go. I love that kid and I would do anything in my power for him. Unfortunately, this isn’t in my power.”

“That’s okay. I really can’t afford to send him anyway.”

His gaze sharpened. “If money’s the problem—”

Her back went up and pride reared. “No. Thank you. I can’t possibly take your money.” She stared out over the rail of the deck. Robby would be heartbroken when he discovered Aiden wouldn’t go.

“If money’s that tight, Amy, you need to take Rob to court.”

“Yeah, right. He’s an attorney, Aiden. He’ll fight me and nickel and dime me, wasting my time, knowing I can’t afford the attorney fees. No thanks. I’ll survive.”

“Is that why you bake? For extra income?”

She nodded. “Mary, who owns the souvenir shop in town, buys my bread and sells it. Unfortunately, after the fall, when the leaves are gone, the tourists are gone too.” How she was going to get through the winter was a constant worry. Somewhere she’d have to find a second job that fit into her schedule and allowed her to be at home when the kids were. But, for right now, she wouldn’t think of that. She couldn’t or she’d get too depressed.



Later that night, alone in his home, Aiden closed his eyes and fought the sexual need coursing through him and the constant hard-on he’d learned to live with. God, he wanted her in a way he’d never wanted another woman. It’d taken all his will power and then some to get up and walk away from her with a light kiss on the cheek when all he’d wanted to do was slam her against the side of the house and plunge inside her sweet heat. He hadn’t been lying when he said he wanted to brand her. It had to be the beast inside him. No one was that primitive anymore, were they?

Christ. He ran a hand through his loose hair and tugged on it just to feel a pain other than the throbbing one in his jeans.

To distract himself, he dialed Ben’s number, calculating the time difference between here and San Francisco then not giving a damn if he woke his best friend. He needed a diversion and Cerian and Boy Scouts would do well enough.

“Hollis here and this better be damn good.”

Aiden smiled, happy he'd made someone else as miserable as himself. "I don't think Cerian's left the area," he said without preamble.

"Really? Why?" Already the ire was leaving his friend's tone and Aiden filled him in on what he knew.

Ben blew out a deep breath. "Shit. That man's just plain sick."

And that's why he needed to be eliminated.

"When's this camp out?" Ben asked.

"Three weeks."

"Tell me who to send your way." Aiden listed the names of some of the best Rogue Hunters in the business. They'd need the best to keep those boys safe. With a promise to get everything he needed, Ben signed off and Aiden flipped his phone shut, his momentarily dormant sex drive rearing up.

He growled and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. He had the whole night ahead of him with nothing to do. Tracking Cerian would be a waste of time because the man was obviously waiting for his moment. The bar scene didn't appeal to him anymore, not since he'd gotten a taste of Amy, and he certainly had no interest in picking up another woman.

A soft knock on his door had him whirling toward it, his mouth drawn down in a frown. Who the hell could that be? When he opened it, the capacity to speak momentarily left him.

"Make love to me, Aiden."

He groaned in denial, her words hitting him like bullets. "Amy—"

She pressed a finger to his lips, the warm vanilla scent of her wrapping around his senses. "Shhhh. Not tonight. Just love me."

He kissed her finger and pulled it away, torment eating a hole through him. "Nothing can come of this. I have to be truthful here. We can't...you and I...there's nothing I can do." God, but the things he wanted to do, needed to do with her.

She nodded as pain flared in her eyes, quickly masked by a sad smile. "I know. I think I've known that. You're different Aiden, I don't know how, but you are."

His eyes drifted closed as her words hit him again. If only she knew. If only he could tell her. If only... “This is insane.”

She shook her head. “No. This is right.”

With a smothered cry he reached for her, pulling her against his hard body and nearly bending her backwards with his kiss. They were both right. It was insane. It was right.

“Just give me one more night,” she panted. Pledaded.

He couldn't deny her. One more night. But it wouldn't be enough. He knew that now. An eternity wouldn't be enough, but he'd take what he could get and store the memories and that would have to do. Her hands lifted the tails of his shirt, skimming over his bare skin and causing him to hiss.

Blood lust roared through his veins and he could smell her blood pounding through her, inflamed with her desire. He was already twice as hard as he'd ever been before and the need pulsed through him, hot and demanding, slick and fast. Her hands ripped at his shirt, her breath coming in short pants, eyes unfocused, dilated, needy. He pulled away long enough to shed his shirt and rip hers from her body. Fabric tore, buttons popped, words were murmured without meaning.

Wanting to see her naked beneath him on a bed of satin sheets, Aiden bent and scooped her up in his arms without breaking contact. She nibbled on his neck and his breath stopped as her teeth grazed his pulse point. He licked his fangs, needing to taste her. To make her his for eternity.

Reaching his bedroom, he tossed her on the bed and followed her. She spread her legs and he fit his hips with hers to relieve the intense pressure of his erection. Pinning her head between his hands, he kissed her, raking his tongue through her mouth, devouring the taste of her. His nostrils flared at her unique scent.

His hips bucked and she gasped, her fingernails tearing at the denim at his waist, her fingers brushing against his arousal causing it to pulse. He hissed in a breath and clenched his eyes shut, attempting to pull in his wayward control.

The button on his jeans unsnapped, the zipper lowered and he sprang free into her hand. Warm skin surrounded him, stroked him, feather light touches interspersed with bold strokes that had stars dancing before his eyes.

“I want you. Now.” She rocked her hips into him and Aiden groaned, his world going gray, the pressure building to an explosion neither of them were ready for. Her nails raked his back as his gaze centered on the rapidly beating pulse at her throat. She turned her head, revealing the smooth length of her neck. He licked his fangs, testing the sharp points and lowering his head, the scent of her sweat-slicked skin invading his body.

His teeth grazed her neck and she gasped, her body arching into his. With fevered movements, Aiden stripped her pants, tossing them away and plunging inside her without any preparation. For a moment, he stopped, worried he’d hurt her. He stared down at her, but her eyes were closed and a moan tore loose from between her parted lips.

She pulled him down, settling his weight on her and he began to move. Slow thrusts in, then out. The feel of her wet walls surrounding him, squeezing him, tightened his sac. Making him want to pump faster, harder. His gaze locked on her neck and he lowered his head, nipping at the delicate skin, prolonging the moment, the pressure building until nothing but the intense sensation of pounding into Amy’s heat remained.

Amy lifted her hips from the bed and threw her head back, the muscles in her neck straining, her eyes clenched tight as she forced him to drive into her. She threw her head back, her tendons standing out as a keening cry ripped through her and she clutched at the satin sheets, trying to find purchase. Going on pure instinct now, unable to control himself, he pierced her skin with his fangs and cried out at the sweet taste of her blood.

Almost immediately, he could feel her orgasm. Feel the tremendous pressure between her legs, feel himself slide in and out of her even as he felt his own sensations, his cock pumping her. It was like being inside her body and his at the same time and the sensations were almost too much to handle. He was afraid he’d be torn apart.

His hips pumped faster until the bed springs protested. Amy screamed as she clamped down on him. Warm, sweet blood flowed from her neck into his mouth and it tasted like nothing he’d ever had before. Sweet and sensual. Bold and spicy.

Just as her orgasm began to abate, it started to build again and he didn't know if he could survive another one, feeling them the way he was and he'd still yet to feel his own. Her eyes flew open to meet his. For the first time, he allowed her to see his smile, but her eyes drifted closed as her head whipped back and forth, small moans erupting from her.

He let loose, throwing his head back and roaring with a release so intense he'd never recover from it. When at last he'd pumped the last of his seed into her, he collapsed, unable to move.

Beneath him, Amy's chest rose and fell in rapid movements. Without raising his head he stroked the damp hair away from her face, his fingers feathering down her cheek until they reached the two small holes in the side of her neck. His body stiffened as his mind whirled. *Oh, Christ.* What had he done?

He pulled back and looked at the small spot where a bruise was starting to form. Shit. Amy pushed at him and his gaze raced to her face, but she was half-asleep and when he lifted his weight off her, she merely rolled over and curled into a ball. He fell to his side and gathered her close.

What was he going to do now? He closed his eyes, his nostrils flaring at the floral and vanilla scent that now invaded his sheets.

He'd lose her for sure when she discovered what he was. What he'd done.

Chapter Nine

Amy awoke and rolled over, cuddling into the warmth at her back. A small purr of contentment rumbled through her as Aiden's arm tightened around her waist. She didn't want to leave, but knew she needed to get back home. Sometimes Robby wandered the house in the middle of the night and she needed to be there. With a small stretch and a whole lot of reluctance, she eased out of bed, careful not to wake Aiden.

She needn't have worried. When she glanced over her shoulder he was lying on his side, head propped up by his hand, his dark-eyed gaze on her.

"I forgot. You sleep during the day. You're probably not tired," she said.

"Are you going?"

She reached out and touched his stubbled cheek. "I have to get back to the kids."

He nodded, his gaze tracking her. She frowned at his worried look and the trepidation in his eyes. Leaning over she kissed him and sensed a desperation she couldn't explain. "You okay?"

He merely nodded so she rose and began gathering her clothes. Her shirt and bra were ruined and she dangled them in front of him with a grin. "You have a shirt I can wear home?"

He slid out of bed, all those powerful muscles flexing in the moonlight. Her mouth went dry while wetness invaded other parts of her body. *Think of your kids, Amy.* She turned away and pulled on her underwear and jeans. Aiden handed her a white, button down shirt that hung almost to her knees. She tied it at the waist.

"Mind if I, uh, use your bathroom?"

He simply nodded and pointed in the direction of the bathroom. She gave him another frown. Why was he so quiet? This wasn't like the chatty Aiden she'd come to know.

Once in the bathroom, she went about her business of cleaning up. When she was washing her hands, she peered into the mirror at her disheveled hair and non-existent make-up. Holy cow, she looked scary. After drying her hands, she swept her hair away from her neck. A small bruise caught her attention and she smiled, remembering when Aiden had nibbled there. The smile faded. The whole episode was still kind of hazy, but she couldn't forget the intense orgasm that went on and on, ebbing and flowing for eternity while he nibbled. Leaning closer she inspected the bruise, noticing two puncture holes in the middle of it.

Her knees wobbled so badly that she plopped down on the closed toilet seat and squeezed her eyes shut. Mental pictures of their lovemaking raced through her mind. He'd nibbled, right? Just nibbled. Nothing more than a love bite.

Surging off the toilet, she flung the bathroom door open so hard it bounced off the wall and hit her in the rear end. Aiden stood in the middle of the bedroom, jeans hanging low on his hips, zipped but not buttoned.

She marched over to him and turned her head, pointing to her neck as fear and horror slid through her. "What'd you do to me?"

He stared at her with blank eyes. She stepped back, her gaze going to the heavy drapes pulled over tinted windows. Oh, God. No. Absolutely not. That was insane. She looked back at him and swallowed.

"You bit me." Still he didn't say anything. Her words came back to haunt her. *You're different Aiden, I don't know how, but you are.* She hadn't meant it in *that* way. "What the hell are you?"

"You don't want to know." His voice was ragged, as if it hurt to talk.

She stepped back again and shook her head. She'd thought she loved this man. But what did she really know about him other than he worked nights in security for some company he'd never mentioned the name of, and she'd never seen him in the daylight?

She lunged at him. Her body hit his and she reached for his upper lip, needing proof. Needing to see for herself. Aiden caught her around the waist and held her in place.

"This doesn't change anything," he whispered in her ear.

"It sure as hell does." She struggled within his grip, but he was too big, too muscular. And a vampire. She stopped struggling as that finally sank in. He let go of her and she spun around.

Her chest heaved with her fear and the adrenaline pouring through her.

"I'm still the same man I've been these past weeks."

She shook her head in denial even though her heart agreed with him. But what did her heart know? She'd already made an ass of herself with one man.

"Amy—" He stepped toward her, his hand outstretched.

She took a quick step back. "Don't touch me."

Pain flickered through his eyes.

"You bit me. D-does that mean...I'm like you?"

"No. I merely bit you, nothing more."

It'd been more than that. He'd sucked her blood and at the time she'd loved it. It was what had driven her over the edge with an orgasm she'd never in a million years believed she could achieve. He must have been thinking about that as well because his eyes flashed with desire.

It was the desire mixed with her fear and the horrific consequences of her actions that made her turn and run, not stopping until she reached her back deck where she paced and rubbed the goose bumps on her arm.

This just wasn't possible. Vampires didn't exist. They were nothing more than a myth created by ignorant peasants to explain things they didn't understand. A result of overactive imaginations. That was all. Nothing more.

Nothing more. Nothing more. Nothing more.

So why didn't she believe it?

She plopped down in a chair—*his* chair—and just as quickly hopped back up. Memories fought their way through her panic. Visions of Aiden kissing her fingers, rubbing them against his roughened cheek, whispering words in that melted butter voice that left her breathless.

I love touching you.

I love being with you,

You bring out the beast in me. I want to claim you as my own. Brand you—

She snorted. He'd done that all right. Oh, God. She raised a shaking hand to her lips. Aiden was a vampire.

She stared out into the dark woods, her shivers turning to deep tremors. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She got the uneasy feeling that evil lurked, staring right back at her from the trees.

She spun around and hurried into the house, closing and locking the sliding door.



Aiden sat on the side of his bed and buried his head in his hands. Well, that certainly went well. The horror and disgust he'd seen in her eyes nearly buckled his knees.

He raised his head and stared at the rumpled sheets beside him. Her scent filled the room, heightening his already sharpened senses. It was always like this after a feeding—restlessness, a sense of invincibility—but this time it was worse, because it was Amy's blood inside him.

What had he been thinking?

How the hell was he supposed to live without her? Especially now, after he'd tasted her? He paced to the window and drew the heavy curtain back, staring out into the dark night at the lights that shone from Amy's bedroom window.

He'd scared her, could smell the fear pouring off her. He wanted to protect her, cherish her, love her forever. Not scare her.

He turned from the window and paced the room. His love for her burned bright inside him while the very real knowledge that they were separated by things far outside her scope of understanding cut at his hope. Setting it free to drift away.

There was no hope.

Not for them.



Amy's fear didn't last all that long, not when images of Aiden from the past several weeks came unbidden. The kisses they'd shared had been magic. His concern for her had been real, she didn't know how she knew that, but felt it in the deepest part of her. One sharp mental picture kept forcing its way to the front of the others: Aiden holding a sleeping Lydia with such reverence it melted Amy's heart.

How could that be the same man she'd glimpsed while making love?

I'm still the same man, he'd said.

Was he?

She'd never believed those tales about vampires, and yet he hadn't denied them and she'd seen the proof with her own eyes. Felt it on her own skin. Goosebumps crawled up her arms, making her shiver at the remembered heights of ecstasy he'd taken her to. He'd been gentle even while he'd... Her mind veered away from that thought as her fingers came up and touched the bruised skin on her neck.

She wanted to believe he was the same Aiden. God help her, she wanted to.

She pushed up from her bed and felt a familiar wetness between her legs that nearly buckled her knees. They hadn't used protection. What if she was pregnant? Could vampires make babies? The last thing she needed was another mouth to feed, yet instinctively she knew that if by chance she were pregnant with his child, she would love it and cherish it just as she cherished her feelings for him.

That made her stop and pause. Did she still love him? Her mind whirled, all those images flashing before her eyes. Aiden laughing with her kids, helping Claire with her homework, holding Lydia. The stunned look of pride on his face when he told her Robby wanted him to be his dad for a weekend, the gentle way he'd held her after they'd made love. His overwhelming anger at her ex-husband for not paying child support.

She wrapped her arms around her waist and hugged herself tight. Did she love him? *Yes*, a voice whispered in the recesses of her mind. Yes, she did. She loved his gentleness and his humor. She loved that he was concerned not only for her, but for her children. She loved *him*. Yet how could she introduce a vampire into her little family?

You already have.

Could it work? She almost laughed. It wasn't as if Aiden had even hinted he wanted a ready-made family. For all she knew, she was just another fling for him.

She peeked into Claire and Lydia's room. Claire was huddled in a ball, the covers pulled up to her chin, her hair fanning out around her head. Lydia, the little monkey, was uncovered, spread eagle, her mouth opened to reveal her tiny baby teeth. Her fingers twitched every once in a while and Amy pulled the blankets up. Immediately she rolled over, dragging the blankets with her.

She patted her youngest on the rump and walked out, a smile on her face. Earlier that night she'd caught Aiden standing back and watching their family dynamics, a look of longing on his face. What had his life been like? Had he at one time had a family? A wife and kids?

It's wonderful, Amy. My house is so quiet compared to this. She closed her eyes as his words washed over her and she remembered his look of completion when he'd taken in the chaos of her house. How many times had she truly seen him laugh?

Never once in all the time they'd been together had she feared he would do her harm. She'd allowed him in her home, near her children, and he'd been nothing but kind and gentle.

So the man was a vampire. So what? Her ex-husband was a snake and she'd much rather be with a vampire than a snake.

She nudged Robby's door open and frowned. His bed was empty, the sheets shoved to the foot of the bed. Rubbing her arms, she stepped in and stopped short, her mother's instinct kicking into high gear.

Something was wrong.

Chapter Ten

Aiden's door banged as if someone pounded a fist on it. He spun on his heel and headed toward it. Amy fell through when he yanked it open.

"What the hell—"

"Robby's gone." Her eyes were wild with fear, her face pale.

"What?"

"He's not in his bed. Oh, God..."

He squeezed her upper arms and dragged her into the house, shutting the door against the night chill. "Tell me what happened."

She stepped back and twisted her hands together. "I don't know. I was checking on the kids before coming back here and he's gone. Sometimes he wanders around at night, but I can't find him. Something's wrong, Aiden. He's never left the house before." She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "Help me find my son."

Cerian. What if he somehow discovered that Aiden knew of his plans? He raced toward his bedroom to get some clothes.

As he pulled a shirt on, Amy stared at him, her eyes huge and trusting. He cursed. Although he was one of the best Rogue Hunters, he didn't always get his guy. But this time he had to. For Robby's sake. For Amy's sake. For his sake.

"You know something, don't you?"

He pushed bare feet into running shoes. How the hell did she know that?

"You just mentioned Cerian. Who's Cerian?"

Shit, he hadn't realized he'd spoken out loud. He turned to stare at her, his hands on his hips. She knew everything there was to know about him. The important stuff anyway. Should he tell her this? Did she need to know who exactly had Robby? Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears. Tears he knew she wouldn't let loose until Robby returned. Or didn't return. She was a strong woman, but strong enough for this?

She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. "Tell me, Aiden."

"I'm a vampire, Amy."

"I know that."

He stared at her for several more moments, searching her face for disgust or fear or horror. Instead he saw acceptance. "I'm a member of the Rogue Hunters. Our job is to track down and eliminate vampires who haven't followed the rules."

Her knuckles, still clasped in front of her, turned white. "So, you're like the vampire police force."

"Sort of."

"And one of these rogue vampires has my son?" Her voice broke on the last word and Aiden fought the impulse to gather her in his arms.

"I hope not. Cerian couldn't have gotten inside your house without an invitation."

She swallowed as her eyes went bleak. "What if Robby let him in? What if Robby went outside looking for me? Oh, God, Aiden. He knows I sit on the deck. What if he needed me and..." Her voice trailed off. Aiden stepped forward, and wrapped her in a hug.

She pushed away from him. Her jaw hardened and her eyes cleared of tears. "Find him. Find this son-of-a-bitch and get me my son back."

He headed for the door, admiring her courage. "Yes, ma'am."

As he walked past her, she grabbed his elbow to stop him. "Be careful," she said, then she did something that rocked him to the core. She kissed him. "I love you."

Stunned, he just stood there, all thoughts on hold until she nudged him. "Go. Find Robby. And come back to me."

He sped into the living room, picked up his cell phone and tossed it to her. She snagged the phone out of the air. "Dial one and then pound. A man named Ben will answer. Tell him who you are and what's going on."

When Aiden reached Amy's back yard, the sun was just starting to break through the night. If he intended to find Cerian, it had to be soon, before they both suffered. He stopped and closed his eyes, opening his other senses. At first only the smell of decaying

leaves reached him, but as he concentrated he picked up other scents—Amy’s fear as she’d run both to her house and away from it, the slight strawberry scent of the shampoo she used on her kids and the spicy scent of Cerian.

Without second guessing the senses that had made him one of the best hunters around, Aiden turned and headed into the woods.

Robby’s scent, mixed with Cerian’s, grew stronger. Aiden’s impulse was to hurry, to catch up to them to race against the sun, but he forced himself to slow down, to track them with stealth and cunning.

He didn’t need stealth. Cerian was waiting for him, Robby’s limp body draped over his arms. Unconscious or dead? From this far away he didn’t know, but feared the worse.

“I’ve been waiting for you to finish fucking the mother. About time.” The rogue’s light gray eyes shone with scorn. Aiden forced himself to remain still, to not react to the obvious taunt. But inside he bristled at the crude language directed at Amy even as he silently agreed with Cerian. If he hadn’t been making love to Amy, the boy wouldn’t be in the hands of a ruthless killer. His gaze went to Robby, visually searching for a pulse, willing his chest to inflate with air, but Cerian held him close, blocking his view.

“He’s alive.” Cerian flashed his fangs and licked the tips of them. “But not for long.”

Aiden clenched his jaw until his teeth ached, relieved the boy wasn’t awake to witness this. “Put him down, Cerian. Your fight’s with me.”

One corner of Cerian’s mouth rose in amusement. “My fight is with everyone. But you’re right. You’ve screwed up my plans for far too long, Reed. It’s going to stop tonight.”

Ah, so this was more about revenge. Aiden’s fingers folded into fists at his side while Cerian smirked.

A small gasp alerted Aiden that Amy had followed. *Shit*. He didn’t take his eyes off his enemy as he spoke to her. “Go back home, Amy.”

“No.”

“Amy—”

“He has my son, Aiden. I’m staying.”

He sighed, understanding a mother's instinct to protect, but she needed to understand his instinct too. Now he had to protect her and Robby while fighting a fellow vampire and he'd need all his concentration for that alone.



Amy stared at the monster holding her son, her stomach cramping with terror. She swallowed her fear, taking her cue from Aiden and remaining as calm as she could. Robby looked dead. *Don't go there. He's not dead. He's not.*

Who was this man and where had he come from? From what she caught of the conversation, Aiden had been tracking Cerian for a long while, and Cerian was mad as hell and taking it out on her little boy. Fury straightened her spine and she eyed the monster with midnight black hair and European good looks.

He hissed and revealed his lethal fangs. She clamped a hand over her mouth, horrified at what those canine weapons could do to her son.

To her surprise, Aiden hissed back, revealing his own fangs and this time she wasn't nearly as horrified. Anger had tightened his body. He rocked on the balls of his feet, ready to spring forward. His gaze kept going to her son, raking his small, inert form.

Eyes dark with blood lust, bodies primed to jump at each other, neither man looked quite human. *Just don't let Robby get between them.*

"Put him down, rogue, and we'll fight like you want."

Cerian grinned and suddenly dropped her son. Just lifted his arms to his side and the boy fell to the ground with a thud. Crying out, thinking only of getting to Robby and rescuing him, Amy lunged forward, ignoring Aiden's shout of warning. She scooped up her eighty-pound son, tucked his head into her shoulder, and turned to run. Her feet slipped on wet leaves. She quickly regained her footing and ran, her son clutched to her.

When she got a few yards away, she turned. Both men were locked together, snarling and snapping at each other, teeth flashing as they tried to sink into soft skin. Robby stirred, but she tucked his head tighter into her, determined to stay and help if Aiden needed it.

Amy shot a concerned glance at the sky. Dawn was fast approaching and bringing the sun with it. What would it do to Aiden?

Aiden and Cerian broke apart and began circling each other.

With a roar that echoed through the trees, Cerian doubled over like a fullback and ran, ramming his shoulder into Aiden's midsection. With a grunt, Aiden stumbled back and fell, Cerian on top of him.

Aiden flipped the rogue over until he straddled him, a knee on either side of the man's hips. His hands around his throat, Aiden squeezed. Cerian struggled, bringing his knees up and into Aiden's back. Aiden continued to apply pressure, his forearms bulging with the effort. The other man clawed at Aiden's arms, his fingers reaching for his face.

Amy couldn't pull her gaze away. She wasn't sickened; she wasn't disgusted with Aiden taking another's life. Her gaze locked with Aiden's feral one. He didn't look like the man she'd fallen in love with. She saw the vampire that resided inside him.

"Leave," he hissed. The voice didn't sound like his and she suppressed a shiver of fear, tightening her hold on her son. "Get out of here, Amy. *Now.*"

She glanced at the sky again, now a lighter purple. The trees around her began to take shape as shadows lightened.

Cerian continued to struggle. Something inside Aiden's eyes seemed to shift. A tremor ran through him and, as if he pulled himself back from the brink of something dark and dangerous, the man she'd come to love returned. He let go of Cerian and pinched a spot between the rogue's neck and shoulder. Instantly he ceased struggling and his head slumped to the side. Aiden sat back. He seemed drained, the life ebbing out of him.

"Take Robby home," he said without looking at her.

"But—"

"I'll be right behind you. Go, Amy."

Sensing that Aiden didn't want her to see what he was going to do next, she stepped away, searched his gaze one last time, and turned, fleeing through the trees that had suddenly turned menacing again.

She stopped once she reached her deck and waited. It took an eternity for Aiden to emerge, and when he did, she let out the breath she'd been holding and the tears she'd been keeping back. He looked so good to her, even though his shirt was torn, he was limping and blood oozed from a cut above his eye. He grimaced and hurried across the back yard as the night slowly gave way to day.

When he stopped in front of her, he gazed down at Robby and brushed a hand across his brow.

"He'll be okay."

She nodded, taking whatever he said as truth. "And Cerian?"

A corner of his mouth twisted up into a smile. "Let's just say he'll see the light."

She glanced up at the horizon where the purples of dawn were turning into the roses of morning and thought of the small clearing he and Aiden had fought in. She had a feeling that within the next ten minutes there would be nothing left of a rogue vampire named Cerian.

"I'm sorry," he said, his face twisted into a grimace.

"For what?"

"For getting you involved in this."

She wanted to hug him, to bring him close and nestle his head into her shoulder like she was doing with Robby, but her arms were full. She kissed the side of his face, knowing she could never thank him enough for what he'd given her.

"You're a good man, Aiden Reed."

His head snapped up, a startled expression on his face, and she guessed it'd been a long time since anyone told him he was good.

Robby opened sleepy eyes. "Aiden?"

Aiden touched her son's face again, a gentle finger to the tip of his nose. "I'm here, son. Go back to sleep."

Robby snuggled into her arms, his eyelids drooping. "Had the weirdest dream..."

"That's all it was. Just a dream."

Robby nodded and drifted back to sleep.

“He won’t remember much of what happened,” Aiden said.

“If I lost him—” Tears choked back her words.

Aiden leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “You didn’t. He’s all right, Amy.” Sweat beaded his brow and he was breathing deep. Suddenly, a muted ray of sunlight touched his shoulder and he winced. “I have to go,” he said, his voice strained.

“Go. Hurry.”

He bounded down the steps and when he reached the bottom, Amy whispered after him. “I love you.” But he didn’t turn around, just hurried away from the creeping arms of the sunlight.

Chapter Eleven

“You scared the shit out of me, man,” Ben said from Aiden’s couch.

Aiden’s lips curled into a smile, his back to Ben as he watched Amy get her kids in the van. Robby, none the worse for wear, squabbled with Claire, poking and hitting her until Amy pulled them apart, pointing to the inside of the vehicle. The morning after his ordeal with Cerian, Robby awoke with nothing but a vague recollection of a bad dream. Aiden and Amy watched him for several more days, but so far he wasn’t adversely affected.

He caught a glimpse of Lydia strapped into her car seat, calmly playing with her Polly Pockets, her mouth moving a mile a minute before Amy shut the van door. He wished he could hear them, wished he could go out there and join them, but the sun was high in the sky and he was trapped in his muted home.

The night after his fight with Cerian, Aiden had gone back to the clearing where he’d left the rogue and found nothing but a pile of ash.

“You’re not listening to me.”

The van pulled away in a cloud of exhaust fumes. Aiden frowned. He was buying her a new van and he didn’t care what she had to say about it. That piece of crap just wasn’t safe.

“Yo, Aiden.”

He sipped his coffee, staring at the spot where Amy’s van had been, a feeling of loneliness creeping through him. He’d have to leave soon, on to the next assignment, but damn he didn’t want to go. Yet he couldn’t stay here and watch Amy and the kids through a tinted window for the rest of their lives either. Always watching, never participating.

She’d told him her fear that she could be pregnant and his gut tightened at the thought. Vampires and humans had mated in the past but the women always miscarried.

So if Amy were pregnant, she probably wouldn't be for long, but that didn't stop him from wanting to see her round and off-balance with his baby growing inside her.

"Aiden." He turned to his best friend who sat on his couch scowling. "Hell, man, I've been talking to you, but you're in your own little world."

Aiden walked away from the window and into the deep shadows of his home. He couldn't even grow plants in here, it was so dark. Suddenly he wanted plants and sunlight.

"So, who's Amy? The cute little brunette with all the kids?"

He settled himself in the chair opposite Ben. "Yeah." The cute little brunette with all the kids.

Ben eyed him for a moment. "So that's the way it is, huh?"

"So where am I going next?" he asked to get his mind, and the conversation, off Amy and the kids.

"Who says you're going anywhere?"

Startled, he glanced up. "Because I always go somewhere."

"Stay here. Figure this thing out with Amy. You deserve a break."

The pain in his gut almost made him double over. "There's nothing to figure out. She's a mother, for Christ's sake. I'm a *vampire*." No. It would never work. Better that he leave now than stick around and wish for things that could never be.

His friend stared at him for several long minutes. "You love her that much?"

"Yeah. I love her that much." Aiden stared into his empty coffee cup.

"I know someone," Ben said after a short pause. "Someone who can turn vampires into humans."

Aiden's head snapped up and he glared at Ben. "What do you mean? I thought vampires were born vampires and humans were born humans and there was no 'turning'."

"Vampires and humans are different species, but a few decades ago we discovered that the close genetic make-up allows us to 'turn' one into another. Remember Ryan Harrison?"

Aiden remembered Ryan. He'd been one of the best Rogue Hunters and had died a few years ago when his truck had run off the road and no one found it until that next afternoon. The sun had killed him. Or so Aiden had thought. "He didn't die in that crash, did he?"

Ben shook his head. "Became human. Carissa Foley was one. You know her, don't you?"

Aiden jerked so hard his coffee sloshed over the rim. "Carissa was *human*?"

"Turned when her brother was killed by Rolf, the rogue we'd hunted for years."

"No kidding. Why am I just now hearing about this?"

"Because it's not something that's done often and it's not condoned by Council. Like Ryan and Carissa, you'll be expected to give up everything. In essence, you'll turn your back on the vampire community. And it's an incredibly painful process," Ben added. "Some don't survive."

Trepidation and something close to fear tingled up Aiden's spine. To turn his back on everything he'd known for the past three hundred years... Could he do it? Could he afford not to? If he didn't, he'd lose Amy forever. "What exactly happens?" he asked.

"You're drained of your vampire blood and infused with human blood."

One of the myths about vampires was that they existed off human blood. That was partly right. Their nourishment came from human blood but the blood that flowed through their veins was pure vampire. To be drained of his blood meant they'd bring him to the brink of death, then back to life. Not a comforting concept.

Ben's gaze slid away. "And you can't feed for ten days before."

Aiden slumped into the couch and closed his eyes. There was no way he could not feed for ten days. The most he'd ever gone was four days and it'd been damn scary, the violent urges he'd had to fight.

"Think hard about it," Ben said.

Aiden opened his eyes. If it meant being with Amy, if it meant spending time with Robby, Claire and Lydia, he'd do it. "If I survive, then I'd be human? No more hiding from the sun?"

“Wholly human.”

“I’ll do it.”

“You sure?” Ben asked.

“Absolutely.”

“When do you want to start?”

“Now.”

Ben’s eyes darkened. “I need to take you to this man. He’s the only one who’s been successful at turning vampires human and it will take a few days after the ten day fasting.”

Aiden nodded in understanding.

“It’ll get bad, Aiden.”

“But I’ll be human afterwards and I can come back to Amy.”

The doubt shone in Ben’s gaze. He didn’t think Aiden would survive, but Aiden knew he could. If he kept Amy in his mind, if he thought of her and what they could have together. He stood and handed Ben his car keys. “Give these to Amy. Tell her to drive it until I get back and can buy her a new one.”

Ben took the keys and nodded.

“I need one more favor.”

His friend stood. “Okay.”

“I need you to find a man named Robert Carmichael. He owes Amy some money. Make him pay up.”

Ben smiled. “Will do.”

“And tell Robby I’ll be here to take him to that camp out.”

“Aiden—”

“Just tell him, Ben.”



The sound of the doorbell pealed through the silent house. Well, half the sound anyway. It was broken and Amy didn’t have the money to fix it so it just dinged but

didn't dong. She pushed a stray hair out of her face with the back of a floured hand and made her way through the junk on the living room floor. All three kids were spending the night at friends' houses and Amy was enjoying her alone time by baking the last batch of bread for the season.

She pulled the door open with a combination of trepidation and excitement. It'd been two weeks since Aiden had left with the promise to be back. Ben popped in periodically to check up on them, but whenever she asked about Aiden he just shook his head and looked sad.

She knew he was going through something horrible, but Ben wouldn't say what and it drove her to distraction not being able to talk to Aiden. She didn't care that he was a vampire. She'd take him however she could get him, just please God, whole and happy, that's all she asked for.

"Ben?"

His smile was sad, as it always was. "I came to give you something."

She stepped back to let him in, unable to tear her gaze away. "How's Aiden?"

He hesitated and wouldn't meet her gaze. Her stomach plummeted. *Oh, God.*

"He's holding his own."

"That's what you always say. Tell me the truth. Am I going to get Aiden back?"

Finally he looked at her and she saw the truth in his eyes and it tore a small cry from her.

"I don't know, Amy. I just don't know."

"What's he doing? Is he doing this for me? Tell him to stop. Please." She almost got down on her knees to beg. Her pain was too great, her loneliness too all encompassing. "I just want him back."

Ben clenched his jaw and Amy scraped her hair back from her face, not caring if she got flour in it. He handed her an envelope. She opened it with shaking hands and pulled out a check for a hell of a lot of money and signed by Robert. Her gaze collided with Ben's. "What's this?"

"Back child support."

“How’d you get this?” He smiled, revealing his fangs. At one time she would have flinched, but not anymore. Nothing fazed her anymore.

“Aiden made you do this, didn’t he?”

“He wanted to see you get what you deserve.”

She laughed, the sound high-pitched and close to hysterical. “Did Robert get what he deserves?”

“Oh, yes.” He smiled again and Amy shivered at the lethal look. “But don’t worry, I left him in one piece and alive. More’s the pity.”

“Thank you, Ben. For everything.”

“No problem. Aiden’s a good guy and deserves to be happy.”

She didn’t voice her fears. Fears that haunted her deep in the night that he would never be happy. That he would never return to her no matter what he promised Robby.



“Quit fidgeting, Robby. You’re driving me nuts.”

“I can’t help it. When’s he gonna get here?”

“I don’t know.” Amy peered out the window, crowding her son. It was the day of the big weekend camp out and Aiden was already an hour late. With each tick of the clock, Amy’s hopes plummeted. Two days ago, Ben had finally revealed what Aiden was doing. And why. When she got a hold of him, she was going to give him a piece of her mind. After she hugged him. And kissed him silly.

If she ever got the chance.

The last time Ben had stopped by, he’d been more optimistic than she’d ever seen him, saying Aiden was doing better. But if the process was even half what Ben claimed, then Amy had her doubts. He’d put himself through hell just for her and it turned her heart.

Robby jumped back and ran to the door. “He’s here!” He flung the door opened and barreled out of it, Amy hot on his heels, Claire clutching Lydia’s hand and trailing behind.

A brand new Ford Explorer pulled into the driveway. Amy stood on the porch, arms crossed around her middle, fully expecting Ben to step out and tell her Aiden hadn't made it. But it wasn't Ben's tall, dark form that emerged. First she noted the long, blond hair, pulled back and secured at the nape of his neck. His long legs ate up the distance between them. Robby bounced along beside him and they both stopped in front of her, Aiden's hand resting protectively on top of Robby's head.

Her hungry gaze raked him. He'd lost weight, his jeans hanging low on too-slim hips. His face, once hard angles and planes, was gaunt and shadowed with a day's growth of beard. His dark chocolate eyes were haunted. But his smile was the same.

She couldn't believe he was here. Standing in front of her. In the daylight. With a cry she launched herself at him and he caught her, his strong arms wrapping around her and holding her tight. Underneath her cheek his heart beat a healthy rhythm and for the first time in three weeks she let her tears go.

He pulled back. "Hey, what's this? I thought you'd be happy."

Oh, God, there was that warm butter voice she'd grown to love. She cried harder. "You idiot." She batted his arm and sniffled. "You didn't have to do this. I would have loved you no matter what."

He put her down and stepped back, his gaze serious as it took in she and the kids. "Yes, I did. I couldn't be a decent father if I couldn't do the things expected of me."

"Father?"

He smiled. A full-blown, show-all-your-teeth, honest-to-God smile. With no fangs. "That is, if you all want one."

Robby pumped his fist in the air while Lydia screeched and launched herself at his legs. Claire hung back until Aiden opened one arm and motioned her forward, then she clung to him and buried her head in his side, a huge smile on her face.

Amy stood back, tears blinding her and rolling down her cheeks. "I think that's a yes," she said.

Aiden's intense gaze bored into her. "And the mother? Does she still want me? Will you..." He swallowed and suddenly looked unsure of himself, the first time she'd ever seen such an emotion in this man. "Will you marry me, Amy?"

She would have launched herself at him like her kids had, but there was no more room in his arms. Instead she smiled and nodded. "Oh, yes."

The kids yelled, whooped for joy, and hugged Aiden tighter, until Robby pulled away and tugged on Aiden's shirt. "Come on, Dad, we have a camp out to go to."

About the Author

To learn more about Sharon Cullen, please visit www.sharoncullen.net. Send an email to Sharon at sharon@sharoncullen.net or join her newsletter to get all the up to date information on new releases, contests and more at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sharon_Cullen/?yguid=224399987

The best way to catch a wolf? Use your heart as bait.

To Catch a Wolf

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Five years ago Braith Merlow walked away from the love of his life, and it wasn't by choice. Unable to tell her the reason why, he threw his things into a duffle bag, swung his leg over the seat of his motorcycle, and headed for sanctuary. The last thing he expects, after all this time, is to find her standing in his bedroom.

Sorcha Lynnae wants only one thing from her former lover: the Masti. She needs the magical necklace to save her life, and the Vampyr Queen has given her two weeks to find it. When she steps out of Braith's shower and into his arms, her "business-only" trip turns into pure pleasure.

With their hearts on the line, Braith and Sorcha set out to pursue their separate agendas. A pinch of magic, a hint of lust, and they're well on their way to catching a wolf.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *To Catch a Wolf*:

Braith left the bar and headed for home once again. Twice now he'd started to go, yet each time his feet found their own way back to the bar. His mind wasn't on work. Indecision kept turning him around.

Sorcha permeated his every thought, his every breath. Part of him was afraid to go home and find her gone once again, like a ghost. The other, larger part, feared she would still be there. Hell if he knew what to do with the woman, or what to say. Did Hallmark make a greeting card that read, "I'm sorry I abandoned you. Sorry I left you to them. Sorry I never told you the truth before I said goodbye. Now go home again before I do something stupid, like start kissing you and never stop"?

Several minutes later, he pulled open the screen door to his house. He could hear the shower running, so he occupied himself with household chores until the water shut off. When he figured he'd stalled long enough, Braith walked into his bedroom.

“Sorcha? I’m home,” he called by way of warning.

She emerged from the bathroom wrapped in nothing but his small, blue bath towel. The swell of her breast rose above her fist, skin flushed a soft pink from the heat of the shower. The long lines of her tanned legs came together as she tried to keep her body hidden in the terry cloth. A blush stained her cheeks, deep enough to be seen even through the bruises. Sorcha cast an accusing glance his direction.

“What?” He smiled and held up his hands in innocence. “I warned you I was here.”

“I didn’t hear you.”

“Not my fault.”

“Yeah, well.” Her mouth quirked up on one side, and she crooked a finger, gesturing for him to turn around. He coughed and lowered his gaze to the floor instead.

“My shirts are in the dresser over there. Second drawer. I might have an old pair of shorts in the bottom drawer too. If you’re interested.”

“It’s either that or walk around naked, right?”

Braith stared hard at the wood beneath his toes. His vote was the latter of the two choices. Not that his vote mattered. Her towel hit him in the head. With a smile, he laid it open over the door to dry and turned to find her tying up a pair of cut off sweat shorts. The dark blue T-shirt she chose dwarfed her lithe form. He watched her teeth nibble on her bottom lip as she worked the drawstring into some semblance of a knot. Damn, he wanted to go over and touch her more and more with each passing second.

Sorcha smiled in his direction. “I don’t suppose you have a brush?”

Braith nodded and pulled a brush from the top of his trunk. He had a few things of hers from when he swiped that dresser top five years ago. He just wasn’t willing to give them all back. Yet. “This one might look familiar.”

He tossed the brush over and made the bed while she tended to her hair. His fingers itched to run through the silken locks, but she braided it back with a speed and ease that thwarted any such ideas. Straightening the pillows, he turned to go into the kitchen and almost ran right into her.

“Damn, I forgot how quiet you move.” He laughed.

She rose on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. “Sorry. Thanks for taking me in.”

The feel of her lips, her breath against his skin, sent a streak of need through Braith's neglected soul. His fingers tightened of their own accord. Awareness flared in her eyes a second before he whispered her name and captured her mouth in a searing kiss.

Drowning, he was drowning. And damn if he cared. A whimper slipped from her throat as her arms wound around his neck, bringing her body flush with his. Gods, how he missed the soft sounds she made when they kissed, touched, loved. Braith pulled her closer with a hand splayed at the small of her back. He kissed her like he never wanted it to end—a kiss to make up for the five years of his absence. Five long, grueling, wasted years. Over and over his lips moved against hers, seeking an entrance to taste what was hers alone.

Her heart drummed against his chest, pounding out a rhythm that his own pulse picked up and joined. Warmth stole through every pore in his body. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it certainly wasn't this overwhelming sense of peace. Of relief. Of his soul rejoicing in the only place he could ever call home—Sorcha.

"Gods, woman, I've missed you," he said as she broke the kiss to nip along his jaw.

Her teeth caught at the sensitive lobe of his ear and tugged until he bent his tall frame lower to grant her easier access. Sorcha traced the shell of his ear with the tip of her tongue. "Mmm...Braith."

His name on her lips pulled up memories he thought long buried. His eyes closed as the air rushed from his lungs, and he squeezed her tighter, silently willing the memories not to fade again.

"I've missed you too, Brai."

The soft whisper wrung a growl from the depths of his throat. Lifting her up by her ass, he caught her lips again and sent his tongue in deep to lick at the roof of her mouth. Her legs wound around his waist, arms locked over his shoulders to hang on tight.

He didn't care why she had come to him. She was here. Belonged here. With him. Against him. Beneath him. With a smirk of possession, he lowered her body to the bed and followed her down.

Five years ago the man she loved died in her arms...Or did he?

Unbreakable

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Jordan McAdam leads an unusual double life. Police officer by day, vigilante by night. But Jordan isn't interested in the average criminal. She stalks Shadow Demons, creatures who prey on the innocent, creatures whom she suspects are responsible for a string of bizarre sacrificial murders. Creatures who killed her partner and lover.

Gage Campbell has spent the last few years on an elite team of Shadow Destroyers, hunting down the demons who changed his life—and his DNA. Then an assignment leads him straight back to the woman he hasn't been able to stop thinking about for five long years. The woman he had no choice but to leave behind.

Is the man before her a mimic demon bent on tormenting her, or is it Gage returned from the dead? All Jordan knows is that the raging desire between them is real.

Standing between them are years of secrets and hurt, and a love that just might have the power to bring them together. If the murder case they're working on doesn't separate them...permanently.

The Shadow Destroyer Series, Book 1.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Unbreakable*:

“You're awake.”

Jordan didn't have to try very hard to ignore the fact that he looked good leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, his feet bare. She was too busy burning him to a cinder with her gaze. “Spare me the small talk.” She jerked on the restraints. “What's with these? And if you try to be a smart ass and say something kinky, I *will* hurt you. Very badly,” she promised.

“When you get up you mean?” The corner of his mouth twitched. He strolled into the room. “But that kinky talk does give me a few ideas now that you brought it up.”

“Do *not* screw with me, Gage. I’m not the submissive type. Take. These. Off. Now.”

“No.”

Frustration chewed away at her insides. “Why not?” She was about three seconds away from screaming the place down, even if the only thing it got her was duct tape across the mouth. She felt far too helpless like this, the same way she had felt when the war demon had cornered her in her apartment the week after Gage died.

“I think that lust demon infected you.”

Jordan snorted. “Not possible.”

“You have a scratch on your side.”

“So. I got a scratch from fighting it. Doesn’t mean he did it to me.” She continued to squirm, seeking any leverage that might help her get free.

“I’m not taking the chance.”

“You don’t have to. I’m fine.” She felt fine. She’d know if something was wrong. She’d been injured in dozens of fights with lust demons before and hadn’t been “infected” like he seemed to think she was.

“We’ll see.”

“Oh, no. You are not leaving me like this.”

Gage cocked his head. “I don’t think you’re in a position to do much about it.”

“You son of a bitch,” Jordan growled.

“Tsk. Tsk. I see you still have no problem shooting your mouth off.”

“Come a little closer and I’ll show you what else I have no problem doing.”

Instead of moving closer, Gage took a step back. The small measure of satisfaction his retreat gave her was short-lived. Mostly because she was still latched to her bed.

She dragged in what she hoped was a calming breath, relaxing the muscles that had locked up the moment she discovered she couldn’t move. “There is no reason to keep me like this. I’d know if I felt differently.”

“There’s no way to tell for another few hours.”

“Are you crazy? In case you’ve forgotten, people keep dying because some power-tripping demon wants to cross over. For all we know a gateway could be opening right now.”

Gage shook his head. "Braxton is monitoring all temporal activity in this area. He'll let us know the second something looks unusual."

"Let me put it this way. When I say I couldn't have been infected, I mean I really couldn't have been. My talisman protects me from all things demon magik related."

"We're not talking magik, we're talking about it getting into your blood."

"In one sense or another all demon powers originate in magik. Trust me, I'm immune."

He didn't look convinced.

"Call Brady. He'll tell you. He was the one who gave it to me."

His brows drew together. "And you're wearing it now? The same one you showed me the night we ran into each other."

"Old friends run into each other, Gage. Like people who went to high school together and haven't seen each other since graduation. Not two people fighting the same abnormally strong creatures, one of whom has played dead for the last five years."

"Do you think you could stop reminding me about that every thirty seconds?"

"Maybe I wouldn't have to if you had dropped a postcard in the mail. Christmas time would have been good."

"Damn it, Jordan. I couldn't."

"Is this about that whole *keep me safe* thing again? I think we've talked that to death, don't you?" They hadn't really, but she didn't want to go there right now. She wanted to get up. Maybe find a demon to slay. Preferably a whole legion of them.

Anything so she wouldn't have to feel vulnerable lying here, especially when he was looking at her like he actually cared what she thought. She didn't want him to care. Not if he wasn't sticking around. It would be much easier to let him go when the time came.

Gage leaned over her. His gaze dipped to the plunging vee neckline.

"What are you doing?" The question didn't snap like she intended it to.

He followed the leather strap down to the top of her breasts and withdrew the talisman.

His fingers brushed her skin, and her stomach tightened. "So you think this thing somehow protects you?"

From this angle she couldn't tell if he was looking at the talisman or her cleavage. "According to Brady, yeah. I haven't had any problems before."

Gage replaced it, his fingers once more sliding over her skin, whisper soft. Definitely on purpose this time.

Jordan searched his face, but he turned away. He made it as far as the door before she opened her mouth to demand he release her. Gage shut off the light and came back to the bed. He stretched out on the mattress next to her, dragging a blanket up to cover both of them.

"You expect me to sleep like this?"

"It's after three in the morning, Jordan. Just...go to sleep."

"Call Brady."

Gage rolled over, his face hovering above hers. He'd forgotten to fully close the blinds and slivers of light from the streetlamp outside allowed her to clearly see his face.

"I'm not calling anyone, so go to sleep."

"Exactly what are you worried about? That you're wrong, or that you wouldn't be able to resist me if I was infected?"

"One, I hope I am wrong. I'd rather you not have to go through that. And two, who says I'd want to resist you?" His voice deepened on the last sentence.

"Gage..."

He sighed. "You really need to stop talking, Jordan."

"Why?"

"You're making it hard for me to roll over and go to sleep."

"So you are trying to resist me," she teased, her earlier frustration fading to the back of her mind as her body warmed from head to toe under his simmering blue eyes.

"Not very well." He covered her mouth with his, proving just how much he couldn't fight the pull that crackled in the air between them. Arguing had always led to the most incredible sex between them and it seemed that the time apart hadn't changed that.

His lips skimmed back and forth across hers. Each hot pass made her tug at her restraints, wanting to wrap her arms around him and pull him closer. The first damp sweep of his tongue filled her senses.

She moaned, already knowing the kiss would never be enough to satisfy the craving heating her limbs until she could have dissolved into the mattress. No matter how much she wanted to strangle the man at any given moment, in bed he never failed to make her forget about everything but how good he made her feel.

How good she wanted to feel right now.

Gage drew back. His ragged breath teased her neck.

“If you’re about to tell me to go to sleep—”

“If you threaten me one more time today, Jordan, I’m going to leave you like this for at least a week.” He captured her mouth again.

This time the kiss wasn’t slow or teasing.

He consumed her.

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