



Bonds of Darkness

Joyce Ellen Armond

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Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Kate Cuthbert

Cover Artist
April Martinez

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Chapter One

“Kate, you cannot possibly wear that.”

Leaning against the old porcelain sink, Kate Scott paused, a glass of orange juice halfway to her mouth. She hadn't left time for breakfast, which was typical. And now she was being maligned for her wardrobe. Also typical. So much for her Big Day being different and special.

Kate confronted her housemate Vanessa, who looked movie star sleek standing in the kitchen doorway. “Should I go naked?”

Gwen, the third of their housemate trio, lifted her teacup from her perch in the bay window. Morning sunlight glittered through the steam. “To nudist court proceedings.”

“To nudist court proceedings,” Kate echoed, downing her orange juice like it was tequila. She slammed the glass against the granite counter with an exaggerated “ahhhhhh.”

Vanessa crossed her arms and cocked her hips. “Kate, Kate, Kate,” she said in her *I-Vanessa-swim-with-sharks-and-you-Kate-are-a-little-fish* voice. “You want to say I’m here to kick ass, right?”

“Um...” Kate worked as a victim advocate, and today was her debut in Bonaventure’s court system. “I wasn’t planning on kicking anybody’s anything...”

“It’s a kick or be kicked world, Kate.” Vanessa cocked her head with a pitying expression. “Navy blue pant suits say kick me.”

Kate ran her hands over the nubby, poly-cotton blend. “This is my best suit.” She’d worn it to land the Bonaventure job, escaping the string of high-crime, major-metropolitan backdrops to her career. “I like this suit. What’s wrong with this suit?”

Vanessa took Kate’s hands in both of hers and led her from the kitchen. “I don’t know if we have time to rescue the hair...”

As if there would ever be enough time to rescue my hair.

“—but we can definitely save you from this pant suit.”

Help me, Kate mouthed to Gwen as Vanessa pulled her away.

The house they shared was a more shabby than chic Victorian: the spoils of Gwen’s divorce. Gwen’s painting and sculpting studio was on the second floor of the corner tower. She’d transformed the ground floor, which had been her ex-husband’s home office, into an ultra-feminine dressing room cluttered with antique mirrors and looking glasses. Vanessa planted Kate firmly in the room’s center, so that the mirrors repeated and reflected every angle of her blue pantsuit.

“I look just fine...”

Vanessa pulled back the curtains on the bank of rigged clothing rods. Their styles hung all muddled together: Gwen’s earth mother cottons, Kate’s conservative suits, and Vanessa’s reds.

“—and I don’t want to be late.”

Gwen appeared in the doorway. “You hear that, Vanessa? She doesn’t want to be late.”

“For breakfast,” Vanessa said, her suggestive tone muffled by fabric.

“For Breakfast Paul.” Gwen grinned over her teacup.

Kate exaggerated a sigh. "I don't want to be late for work." Although she had been thinking of Breakfast Paul. The rational voice in her head, inherited from her parents, demanded she stay focused on her Big Day. She had more important things to think about than Breakfast Paul.

"This is more like it," Vanessa said, her voice stern and serious. To Vanessa, a local weekend features reporter with aspirations of network anchor stardom, clothes mattered. "We'll start here."

A red cashmere camisole sailed through space like a kite. Kate caught it, and the fabric snuggled up against her fingers. She expected it to purr. "This kicks ass?"

"It says I am woman, unafraid."

It's easy to say it. I'd like to feel it. Even red cashmere couldn't smother her inexplicable jitters. She'd been in courtrooms countless times. She'd worked in much bigger cities, pushed her way through police precincts full of hookers and junkies to reach the women and families she helped. Her experience with violent crimes had landed her this assignment, leapfrogging her over others in her office with more years of service. Still, a thousand butterfly wings fluttered against her heart.

Hangars scraped. A skirt and jacket flapped from the closet, the motion captured by all the mirrors. Kate caught them before they hit the floor. Made from a solid, sensible gray tweed, they seemed perfectly acceptable.

"A gray suit," said Vanessa. "That says I'm playing by the rules, because I can beat you without cheating. And the final touch." She emerged from the closet, cradling in both hands, as if they might wake up and cry, a pair of blood red suede heels. "These say I'm here to kick some ass."

Kate looked down at the sensible blue and beige pumps on her feet. "I can't wear red shoes to court."

"I still vote for naked," said Gwen.

Vanessa pointed a long, French-tipped finger. "Hush yourself. Damn hippie."

"I'm wearing the blue suit," Kate said.

Vanessa cocked her eyebrows and her hips.

Kate held the gray skirt up to her waist. "It's way too short. It says I'll beat you by sleeping with your boss instead of mine. And the shoes." Kate rolled her eyes. "Those aren't courtroom shoes. Those are follow-me-home-and-stay-for-breakfast shoes."

Gwen giggled. "Then I'm sure Breakfast Paul will like them."

Kate set her teeth. "I don't want to hear about Breakfast Paul. I don't have time in my life for men like Breakfast Paul."

Though she'd never met any man like Breakfast Paul before. Theirs was the oddest friendship, a year of breakfasts building up ... to what?

A year ago, alone, trying to pretend she wasn't nervous on her first day at a new job in a new town, Kate had marched up to the counter of a coffee shop called Café Foy. She'd ordered her usual: an extra-large double mocha soy latte. A man sitting at the counter, a man with wide shoulders and uncombed black curls, a man with the shadow of many unshaven days on his chin, had grumbled rudely under his breath.

On any other day, Kate would have ignored him. Just folded him up in her mind and sailed him away like a paper airplane. But this day, her first day at a new job in a new town, Kate had looked him up and down, turned back to the clerk, and said, "Make another one for Mr. Happy here."

The man surprised her; he laughed. The sound of it seemed to startle him, and suddenly he wasn't a broad-shouldered nobody with a whiskery chin. He flashed her a look from eyes the color of a sunny winter day. "Save your money. I wouldn't drink such a thing in my life." Underneath its roughness, his voice had a warm liquid quality. "But thank you for making me laugh."

"Yeah, well, no good deed goes unpunished, buster." Kate had taken her mocha soy latte, left his on the counter, and went on with her day—a day she'd spent pushing away the distracting memory of his laugh.

Kate lifted her eyes out of her reverie and met the knowing smiles of her roommates. "Give me the damn shoes."

Gwen laughed. "Hurry up. You don't want to be late." She turned on her heel and disappeared from the doorway. Her voice floated back to Kate like incense smoke. "For breakfast."

"For work!"

Vanessa held out her hand for the clothes Kate wore. "Tick, tick, tick."

Kate shrugged out of her blue jacket. The white nylon shell and slacks followed. "I don't have time for a relationship."

"Take tomorrow off and make time."

Kate took a deep breath, ready to launch into the Work Comes First refrain. Her parents had dripped it into her mind like water torture, a steady but gentle bombardment. A life of service was the only life worth living. Only by putting others' needs first will you ever find contentment.

Vanessa interrupted. "There's a run in your stocking."

Kate let out her deep breath in a long sigh and dragged the red cashmere down over her head. One of the pins holding her impossible hair popped loose. She silently started to count backwards from ten.

"I'll get you fresh stockings." Vanessa rummaged through the bureau drawer. "We'll fix your hair." She didn't sound confident.

Kate tugged the skirt over her hips. "There's always a run in my stocking, Vanessa." She shrugged into the jacket. "There's always a pin loose in my hair. Do you know what I'm saying?"

Vanessa handed her a pair of very sheer thigh highs, a frill of lace around the top. Very firmly, Kate handed them back.

"If it's not my stockings, it's my hair. If it's not my hair, it's the car breaking down. If it's not the car breaking down, it's, I don't know, the world is about to be smashed by a meteor. Or something."

"A little exaggeration never hurt anyone." Vanessa handed her a pair of sturdy tan reinforced toes. "Besides, you'll do fine."

Some of the butterfly wings took up residence in Kate's stomach. "What if I mess up?"

Vanessa rolled her eyes. "As if."

Mollified, Kate shimmied into the pantyhose, adjusted the skirt, and stepped into the heels. "For once," she said, bending to buckle the straps around her ankle, "I'd just like to win one."

All dressed, Kate took in all her reflections from the different mirrors. The shoes made her legs feel long, long, long. The cashmere hugged her with every indrawn breath.

Except for the tangle of curls that topped her, she looked great. Would Paul notice? He had to notice. Anticipation tingled, followed by a scalding wash of guilt.

Kate had played through her early adulthood, indulging in love affairs, blowing off classes, breaking her parents' hearts. Her mother, the hospice nurse, and her father, the expert on contagious diseases for the World Health Organization, had gone through rigorous and demanding fertility treatments to create a child they could give as a gift to the world, a child they could raise to make a difference, be a healer, continue their legacy. That's what they'd told her in the last big fight, when Kate threatened to leave her master's program in social work. *I'm not you*, she'd told them. *I want something else*. Then hung up. Twenty minutes later, her mother and father had died in a car crash. Kate had broken their hearts when they lived. Now that they were dead, she needed to prove herself to them. And that meant focusing on her career, and not Breakfast Paul.

Vanessa nodded with satisfaction. "Okay. Time for the hair. You can't win anything with that hair."

The grandfather clock in the living room pealed out its on-the-hour song. Kate counted seven bongs. Time was up. *If it's not my stockings, it's my hair...*

With a sigh, Kate pulled the pins from her hair and threw them like confetti. Then she shook her head wildly, until she could feel the static and hear the crackle.

"There."

Vanessa stared, scandalized.

"It's fixed." She stalked out of the dressing room, got halfway down the hall, and turned around. She popped her head into the doorway. "Thank you. For the clothes. And the support."

Vanessa grinned and waved. "Kick some ass."

As Kate reached the back door, Gwen's voice reached out and chucked her under the chin. "Have a nice breakfast."

"I'm going to work!" She slammed the door behind her.

On the porch, she stopped. "Damn." And then went back inside for her briefcase.

"Not a word," she said to Gwen's grin, and slammed the door behind her even harder. She skidded down the damp slope of the back yard to her battered blue Chevy.

The engine sputtered and, thankfully, turned over on the third turn of the key. If it didn't catch by the third turn, she believed it was an omen of a horrible day. Running just a little late, she pulled into the gravel lot of Café Foy, parked beside Paul's lion-colored Mercedes. She hoped the loyal little car wouldn't expire of humiliation before the engine cooled.

She levered the rear-view mirror so that it reflected her static-charged curls. From the glove compartment, she extracted her emergency hairbrush. She kept crisis coif-kits everywhere—her briefcase, her desk, her purses—to survive the tangled disaster of her own hair.

In a flurry of brushing and twisting and tucking and swearing, she bundled the whole mess up onto her head. Vanessa always comforted her, pointing out that millions of women spent thousands of dollars to create that about-to-come-undone look. The little emergency bottle of hairspray gave up its last aerosol breath for the cause.

Kate glanced up at the window of the coffee shop. She saw Paul's head turn away. He was already waiting on the sofa in the back. He'd watched her fight with her hair. He'd know if she just gave up and drove away. Kate sighed. Why did facing violent

criminals frighten her less than showing Breakfast Paul a little leg? And why did she care if he noticed? Her life was her work now, no time for love.

An internal sigh rippled through her, as the mantra rang hollow. Not even with her dead family's legacy wrapped like chains around her heart could she control this one last expression of her rebellious nature. No matter who told her no, she couldn't resist the forbidden.

Kate tugged the hem of her skirt down towards her knee. She checked her teeth in the rear-view mirror. She jiggled her breasts in place behind the red angora. She patted her hair one more time. What would it be like, to die of humiliation?

She folded up her fear like a paper airplane and sailed it away on the slanted morning rays of sun.

Chapter Two

Her hair. Paul watched her struggle with the unruly waves. *God, I love her hair.* As he watched her brush it, he couldn't stop imagining how it might feel, sliding through his fingers, over his chest, across the head of his cock. *Imagine all you like.* He directed the thought to the little head behind his fly. *It's never going to happen.*

He was grateful for her friendship. Grateful for their breakfasts. More than a man in his situation deserved. If she ever knew... He'd lose her smile and her wisecracks and her exasperating stubbornness forever. And his forever was longer than most.

Kate looked at the window, and he turned away quickly. He didn't want to be caught staring. It was hard enough anymore to suppress his reactions to her hair, her body, even her scent. When had he risked noticing Kate's smell? Breakfast one hundred five. An unexpectedly cold morning in February, and he'd sensed the heat rising from her skin. A peculiar, peppery, Kate heat.

Still, breakfast number two had been the biggest risk: the moment he'd decided to take a step back from his personal abyss and try living again. After that first encounter, his nerves still reeling from the shock of her and her disgusting pseudo-coffee concoction, he arrived early at the café to wait, two cups of real coffee ready on the counter. He never doubted that she'd come in the next day. He didn't have the courage, a year ago, for doubts.

In she came, saw Paul, saw the two cups of coffee, and stopped. She cocked her hips, tilted her head, and narrowed her lovely lips as she suppressed a smile.

"My name is Paul Tristel." He'd rehearsed the line over and over, so he would remember to use the false surname. "Let me teach you about real coffee."

Her eyebrows climbed. "I know about coffee."

You call that stuff in a paper cup coffee? You call that sugared-up slime coffee? He hadn't been able to get the words out. So he wagged his hands and rolled his shoulders, trying to convey how mistaken she was about the breadth of her beverage knowledge.

She seemed to understand, because she took a seat at the counter beside him. "Hello, Paul Tristel. I'm Kate Scott."

A perfect name. Sharp. Fast on the tongue like a bullet.

She looked into the mug. "I wouldn't drink such a thing in my life." To the girl behind the counter, she said, "Extra large double mocha soy latte. Make it two." She turned on him the full force of her freckles, her hair, and her wide, twinkling eyes. "Maybe I can make you laugh again."

He'd experienced such a force of feminine personality only once before, in Alina Wald. He hadn't been able to resist her either. He answered with his old voice, full of teasing and charm. "Not if I make you laugh first."

The Chevy's door clunked shut, pulling him back into the present. He couldn't resist glancing out the window again.

Oh my God.

Kate leaned inside the car for her briefcase. Her skirt rode up, exposing the nylon-clad back of her thigh.

What the hell was she wearing? In the three hundred fifty seven breakfasts they'd

shared, she had never, ever worn a skirt with a hem above her knee. How was he going to keep things safe, if she came to breakfast looking like this?

He turned from the window, sat with his back straight against the sofa's cushions. He couldn't catch his breath. Every nerve in his body quivered like setters on point.

The bell on the café door tinkled merrily. Kate took one step inside. Her blood-colored heel met the floor, and time held its breath. The length of her leg rose from the cup of soft suede: the curve of her calf, the strength of her knee, and then, the perfect palm-width of her thigh. He blinked; time resumed. The rest of Kate crossed the threshold. With her buckwheat honey hair and the dusting of freckles, the frost gray suit over the red sweater, she looked like autumn come to life.

A rational sector of his mind urged calm, counseled him to be cool. The rest of his thoughts flapped around like a flock of panicked geese. They had a routine. She smiled and waved on the way to the counter. He smiled and waved as was expected, then took refuge behind the fortress of the sports page.

He could sense her legs even through the newsprint.

* * * *

From behind the counter, Dee whistled at Kate's approach. "Ooh la la, girl! You look spiffy!"

Kate looked at Dee, then at Paul behind his paper. Nothing. No reaction. *I can't believe it.* She glared at the newspaper, clawed it with her eyes. Dressed as a knight in shining armor, or a fuzzy pink bunny, she might have provoked a raised brow. But her legs in heels? Nothing.

Dee put two extra large double mocha soy lattes on the counter. "Big day today, right?"

Kate wrapped each hand around a hot paper cup. "Big day today." She looked at Dee, and Dee at her, and they shared a moment of silent communion. They never spoke openly of Paul, but Dee had made a silent campaign to grow their flirting into something serious. She was also the one least interested in buying Kate's stance that Paul Tristel was merely Breakfast Paul, an inconsequential quirk in her career-focused life.

Kate lifted her eyebrows and pursed her lips. *You'd think he'd have noticed.*

Dee shrugged. *Who can figure that one out? Best luck to ya, girlfriend.*

With that anemic support, Kate picked up the lattes and started back towards the sofa. As usual, right beside Paul's mug on the long, low table was the mug of that horrid black goo he insisted, every day, on buying for her. She put his mocha soy latte beside his mug of black goo, moved her mug of black goo from the coaster and placed her mocha soy latte there instead.

By rough calculation, Kate believed that the ongoing coffee cold war had cost her \$960.00 in tenaciously untasted mocha soy lattes, and Paul \$585.00 on ignored black goo. Tax not included. Two of the world's most tenacious souls, wasting time and money on a stupid, year-long game.

She flopped down just a little too hard on the sofa beside him. A slight adjustment of his leg away from hers was his only reaction. Kate resisted the urge to kick him.

Paul handed her the front page, barely flicking his eyes from the sports scores. "Big day today, right?"

Kate gave him a brisk, businesswoman's nod before she flipped open the front page.

“Big day today, right.” She realized that she'd stopped thinking of the court appearance as what made the day big. She hadn't thought of anything but his reaction to her appearance since she left the house. Now, like a maraschino cherry dropped onto a tower of whipped cream, her misgivings about court plopped on her head.

“Are you nervous?” Paul asked.

“Of course not.”

Paul folded down the corner of the sports page and regarded her with narrowed eyes. Even though he seemed oblivious to her legs in heels, he hadn't missed her little lie. Kate found it unnerving that, of all the people in the world, a man with whom she'd only ever shared breakfast knew her well enough to catch her in a lie.

“I'm sure you'll do great,” Paul said after a moment, his lips lifting in a trace of a smile. “But what you need is caffeine. Fortify yourself for the day.” He picked up the mug of black goo and held it out, his face a picture of concerned innocence.

Kate looked from his smile, which was quickly degenerating into that smirk she hated so much, to the mug of black goo. Every damn morning. It made her want to laugh. But she didn't. She wouldn't. If he wasn't going to notice her legs, she wasn't going to let him win the laughing game.

She took the mug from his hand, very careful not to let their fingers touch. She put it back down on the table, picked up her mocha soy latte, and took a long, scalding gulp. When she came up for air, she knew she'd succeeded. She could feel the warm nubbin of soymilk foam on the tip of her nose.

Paul's eyes widened and lips twitched. “Kate, um, you have...” She could see him debate whether she'd done it on purpose or by accident as his gaze flickered from her nose to her eyes. He pointed to his own nose, keeping his expression serious. “You have foam.”

Kate lifted her eyebrows and crossed her eyes, trying to pinpoint the location of the foam at the tip of her nose.

Paul took a very, very deep breath.

Oh, come on, laugh, Kate thought. But he wouldn't. He just stared at her. Then he smirked again. Okay, so she loved that smirk. She'd never admit it to him, especially not now when he didn't notice her legs. Using one finger, Kate lifted the warm soymilk foam from the tip of her nose. Without changing her expression, she leaned forward—making certain that the low scoop of her neckline framed everything nicely—and deposited the foam on the tip of Paul's nose.

Try not to laugh at that!

* * * *

There are freckles on her chest. Paul's heart pushed against his throat. *There are freckles. On her chest.* He concentrated on her face, on the freckles he knew, and tried to look fierce. What he wanted to do was push her back against the cushions, run his hands through that preposterous hair, and kiss her until she was gasping.

Kate tilted an eyebrow, looking quizzical and innocent. He felt the foam start to slide, clinging precariously to the tip of his nose, but it just didn't matter. He couldn't tear his awareness away from the gleam in her green eyes and the freckles on her chest and the steady rise and fall of her breasts under the red angora. He had to win the laughing game and win fast, because he couldn't go on with the teasing, not with freckles on her

chest, and her legs and oh, God. He hadn't touched a woman in years. Decades. Almost a century.

"Very saucy sort of maneuver, Kate, even for you," he said. His voice came out a shade too low, too husky. She noticed, and her brows tipped curiously. He wanted to push her down against the sofa, run his hand up her skirt. He wanted it so badly that his hands shook. *I have to win NOW.*

Sacrificing any pretense to dignity, he rubbed away the foam with his shirtsleeve, making pig grunts.

Her eyes flew open and her mouth popped into a surprised "o" before she threw up the barrier of the newspaper. And there it was. She laughed! Covered badly by a cough, but she laughed.

"Aha! You're laughing back there."

"I am not!" Kate protested. "I'm not laughing. I'm choking on my coffee." She made strangled noises, then guttural hacks, like she was dredging up the bottom of her lungs.

Paul laughed.

Kate dropped her paper, declaring, "I win!"

"You can't win, I already won." He sat back, feeling smug. "He who laughs second, laughs last."

Irritation brightened the gleam in her eyes. Her emotions always played like a Broadway show across her face. He wondered how passion might look. How would her cheeks flush? Would her lips tremble?

Her brow suddenly smoothed. The gleam in her eye put Paul on guard.

"Okay." She gave him an airy smile. Then she uncrossed and crossed her legs with deliberate slow grace. Up went the skirt, high up her thigh. "You win."

Paul stared helplessly at her exposed leg. His hand twitched and curled into a fist. He could feel the heat of her skin under his palm even though he hadn't even touched her. Something long captured inside him broke loose. He knew he couldn't stop himself from touching her, from kissing her, right here in the coffee house. He raised his eyes, knowing that when he looked into her piquant face, he would lose all control, and he couldn't wait to be free.

But instead of Kate's green eyes he saw another pair, staring sightlessly out of his memories. Horror overwhelmed him. What was he doing? He had to stop now! But now was too late. Kate's expression exploded with outrage; she mistook his expression of horror to be for the display of her glorious leg.

Apologies leaped to his lips, but he didn't have a chance to speak them. Her expression shifted from indignation to humiliation.

"Oh no, I'm sorry." She tugged furiously at her skirt's hem, then put her hands over her face. "God, how embarrassing. I didn't know."

Know what? Fear frosted Paul's heart. She couldn't know. He'd never, ever tell her.

She spread her fingers and peeked out at him. "I didn't know, Paul. I didn't know you're gay."

"But I'm not!" The words popped out at the same moment an inner voice shouted, *Stupid, stupid, be gay, be gay!* Being gay was a much better reason why he couldn't love her. Being gay was so much easier than trying to explain how every night his bones were crushed and his spirit broken, and what was left of his soul... "Wait, yes. Yes, you're right, I'm gay." He gave a decisive nod, met her eyes, and gave up any chance he might

ever have to kiss her. "I'm gay."

* * * *

The ridiculous words stabbed Kate. She dropped her hands from her face. "What?" It was bad enough seeing him look like a cat about to be thrown in a wood chipper when she flashed her leg. Now he was telling her outrageous lies. *God, I hope it's a lie.* "You're either gay or you find me repulsive, Paul. Which is it really?"

She stared at him, unflinching, ruthless, as he just sat there, mouth open like some stupid fish, hooked and gasping.

"Ummm..."

"Which is it, Paul?" Whichever option he picked, gay or just repulsed, she was going to throw the mug of black goo down his shirt and storm out.

"Umm..." He looked at his wrist, which didn't have a watch on it. "Aren't you going to be late?"

Way wrong answer. Kate reached for the mug of black goo.

"No, no, no!" Paul lunged forward and grasped her wrist. Kate's head came up, and they both froze. Her face was only inches away from his. She could see the outline of his lower lashes against his cheek, the even ridge of white teeth between his parted lips. She felt the tickle of his suddenly indrawn breath.

She'd never noticed the way Paul smelled before. Her world narrowed to the scent of Irish Spring and the hot-dryer perfume of fabric softener, the bitter tang of black goo over toothpaste. And a wisp of something more. A musky something rising up from the hollow where his collarbone met his throat. For that moment, she didn't give a damn about anyone anywhere ever finding social justice.

"Please don't be gay," Kate whispered.

He brushed his thumb over the pulse point at her wrist. Kate felt the touch enter her vein and swim through her blood. He lifted her hand and, closing his eyes, he pressed a kiss into her palm. She felt the touch of his lips echo across every nerve ending. She curled her fingers around his cheek, finding a rough spot he'd missed shaving. He moved his mouth in light, tickling kisses to her wrist, and Kate suddenly became aware that the coffee shop had gone unnaturally quiet.

"People are staring," she whispered.

Paul opened his eyes and peered around. The edges of his mouth twitched. "Perhaps this is not the most appropriate moment..."

Kate hadn't thought her heart could beat faster, but it did. No one had ever set her skin on fire by kissing her palm and her wrist. How could she have believed that this man would ever just be breakfast? "I..." She swallowed. "I like to keep my mind open about what's appropriate."

"Oh you do?" His eyebrow quirked. The index finger of his right hand brushed the inside of her knee.

The flicker of a touch sent a spasm through the muscle of her thigh. He saw it, and the quality of his smile kicked up her pulse.

"How about that? Appropriate?"

It wasn't, really. Her parents were probably peering down from heaven, scandalized that on her biggest career day, she was having serious turn-on for breakfast. But for the first time since they died, she just didn't care.

“Perfectly appropriate.”

He shifted on the sofa, using his body to block them from the sight of most of the patrons. His knee nudged slightly between hers. His fingers walked up the inside of her thigh.

“Still appropriate?” he whispered.

Kate met his eyes, touched her lower lip with her tongue. Her voice lowered. “I think you’re just being polite.”

He chuckled.

“Made you laugh.”

His fingers slid higher. Another three inches, and they could be arrested.

From Kate’s briefcase came the shrill ring-tones of her cell. Paul jerked his hand away. Kate jumped to her feet. The moment burst like a bubble. Cups clinked and voices chattered. The television blared and the cell phone rang. Kate grabbed the thing, turned her back, and answered, “Scott.”

“Kate.” The voice belonged to David Dowd, her boss. “We have a big problem.”

* * * *

Paul heard the slight quiver in her voice as she answered. Then her spine straightened and she all but shouted into her phone. “They did what?”

The anger in her voice brought Paul to his feet as well, overwhelmed with the urge to punish whoever had crossed her.

“Well did you tell her?” Kate threw up her free hand. “That’s great.” Sarcasm spiked her words. “I’m glad you saved it for me. Is it Christmas or my birthday?” A short pause. “I’ll be right there. Just ... don’t ... do ... anything. I’ll take care of it.”

Kate clicked the phone shut and muttered a stream of obscenities in a poem that had the rhythm of long practice. Then she turned to Paul. She looked like she’d just run over a baby squirrel with her car.

“This is what happens,” she said, “when you forget what’s important.” She grabbed her briefcase. “I’ve got to go. Goodbye.”

It sounded so final. “Goodbye?”

She was already halfway across the coffee shop, the red suede heels clicking decisively against the floor.

“Kate?”

The bell on the door clanged as she pulled it open. Paul grabbed her soy mocha latte and followed. “Kate!”

She didn’t stop. She opened the door of her blue Chevy, threw the briefcase onto the passenger seat. “I have to go,” she said. “I don’t have time for this.”

Paul read the conflict in her easily. Like recognized like. She had her career to keep them apart. He had his curse.

He realized that she was waiting, her hand on the open car door, her face turned away.

“You forgot your coffee,” he said, instead of *I love you, Kate Scott. I’ve loved you for the better part of the last year. And you can’t leave me now.*

She flicked a glance towards the steaming paper cup. “You drink it. I have to go. I’m sorry.”

Paul realized that she wasn’t apologizing for leaving early. She was apologizing for

letting things get out of hand. She was apologizing for the fact that she was never planning to come back. Panic jolted him. No breakfasts with Kate, no reason to stay sane.

He lifted the paper cup and drank. It tasted like scalded sugar, and it was unnaturally thick from the soymilk. But he drank it. When he took the last gulp he could stand, he knew he'd succeeded. He felt a warm wet nubbin of soymilk foam on the tip of his nose.

She was staring at him. When he moved the cup away from his mouth, a reluctant flash of a smile lit her face. "You have..." She pointed to her nose. "Foam."

He crossed his eyes to see it, and this time she laughed. He knew his eyes were pleading with her. *Don't let this end.*

Her smile faded. "I have to get to work." But she didn't move.

Neither did he. "Promise you'll be back tomorrow."

Kate stared at him. He felt her eyes moving over him as if she were running all ten fingertips over his shoulders, down his stomach. When she reached his belt, her eyes flicked away fast.

"Of course I'll be back tomorrow." Her smile trembled, and she didn't meet his eyes. "Tomorrow morning, bright and early."

Paul scooped the nubbin of soymilk foam onto the tip of his finger. He held it out to her, an offering, a dare, a pact. If she was really coming back, he knew she would just laugh at him. But if she really meant to leave forever...

Kate stretched her neck, parted her lips, and closed them around his extended finger. He felt her teeth scrape the first knuckle, her tongue curl around the fingertip. A goodbye finger-suck instead of a goodbye kiss. She pulled away, and Paul closed his hand into a fist.

"Bye, Paul." She got into the car, closed the door.

All Paul could do was stare. She was serious.

She started the engine and backed out of the parking lot without waving. Her car swirled through the coating of leaves on the road as she drove away.

I have to get her back.

Chapter Three

Getting her back just for breakfast, though, wasn't going to be enough. Now that he'd had a glimpse of paradise, he couldn't go back to purgatory. For hours he'd debated, deciding and then undeciding, then deciding again. But as his mind played over the memory loop of breakfast—the freckles on her chest, the contrast of white teeth and red lips—he knew he had no choice. He wanted his life back. He wanted to get old and, until he died, he wanted to make Kate laugh, and make her tremble when he touched her. For that, he was willing to risk the witches.

Paul navigated the Mercedes down the half-mile of wagon tracks he thought he'd never see again. The car scraped bottom and lurched as he eased around a tight curve. Tree limbs scraped at the window, as if all of nature were trying to hold him back.

Maybe the trees had a point. Here he was again, taking risks, making bad choices, just to have a woman who captivated him. But these feelings for Kate were new, different. It was more than just a hungry cock and the thrill of the chase. Wasn't it?

The wagon-track drive ended at a two-story brick house, crumbling at the edges and overgrown with the brown remains of climbing roses. Paul parked under a gnarled apple tree. No smoke drifted from the chimney on this blaze-blue October day. Cats scattered from the porch when he closed the car door. Warm sunlight pressed against him, raising the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck. He leaned against the car door and let his head fall back. He pulled the tail of his shirt from his waistband and lifted it, giving the sun more access to his skin. The breeze skittered up the plane of his stomach, and his imagination turned the cool soft touch to a warm wet one. He envisioned Kate licking her way up past his belly button. His groin tightened and he laughed with delight at the hungry sensations prowling through his nerves.

He opened his eyes. The house looked back. In one of the second-story windows, a curtain twitched back into place. The coltish rebel part of his brain stopped kicking. Paul tucked his shirt under his belt and took a deep breath. After a hundred years he'd finally fallen in love—real love. And he was dependent on the efforts of the one woman whose love he'd rejected: Laurie Donne, the coven elder.

After eight years of accusatory silence, Laurie had sent him a letter this spring. In it, she'd told him in blunt terms about the cancer and her impending death. In coy terms, she hinted about a second chance, a new plan to break the curse. He'd ignored the letter when it first arrived, but this morning changed everything.

Reluctantly, Paul moved from the bright sunshine to the shadows of the deep porch. He touched the cold doorknob, and, like a plunge into icy water, he saw Laurie in his mind's eye. Laurie with one arm draped over her hip, the other splayed against her breasts, anger and humiliation contorting her face. Laurie had seen him drive up to the house. She'd seen him expose his skin to the sun. She knew he was here, and she knew something was up. So he didn't give her a chance to keep him waiting. Without a knock, he opened the door and walked into a billow of fragrant smoke. He recognized some of the incense elements: orange for raising energy, cinnamon for opening psychic portals.

Paul breathed in the scents and tried to stitch together some kind of disguise for the new humming in his blood. He had to keep the secret of Kate deep in his heart. If Laurie

knew that he'd fallen in love, her obsessive jealousy might overcome her dying wish to set things right. Besides, it was bad enough that Laurie knew about his crimes against Alina. He didn't want her judging him for Kate.

Paul followed the incense through an arched doorway that should have led to a living room. In this house, there was no television, no sofa, no furniture at all. The floor was stripped, unpolished pine. The windows were painted over with the same white as the walls and ceiling.

Paul paused at the edge of the doorway. He saw two of the four oak pillars that marked the cardinal points of the ritual space. On the one closest to the doorway, a blue candle burned. On the one against the far wall, a yellow candle burned. He could see the bench draped in white cloth that served as a working altar. A brass incense burner smoked there. A long knife with a pommel and guard spanned the white cloth. Laurie preferred to work with a wand, not a blade, so Paul knew that Vern was working in the circle.

As expected, Vern stepped into view. His back was turned to Paul as he faced the yellow candle in the east. Skinny shoulders poked at the thin white cotton of his t-shirt. Denim covered his lanky legs. Ratty Nikes encased his feet.

"Go in peace," Vern murmured, snuffing out the yellow candle. He went to the red candle, a quarter turn around the circle. Paul moved to watch him snuff it, too. "Go in peace." When he turned to the blue candle in the west, he saw Paul.

If Vern ever grew out of his awkwardness and defensiveness, Paul knew, he would stop a few hearts. Behind the owlsh glasses, he had wide brown eyes, lavishly lashed. Vern continued his ritual, snuffing the blue candle and sending away in peace whatever he'd called to guard the west quadrant. He went to the top of the circle, where the green candle was already out, then took an exaggerated counterclockwise step. Paul's oversensitized skin felt the ripple of released energy.

Vern left the circle and leaned in the door's frame, stuttering his feet to find his new center of balance. "You're here," he said simply.

Paul couldn't decide if he heard a positive or negative spin on those two words. "You have a big new plan?" He couldn't keep an edge of out his reply.

"Laurie does." Vern didn't meet his eyes. "Laurie has a plan."

Not we. Whatever the plan was, Vern disapproved of it. Paul doubted he'd like it much either.

Vern pushed his glasses up on his nose. "She thinks she has a way to find out the demon's name."

Paul felt the demon stirring inside him, like a questing nose lifting to taste the wind. It knew that the key to breaking the curse was finding out its name. Paul couldn't tell if the thing wanted or feared it.

"How?" Paul asked. After a hundred years of searching, the demon's name remained a mystery.

Vern shook his head. "She wants to tell you herself. Come on."

He pushed through the doorway past Paul and climbed the steps that led to the second floor. "She's pretty weak today. She hasn't gotten out of bed. I took her some tea and..." Vern paused on the fifth step, realizing that Paul hadn't followed.

Kate might be enough to get him inside Laurie's house, but Paul still resisted going into her bedroom. Laurie's words, spoken in that room, still haunted him. *I did it for us,*

Paul. I did it to free you, so we could finally be together!

The small bedroom had overflowed with her humiliation, and his guilt, when he'd shouted his reply. *I don't love you, I can't love you, I wouldn't love you if I could!*

Not the best day, even in a cursed life.

"She asked you to bring me up there?" Paul asked.

Vern looked down at his sneakers.

"Did she tell you I wouldn't want to?"

He shrugged, just a twitch of his bony shoulders.

"Did she tell you why?"

"She didn't really have to. I'm not stupid. I can figure things out." Vern looked up, his eyes earnest behind the smudged lenses. "But does it really matter now?"

Now that she's dying? Paul didn't know if it still mattered. Laurie had stunned him with her audacity, each time in that bedroom. The first time she'd been thirty-five. She'd surprised him, naked, her long blonde hair unbound and brushing her hips, confessing that she'd wanted him since they'd met. He'd explained, as kindly as he could, that seeing Alina dead by her own hand because he couldn't protect her had left him impotent. Back then it had been the truth. The second time had come almost twenty years later, after Laurie's reckless attempt to break the curse left an innocent young witch dead.

Paul searched Vern's face, looking for clues. "How much has she really told you, and how much have you figured out on your own?"

Vern pushed up his glasses. "I don't care what happened between you and Laurie." With a furtive glance over his shoulder and up the stairs, he came back to stand near Paul. He dropped his voice to a whisper. "She didn't tell me about the spell with Gloria, but I found her notes. I've done more research, and I think she..."

"Hello, Paul."

Even the ravages of cancer hadn't stolen the smoke and whiskey from that voice. To Paul's awakened senses, it was like a cat's tongue on his ear.

Vern jumped away. "I was bringing him up..."

"...but he wouldn't come." Laurie stood at the top of the stairs, her head wrapped in a smoke-gray scarf that matched her smoke-gray robe. "It's alright. We can talk in the kitchen."

Laurie leaned on her cane and took one wobbling step onto the first stair. Vern raced up to wrap an arm around her, lend her his youth and strength.

Guilt rose like bile in Paul's throat. It was one thing to read in a letter that someone was dying. To see it was another thing entirely. She looked like a lightning-struck tree, still standing because it had never learned how to fall.

"I would have come up," Paul said. "You didn't have to..."

With Vern's help, Laurie's slippered feet reached the last stair. "No you wouldn't." She pushed past him. "I'm dying, Paul. I don't have time for games anymore."

Paul remembered the twitch of the second floor curtain. Nothing had changed. "If you didn't have time for games, you would have been waiting for me in the kitchen."

Vern shot him a frown over his shoulder.

Laurie shook her head. Her neck, always slender, looked too weak to keep her chin at its customary proud tilt. "Be useful," she said. "Make tea."

Be useful; Laurie's way of turning things around, reminding him that his curse was a drain upon her precious resources as she died. The idea of leaving, just leaving and not

coming back, struck like an unexpected slap. He drained the anger into the ground, squeezed past Laurie and Vern, and reached the kitchen first to obediently make tea.

By the time Laurie had managed her wobbling way down the hall, Paul had the kettle on the burner. As Vern settled her in the overstuffed chair by the breakfast nook's window, Paul spooned whole, dried leaves from a porcelain canister into the drawstring mesh bag. The leaves smelled sharp and balsamic, promising energy and a clear mind. The kettle whistled.

"Don't forget to warm the pot first," Laurie said, her tone condescending.

Paul breathed deeply, drawing in the tea's scent. No matter what Laurie's provocations, he'd keep his mind clear and his buttons unpushed. For Kate.

As Paul made the tea, Vern joined him at the kitchen's counter to slice apples and pears and the last of summer's fresh peaches. Laurie watched both of them with those stormy gray eyes, never missing anything, always managing to see things well hidden.

Nervous, he took the offensive. "So you have a plan."

Laurie smiled. A chill dripped down Paul's spine. "Pour me some tea."

Pour it yourself. He thought but didn't say. Instead, he dutifully filled the first cup. A whim of compassion made him put a thick slice of peach on the saucer. What pleasures did Laurie have in the face of her impending death other than to enjoy her control over a man who'd broken her heart? Besides, she had not noticed the luminosity of Kate around him yet. Keeping her happy kept her from prying further.

"That's some car that you're driving," Laurie said. "Very nice. Very sharp."

Paul set the teacup and peach in front of Laurie. "Have you been spying on me?" The idea made him shiver.

Laurie covered Paul's hand with hers. Her flesh felt cold, as if she were already dead. "Where did you get the car, Paul?"

Paul pulled his hand away and stood straight. The car had been delivered last year, during the relentless heat of August, with a single sentence fragment of a note... "my compliments until autumn", and signed, "Yours, Sander Wald."

"He sent it." Laurie's disdainful sneer made her feelings clear. "Am I wrong?"

When the car first arrived, Paul considered setting it on fire. But ever since the Model T, automobiles had captivated him. So he'd chosen to indulge. He fantasized about taking Kate into the city to dance and drink and eat until dawn. In his mind, he could see himself handing Kate out of the Mercedes, Kate dressed in slinky red and topped off with her impossible hair.

"How does it ride?" Laurie asked in a light, innocent tone. "How fast can you go in it?"

Paul turned away from her, and met Vern's face, full of pity. He looked away and busied himself pouring a second cup of tea.

Laurie pressed on, relentless. "Did he let you pick the color?"

"Why are you...?" The teapot's spout crashed into the cup. It tipped, sending a spray of steaming liquid across the counter. With shaking hands, Paul carefully set the pot down. "He didn't let me pick the color. He just sent it, uninvited."

"Why do you think Sander sent you a beautiful, expensive car, Paul?"

The question slid up Paul's neck like a snake. "Why does Sander do anything? He's a maniac." An immortal maniac, Paul's eternal jailor. A man who didn't know how to forgive.

Vern began mopping up spilled tea with a rag. Paul realized that he'd just been standing there, staring, as the amber liquid spread across the counter.

"Did you even ask yourself why Sander would take the time and the money to provide you with something beautiful?" Laurie asked, her tone clearly relishing the question. "Something he knew that you would value and appreciate?"

Paul made himself turn to face Laurie. "I don't wonder why he did it at all." It was the truth. He already knew why. Like Kate, it was his secret to keep.

"Sander's trying to woo you, Paul." Laurie licked her lips, as if the words tasted sweet.

Underneath Paul's heart, the demon thrashed against the bars of its prison. It was the only thing Paul felt. The moment Laurie's words traveled from her lips, through his ear and into his brain, his nerves grew a thick cotton coating.

"That's absurd." Paul heard his own voice as if from far away.

"It is inevitable," Laurie said. "I don't understand why I didn't anticipate it. Vern was the one who figured it out."

Paul looked over his shoulder at Vern, who blushed and looked down. In a voice soft with compassion, he said, "It makes sense, Paul. Sander wanted to completely control Alina."

Cold beads of sweat popped out on Paul's upper lip. His head filled with memories of his mother's harvest ball, a hundred years ago: the flinty scent of dry leaves, the flicker from the gas lights, the cool silk of Alina's harem girl costume under his fingers. He heard the echo of his own voice. *How unfair to the other slave girls. They'd stand no chance against you.*

Paul turned away from Vern and Laurie both. He found himself standing by the kitchen doorway with no awareness of having moved there.

"After a hundred years, even a man like Sander would feel loneliness," Laurie said. "Sander's idea of love is complete control over another person. Who else but you would he turn to for that?"

"Ridiculous." Paul didn't feel his tongue moving in his mouth, or his lips shaping the sounds. "Obscene."

"Truth." Laurie's tone gloated. "Sander wants you, and, if you play along and let him think he has you, he might tell you the demon's name."

The words rushed at Paul like a flock of angry crows. He ran. He heard Laurie calling after him, but he didn't bother to answer. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't catch his breath. His heart thumped unevenly. For an instant, when he threw open the back door, he thought he might pass out. Then the cotton around his nerves puffed into towering white clouds, wrapping him in a protective haze. He floated like a ghost from the porch to the car. The heat, he noticed distractedly, had gone out of the sun, and the birds had stopped singing. In the unnaturally muted world, Paul heard the hush-hush of the wind blowing and Sander's voice as if it played from a scratchy old gramophone.

Sir, you will unhand my wife this instant. And his own voice in reply: *But your wife has such lovely hands. I wouldn't chop them off for anything.*

Colors swirled around him. The Mercedes pulled out from the wagon-track drive and onto the paved rural road, kicking red, yellow, and orange leaves up into the air. The leaves spun like dancers in a waltz. He'd waltzed with Alina that night. One waltz was more than enough time to arrange a tryst. *Would you meet me in three day's time, when*

the moon will rise full? The memory of Alina's Irish lilt threatened to melt his cloud-cotton cocoon. He'll be busy with his evil things, and I can get away.

Under and around Alina's Irish lilt, Paul heard his mother's liquid French accent. *Take care, mon cher. The man has notoriety. Kicked out of some Temple or Order or something on the continent.*

Paul had offered to paint Alina's portrait. He was a talented artist, though he used his skill to capture the essence of other men's wives. Rarely did the bored, caged beauties turn down his double appeal to their vanity. But Sander had declined, citing an endless string of busy days. Paul had protested. *She is too precious not to be shared, Herr Wald. Come now. Let's strike a deal. You can have her during the day, and I'll have her at night.*

A horn blared, jerking Paul out of his memories. He found himself behind the wheel of the Mercedes, idling at an intersection. He had no idea how long he'd been sitting there. He drove the remaining few blocks to his house and pulled the Mercedes into the drive. The garden walls, both sanctuary and prison, closed around him. The small, wood frame house lay directly over the place where his mother's garden folly once stood like a huge cut amethyst set down amid the hollyhocks.

Paul put both palms flat against the rough bark of the maple tree his mother planted. When he was forty-two, the tree had seen Alina, folded tightly in a black traveling cloak, step inside the stained glass panes of the garden folly to meet him. She'd seemed hesitant, and Paul had tried to ease her.

You aren't the only unhappy wife whisked away from your home and your family.

Alina's face had turned to hard silver in the moonlight. *I've no family. Sander Wald bought me in a London brothel.* She'd unfastened her cloak. Paul remembered the metal clasp clanking against the floor. Underneath it, she was naked. Paul hadn't noticed her breasts or her hips or the line of her legs. He'd only seen the purple bruises on her chest and arms and stomach, the fading marks of fingers at her throat. *For that one waltz with you, he did this to me. You are going to help me escape him.*

What answer could there be to a statement like that?

But first, Paul Dumond, you are going to make love to me, because, for once, I want it to be something like love.

Paul had her in his arms for less than five kisses before Sander tore her away from him. He grabbed her by the hair and put a pistol barrel against Paul's forehead. Alina fought her way free, ran to the back of the folly. But once the cold metal muzzle touched Paul's skin, he didn't move until Sander ordered him to his knees. The trigger had been inches from Paul's nose, filling it with the odor of bluing and oil and gunpowder.

Alina's defiant shout echoed through Paul's head. *I'm done and through with you, Sander. Done and through!*

Sander's reply had been as cold as the metal of the gun. *You cannot be through with me until I am through with you. Which I am not. You will watch this one suffer and die, and then you will learn you can never, ever escape me.*

Shattering glass answered Sander's threat. Later Paul would know that Alina had broken one of the wine goblets he'd brought for their tryst and plunged the ragged edge into her throat. All he remembered was Sander's feral scream, and the pain as the gun smashed into his temple. The memory pain turned Paul's vision white, and he watched the rest of it unfold in the screen of his mind.

When he crawled out of the cave of his throbbing head and opened his eyes, Paul found it was still night, and he was still in the garden folly. He tried to sit up, but his hands were tied behind him and his ankles were tied together. A cloth gag stretched his mouth.

Paul turned his head and his cheek encountered something sticky. He saw Alina's body lying on the folly floor next to him. Sander crouched over it, muttering words in a language Paul didn't recognize. He painted strange symbols on Alina's naked body. It was like some sensual, teasing game, except Alina lay motionless, and Sander used her own blood as paint.

Paul pulled at his bonds, realizing that he, too, was naked. He growled past the gag. Sander didn't look up from his work. The artist's brush swirled a spiraling symbol between Alina's breasts. Paul saw her chest rise. She was still breathing, but barely.

Sander had taken the candles Paul had laid out to seduce Alina and made a circle around both their bodies. Paul rolled his head, eyes straining. Four of the candles he'd propped up on bricks so they stood higher than the others and marked the points of a cross: one at their feet, one at their head, and to the right and left of their bodies.

Apparently finished with Alina, Sander moved to Paul. He pushed Paul onto his back, resting a knee in Paul's stomach to keep him there. The brush, sticky and wet, tickled Paul's forehead.

Sander drew symbols on his throat, his palms, his stomach. The brush lingered on his penis and balls. Over Paul's heart, Sander drew a spiraling arabesque, muttering under his breath and ignoring Paul's growls and moans and jerks.

The strange ritual completed, Sander grabbed Paul by the hair. He pushed his face into Paul's. "You took everything from me. Now I will take more than everything from you."

Paul jerked at the ropes, felt the twine bite into his skin. Whatever Sander planned, he knew it would hurt badly and end in his death.

Sander let his head fall back again, retreated outside the circle of candles surrounding his bound body and Alina's still one. Taking the shards of the wine glass to the candle he'd elevated at Paul and Alina's feet, he slashed his palm and let his blood drip onto the flickering candle flame.

"Hard earth..." Sander moved counter-clockwise around the circle, pausing at each cardinal point to drip blood onto the ground. "Drowning water. Burning fire. Relentless wind. Come and do my will."

The flames jumped and flared.

Sander muttered again in a language Paul did not recognize. Almost Latin, not quite Greek. The words rocked back and forth, swaying hypnotically through guttural rhyming sounds.

Paul smelled blood in the air, a sudden coppery thickness. A snake of fear crawled down his neck, coiled around his spine. Death was one thing. He didn't know what this was.

Sander's voice rose as he recited faster and faster. He raised his hands, squeezed his slashed palms. Blood dripped down his wrists, his elbows.

The symbols painted on Alina's body began to glow. Her body bucked weakly. Then her face rolled towards Paul, her eyes open and staring. Still beautiful, even lifeless.

This is a hallucination, Paul thought. He's given me drugs.

The symbols on Alina's body caught fire, red flames flaring. Thick black smoke rolled up in a cloud and hung in the air. It began to whirl counter-clockwise over Alina's body, whirling so fast that the burning symbols went out. The force of the motion pushed the smoke into a dense ball that began to take on shape. Two arms. Two legs. A head. The smoke thickened to oil, and a pair of yellow eyes broke the surface. A pulse of light worked through it like a beating heart.

Sander's shouts stopped. His ragged breath was all Paul could hear above the frantic drumming of his own heart. Sander flicked his hands, throwing blood on the thing's inky surface. Paul felt the hot droplets hit his thighs. Lightning flickered deep inside the thing's form as it floated through the air until it hung directly over Paul.

Paul took a deep breath and prepared himself for death.

Sander intoned guttural words.

The thing rushed Paul before he could scream.

A car door slammed. Paul jerked back into the present, found himself slumped against the maple tree, his legs drawn up tight against his chest. As he watched, a tall, silver-haired man dressed in crisply creased Armani walked towards the porch. He rang the bell, and, when no one came to the door, he put his burden down on the welcome mat. It was a yawning crystal vase spilling over with white blooms that spanned the seasons: crisp tulips, ruffled carnations, throaty lilies, pouting gardenias, shy rosebuds. Attached to the basket, striking against the facets of the crystal and the tender white petals, was a small envelope of black linen bond.

The man turned on his heel and started down the porch steps. He noticed Paul then, and made a little half-bow. "Mr. Dumond?"

No one called him that anymore. He'd gone by the name Tristel for twenty years.

The man gestured at the flowers on the porch. "Compliments of Sander Wald."

Chapter Four

Diamond-hard sunshine refracted from the office's frosted windows as Kate pulled into her parking spot, burning her eyes like the tears she refused to let fall.

With one phone call, a year of her life had been rendered meaningless. She'd tiptoed around egos, kissed appropriate asses, made promises she couldn't cover—all to patch together the fragile compromise that would have allowed Shawn Harris to plead guilty to drug charges, while Kate helped her client, Ellie Harris, find the strength to testify to her husband's deeper crimes. Now, just hours before the trial was due to start, the district attorney's office had swung its political stick and shattered it all. Kate leashed the urge to shatter something herself.

Instead of strategizing and improvising a way to salvage the situation, her brain was stuck on a playback loop of breakfast. When she should have been thinking about Ellie's needs and the demands of her profession, her biggest concern was that guilt might actually keep her away from Paul, and all that he promised.

It was just a stupid kiss on the hand. Kate had been kissed on the lips in Times Square on New Year's Eve at midnight. She'd been kissed on her bare shoulder while she skinny-dipped under the moon. She'd been kissed on the tip of her toes by a much older man who'd gifted her with pearls. A kiss on the palm in a coffee shop really shouldn't rate.

The nerves in that palm pulsed like a second heart. The sunlight glared in her eyes and in the bright flash she saw Paul, his head bent just so, his lashes dark against the skin of his cheeks, as he drew her wrist past his lips and placed that one, single kiss in the center of her palm.

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. *Work. It's time for work.* She grabbed her briefcase, pushed open the squeaky driver's door, and tried to leave the kiss behind her. Paul was history. Breakfast was over. She'd let herself slip into personal indulgence and WHAM—the universe sent disaster crashing down like laser-guided meteors.

"Kate!" Her boss, David Dowd, shot out of his office just as Kate passed the reception desk. He took her elbow and steered her toward one of the conference rooms. Kate had a chance to glimpse Ellie's frizzy, bleached hair in Dowd's office.

"Did you tell her?" Kate asked.

Dowd shushed her until they were behind a closed door. "She has to testify, Kate. The DA's office is not going to negotiate this one. They're pulling the plea bargain offer."

Kate slumped into the nearest chair. "She won't testify. She's too scared."

In Kate's opinion, Ellie had every right. She'd witnessed what her husband did to his rival's daughter before killing her. Ellie didn't want anything like that to happen to her, and Kate couldn't blame her one bit.

"Without Ellie's testimony, they have no case. I made that very clear to them."

Dowd shook his grandfatherly head. "ADA Frischler isn't budging."

"Frischler." Kate said it like a curse. She ran her hands through her hair, feeling the crackle of static around her fingers. Louisa Frischler was tired of having her professional title marred by the prefix 'Assistant.' Kate could hear the commercials now: Louisa

Frischler, tough on criminals, tough on crime. Tough, too, on battered women witnesses, but she'd keep that out of the advertising copy.

"Frischler wants you and Ellie in a meeting with the DA after court today," Dowd said. "That's when they plan to take the plea agreement off the table."

"Very theatrical."

Dowd shrugged helplessly. Kate tried to feel sympathy for the man's position. If he didn't keep a good working relationship with the DA and local law enforcement, the agency wouldn't get access to the victims it helped. It wasn't his fault that ADA Frischler was using their system to victimize Ellie again. Still, he hadn't shown any courage standing up to Frischler. He hadn't even told Ellie, leaving the dirty work for Kate.

Kate stood up so suddenly that the chair fell backwards. It thudded against the industrial carpeting. "I'll call you from the city with a report."

"I know it's hard, Kate, but if Frischler is going to end up the next DA..." He left the order unspoken, but Kate heard the meaning clearly: don't blow the agency's future.

Kate nodded, not trusting that any words she spoke would come out in an acceptable, employee-to-employer tone. She retreated, leaving the chair overturned on the floor.

Kate stopped in at the ladies room, gave herself a moment to prepare. She stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror. The clothes suddenly didn't matter. She rested her forehead against the cool, silvered glass. *How am I going to tell Ellie? I've begged her to trust me, and now I have to betray her.* She could only hope that in the time since her husband had been arrested, Ellie had found some new source of strength.

Kate left the ladies room and went to Dowd's office.

"Kate." Ellie stood up, swinging her red leather shoulder bag. "Big day, right?"

The echo of Paul's words sliced through her. "Big day," she agreed, putting her hand on Ellie's arm. "But we have to leave early."

"Okay." Ellie turned around for her coat, not even asking why. She trusted Kate to take care of her. Kate's stomach threatened to eject mocha soy latte.

It was at least an hour's drive into the city, not counting whatever rush hour traffic they might encounter. Kate drove them out of Bonaventure and onto the interstate. The road had been carved right out of rolling hills and green pastureland. Under the kiss of the sun, the trees shouted red, laughed orange, sighed gold. The sky burned an unbearable blue. The last of fall's asters crowded the steep slopes on either side of the four lanes, fuzzy and flirty, purple and white.

"Such a beautiful day." Ellie tilted her head, looking out the passenger side window. "You know, I was thinking about taking some classes at the community college. Maybe accounting." She turned and gave Kate a smile. "I like numbers. You can count on them."

Kate forced herself to laugh. The spot on her palm where Paul kissed her tingled. *I do not have time for Breakfast Paul.* Ellie was counting on her. She couldn't let Ellie down.

Three quarters of the drive done, they crested a hill and were greeted with an eyeful of brake lights. Kate slowed down and took her place in line, began creeping along with the rest of the cars.

Ellie looked from the traffic to the digital clock on the console, then back to the traffic. "Nothing will go wrong if we're late, right?"

Kate glanced over at Ellie. Her eyes were on the brake lights, but she was not actually seeing them. She began twisting the turquoise ring on her left pinky finger,

around and around.

When Kate first met Ellie, in an interrogation room at the precinct, she'd been huddled on a wooden chair, folded up impossibly tight and balancing on the narrow seat. Her forehead had been pressed tightly to her bent knees, her hands clasped around her legs, and she had twisted the turquoise ring, around and around, ceaselessly.

For the first three hours, Kate communicated with Ellie entirely through the turning of that ring. Kate asked questions and judged Ellie's answers by the manner of the ring turns. *Do you need to go to the hospital?* caused no change in the rhythm of the turning. *Do you understand you aren't in trouble? Do you understand we're here to help you?* caused vicious twisting, Ellie's nails biting into her own skin. Only when the detective arrived to announce that her husband was in custody did Ellie stop twisting her ring.

Kate still woke up at night shivering with the memory of the fear in Ellie's eyes as she whispered, "He's here? He's here now?" And she had flung herself at the detective, her hands scrabbling for the gun in his shoulder holster.

Kate could not comprehend being so afraid of another human being that she wouldn't trust the police to keep her safe. But now Ellie trusted Kate, and she was about to let her down.

"How old are you, Ellie?"

Ellie frowned at the unexpected question. "What?" Her eyes came back to Kate, to the present and out of the past. "Twenty-two. How old are you?"

Kate sighed, and nosed her way into the passing lane. "Older."

The traffic eased closer to the city, as people streamed off towards their different destinations among the city's neighborhoods. Kate aimed for the heart of downtown. By the digital clock on the dash, she pulled into the parking garage at 9:42 a.m.

A little more than two hours ago, Breakfast Paul had kissed her hand. With her thumb, she rubbed the spot on her palm, and felt the warmth of his lips all over again. Two hours to go from the first step of heaven to the edge of hell.

Ellie twisted her ring and stared into a distance Kate couldn't see. "Something's wrong," Ellie said, not making it a question.

Kate rested her wrists on the steering wheel, resisted the urge to rest her head, too. "Yes."

The parking garage was dark. Ellie's body drank in the shadows, her body shrinking as the force of her will dimmed. It was as if Ellie was at sea, not in the car, and she was receding with the waves. A few miles ago, she was joking about being an accountant.

"The plea agreement isn't going to work, is it?" Ellie's voice sounded flat with fear.

"Do you want to go home?" It was Kate's job to make sure Ellie was safe, Louisa Frischler and her ambitions be damned. "I can make the right calls, have you safe before dinner." She'd opened the door to the battered women's underground three times for Ellie, even though it would probably cost Kate her job. Each time, Ellie had refused.

Kate saw Ellie roll the idea of running through in her head, and was, for a moment, sure she was going to say yes. But then she shook her head "no" once, as if the muscles in her neck and shoulders were already too tight to move easily. Without a word, without looking at Kate, she got out of the car and started toward the elevator.

Kate caught up with her, marveling at the courage. She sensed Ellie was using everything she had to keep walking forward. She gently nudged Ellie's hand with hers. Ellie's fingers closed around her own, pushing into the spot where Paul kissed her.

At that moment, Kate would have given everything, all her ambitions, all her ethics, all the work she'd done to be who she was, to be anywhere with Paul. All she wanted was to win one, just one. But she kept fighting to win things she had no power over, and she was always going to fail.

Cold from that bitter revelation, Kate held onto Ellie's hand as they stepped across the threshold of the walkway from the parking garage and into the courthouse. The grunge of the garage gave way to that well-worn bureaucratic hum that throbbed beneath the scrubbed tile and echoed in the vaulted ceilings of the old building. They were swept up in the flow toward the elevators. Motion ruled here. People streamed in and out, back and forth, waves and ebbs. And no matter who they were, all the people seemed subdued by the sheer bureaucratic crush of what the building could do to them. The elevator button for "up" already glowed, so Kate did not have to let go of Ellie's hand. An attorney, clinging to his briefcase life preserver, cocked an eyebrow at them. Kate stared him down until he looked away. A tall, skinny woman in black jeans held the hand of a little boy, who rubbed his eyes with his other hand. Kate exchanged a look with her, and they shared a moment of resignation. She and this woman were pushing uphill against a system rushing down the slope too fast to stand against. The little boy and Ellie were both about to be swept away.

The elevator dinged open. Kate put her misgivings inside, Ellie still latched to her hand. The elevator car had been restored to its art deco origins. The panel was framed in sharp silver angles, a stylized leopard ready to pounce on the lighted buttons.

The woman with the boy clicked the button for the fourth floor. The attorney was headed to three.

"Six, please," Kate said, and the attorney shot her a speculative look, because the sixth floor was criminal court.

When the woman and child got off at four, she gave Kate a tight, sad smile. Kate gave Ellie's hand a squeeze, but Ellie didn't respond. She just stared front and center, bottom lip caught in her teeth.

The elevator jerked and settled. A hollow ding, and the doors parted to frame the sculptural centerpiece of the rotunda, a marble Lady Justice, her hair perpetually frozen in a stream of unfelt wind, her sculpted gown caught forever against the lines of her stylized body, her molded arms outthrust to carry the weight of the scales.

Kate stepped from the elevator, Ellie still clutching her hand.

Talk. Reassure her. "The ADA's office is down the west hall."

Ellie slowed like a reluctant child.

"It'll be alright." Kate repeated the words, a promise that might come true if she said it over and over. "It'll be alright, Ellie. It'll be alright."

Ellie's courage rallied, and she kept up with Kate's strides. They moved past the attorneys and workers and defendants milling in the hallway, past the wide double doors of the courtrooms.

"It'll be alright."

One of the double doors opened almost on top of them. Kate skipped backwards a step, felt Ellie stumble. Their hands came loose. Kate turned to see if Ellie was still with her. Ellie's eyes went wide, and she flinched into a defensive crouch.

Kate whirled. Right in front of her, coming out of the courtroom, without handcuffs, without restraints, was Ellie's husband. He didn't seem to see Kate. His narrowed slits of

eyes were fixed on Ellie.

Ellie shrieked like a rabbit caught by a cat.

Shawn Harris lunged, and instinctively Kate put her body between him and Ellie. His fist slammed into her cheek. Kate felt a hot slice of pain and she pushed back, bringing her knee up into his soft spots. The man grunted and fell, dragging Kate down with him. Her head hit the floor hard, and the edges of her vision blurred. She felt Harris try to scramble up her body. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and clung tightly, a parody of lust. His knee ground into her side, his elbow caught her temple. Her world tilted and her grasp loosened. But strong hands pulled him from her. Light flooded her eyes and she saw the blue uniforms of bailiffs and sheriffs. Ellie was screaming, screaming. The world shivered with the force of the sound.

Kate closed her eyes. *This was supposed to be the best day of my life.* She tried to picture Paul, her hand in his, his dark lashes sweeping down against his cheek, but before she could assemble the memory, consciousness teetered, spun and fell away.

* * * *

“Will you follow my finger with your eyes, please?” The ER doctor moved his lifted index finger back and forth in front of Kate’s face.

Kate stared at him. “They did this in the ambulance. They said I was fine. No concussion.”

“Do it for me again.”

Instead of obediently following the finger, Kate crossed her eyes. The doctor heaved a sigh. “Ms. Scott...”

“There was a woman who came in on the other ambulance same time as me,” Kate broke in. “I need to know how she is.”

Ellie had still been screaming when they took her out of the courthouse, the last thing Kate heard when they loaded her into the ambulance, high and scratchy as her throat gave out. Screaming, like the long scream of a falling tree, and then, after the thunk of the ambulance doors, nothing.

“I can’t give out information on other patients, sorry.” The doctor took Kate’s chin and tilted her head to inspect the small incision on her cheek. “What happened?”

“The guy who hit me wore a great big diamond pinky ring.”

“Hmmm.” The doctor pulled apart her hospital gown to inspect her bruised side. “Do you want to file a police report?”

The ER curtain flicked open. “Of course she wants to file a police report.” Louisa Frischler stepped inside the little alcove, looking as polished and mechanical as the medical equipment. “Great news, Kate. After Harris went postal all over you, the judge revoked his bail.”

The doctor poked a spot under her breast. Kate hissed at the pain. “He wouldn’t have been granted bail if you hadn’t yanked the plea deal.”

Louisa tipped her shoulders in a shrug. The right angles of her collarbone threatened to push through her bottle bronze tan. “The judge bought his attorney’s pity-my-jerked-around-client spiel. But now we’ve got him. Ellie’s testimony will be even stronger, after he tried to attack her. We’ve got the bastard right where we want him.”

“My client isn’t willing to testify,” Kate said in her sweetest voice.

“She’s a material witness, Scott.”

Material witness. She referred to Ellie as if she were merely another legal concept, like *force majeure* or *non compos mentis*.

"Besides, I'll subpoena her."

To the doctor, Kate said, "Can you make that woman leave, please?"

The doctor turned to Louisa. "You'll have to go, miss."

Louisa flipped out her ADA credentials.

The doctor looked back at Kate, then at Louisa. "Is she a prisoner? No one told me. There are rules about that."

Louisa flashed her even, white teeth and let out a metallic ringing sound Kate assumed was a laugh. "She's not a prisoner. Unless she obstructs justice. Or helps her client to obstruct justice."

Justice would be knocking you senseless with an IV stand.

"Check with me before you leave this hospital, Scott." With a military turn, Louisa flicked the ER curtains enough to let all the sharp points of her body through.

The doctor closed Kate's gown. "Looks like all bruises, no breaks."

"Can I go?"

The doctor waved his hand distractedly. Kate took it for a yes and dressed the instant he left the curtained exam space. Streaks of blood marred the jacket's collar. She folded it over her arm and escaped.

She found an information desk and asked about Ellie, found that she'd been admitted into the psychiatric ward for observation. On the hospital elevator, she pushed the button for the seventh floor. A couple of the workers flicked her a look. The hospital elevator was bigger than the courthouse elevator, and it was ugly and modern. Nobody held Kate's hand.

The doors opened and Kate headed towards the first nurses' station.

"I'm here about Ellie Harris."

A nurse, an older woman with tired eyes, looked her over. "And you are?"

"Her advocate." Kate showed the woman her credentials, a copy of the court order appointing her.

A middle aged woman in a lab coat paused. "You're Ellie's advocate?"

"Kate Scott." She held out her hand.

"I'm Dr. Saheed." She flicked a quick look at the nurse, who returned Kate's credentials. "Walk with me?"

Kate accompanied Dr. Saheed down the sterile white hallway. "Ellie seems to think you were killed today."

Kate frowned. "She saw me get onto the ambulance; she knows I'm okay."

Dr. Saheed's smile was gentle, sad. "I'm sorry, Ms. Scott, but Ellie's too afraid to understand what really happened. She thinks you're dead, and she feels responsible. She keeps saying that she should have just run away and everyone would have been safe."

Kate felt her heart crack. "She didn't hurt me, Doctor. Can I see her? Talk to her?"

"I think that would be the best medicine we can give her right now. But," Dr. Saheed stopped and unlocked a door, "I think she should stay here overnight. At least." She waved Kate inside.

The room was small, with just a bed and one chair. Restraints dangled from the rails of the bed. Ellie sat in the chair, her knees wrapped up to her chest. She stared blankly ahead, her body rocking slightly as her fingers twisted the turquoise ring.

“Ellie?” Kate said softly.

The stare did not focus. Ellie didn’t stop rocking, didn’t stop twisting.

Kate went to her knees, put her hands on Ellie’s.

The staring eyes did not meet hers, but a tear slipped down Ellie’s cheek. “I’m so sorry, Kate. I’m so sorry.”

“No, Ellie, I’m sorry. It was my job to protect you. I screwed up.”

This brought a deep, shuddering breath, more tears. “Everything’s my fault.”

“It’s not.” Kate pressed Ellie’s hands. “You are being unbelievably brave, Ellie. I’m proud of you.”

Ellie pressed her forehead against her knees, hiding her face. Her whole body shook with sobs. Kate came up from her knees and pulled the hard knot of Ellie’s body into her arms, held her until the crying slowed. She looked at Dr. Saheed, who gave a small, sad smile, and shook her head slightly.

Kate put her hand on Ellie’s frizzy hair. “Sweetie, do you want to stay here for a day or two? Will you feel safe?”

She felt Ellie’s nod against her bruised side.

“I’ll leave my number at the desk, with Dr. Saheed. You call me anytime.” She glared at the doctor. “All you have to do is ask, and they will call me. Understand?”

Both Ellie and Dr. Saheed nodded.

“I want you to rest now, Ellie, okay?” Kate went back down on her knees, put her hands on either side of Ellie’s cheeks and waited until Ellie lifted her head. “Remember: you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Whatever you decide, Ellie, I am going to back you up and help you any way I can. We’re a team. Got it?”

The teary eyes just stared. Kate dropped her hands, and Ellie dropped her head onto her knees again.

Dr. Saheed put her hand on Kate’s shoulder. Kate got to her feet and followed the doctor out. She looked back at Ellie, saw nothing but the tight muscles in her arms and shoulders as she hugged herself into the smallest ball she could.

“We’ve given her something to help her relax. After that, we’ll make sure she gets a good night’s sleep.”

“Doctor, how long can she stay here?”

Dr. Saheed stopped at the nurse’s station, made some notations in Ellie’s chart. “Depends on how well she stabilizes. I think at least tonight, probably another day and night.”

Kate looked back at the blank white rectangle of Ellie’s door, and then into Dr. Saheed’s calm, sympathetic eyes. “Do you have a minute? Or two?”

Dr. Saheed looked at her watch and frowned.

Kate laid her hand on the doctor’s arm. “A minute.”

The doctor took her to a little waiting room with uncomfortable plastic chairs. Kate told her everything about the case, about the broken plea, about Louisa Frischler’s threat of a subpoena.

“As Ellie’s treating physician, you can tell the court that testifying would harm her too much.”

“But what about her husband? Won’t he get away?”

Kate sighed. “Probably. But that’s the DA’s problem, doctor. You and I can’t fix the justice system.” Kate leaned forward. “But we can protect Ellie.”

Dr. Saheed pulled back, clearly torn between protecting Ellie and letting her drug-dealing, rapist-murderer husband go unpunished. "I don't know if I can..."

"And we won't know if you can until you observe Ellie and make a diagnosis. I wouldn't ask you to do something that wasn't medically sound, or ask you to say something in court that wasn't absolutely true."

Kate knew it was a long shot, but if Ellie were under psychiatric treatment at least she could keep Frischler from hounding her. She could buy Ellie some precious time in a safe place to gather her courage again. Maybe she would be able to testify.

Dr. Saheed thought it over for a moment, then nodded. "As long as you respect that I have to remain neutral, and only render my opinion to a degree of medical certainty. That will mean at least four days here, and then whatever course of care is appropriate."

Kate let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "Thank you, Doctor."

Dr. Saheed walked Kate to the elevator. Kate gave her a handful of her business cards. The bell dinged; the door opened.

"As an advocate, Ms. Scott," the doctor said, "you do a very good job."

Kate felt a stab, deeper than the pain of the bruises. "Never a good enough job."

The elevator closed on the doctor's eyes, now full of sympathy for her.

She rode down with the nurses and workers and visiting families, wondering what the hell she was going to do. *Call a cab, go back to the courthouse, and get my car. Call work and tell Dowd how badly I screwed up.* She let herself sag against the elevator wall.

The doors stopped on another floor, and, before a group of nurses could get out, Louisa Frischler got on.

Oh, God. Kate shut her eyes. *Maybe if I don't see her, she won't see me.*

"Scott, just who I was looking for."

Kate opened one eye.

"How's my witness?"

Ten ... nine ... eight ... seven. "Under psychological care and evaluation."

"Good, we could use the time. Listen, Scott. We need to take the offensive."

"Personally, I think you are offensive enough."

"What?"

The elevator doors opened to the lobby. Kate aimed toward the double doors, toward freedom. Frischler trailed behind, still talking.

"I want you to do a television interview."

"I am not doing a television interview." Kate burst out of the hospital doors to find that the sun was sitting low in the sky, its light already a sleepy gold.

Louisa stuck a long hand under her jacket, extracted a cell phone a little bigger than a matchbook. "If we put you and your cut cheek on at 6:00 and 11:00, we can put pressure on Harris and his lawyer. Maybe they'll come to us, start dealing."

Kate whistled and waved her hand for a cab. "If you didn't yank the first plea, you wouldn't have to be worried about it now."

Frischler tapped the face of her cell phone. "Let me see ... who would give us the right audience?"

As the ADA scrolled through her contact list, Kate reminded herself that ripping the little phone out of Frischler's hand and shoving it down her throat would constitute, in the eyes of the law, aggravated assault.

A cab pulled up to the curb.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Her tone said that no lowly little social worker turned her back on ADA Louisa Frischler.

Kate threw her a raised eyebrow and put her hand on the cab’s door handle.

Frischler narrowed her eyes at Kate. “Your client will testify.” Frischler flicked her wrist. The phone flicked shut. “I will subpoena her.”

“Subpoenaing a rape victim.” Kate's smile would have terrified a shark. “Should look good on campaign ads.”

Frischler’s mouth puckered into a little wrinkled “O” and her eyes popped open wide. Kate got into the cab and left her standing on the curb.

Chapter Five

By the time Kate reached her exit, the sun burned above the hills and the shadows slanted long and deep. She'd called Dowd on her cell phone, gave him the bad news from a distance. Good thing—Dowd had already fielded calls from Louisa Frischler and the DA himself, stressing how crucial Ellie's testimony was and how uncooperative Kate had been. He told her to lay low for the rest of the week while he tried to calm the waters, and not to forget to fill out an accident report. Kate disconnected with the uneasy feeling that she'd just been placed on probation, and wondered if the rest of the week off would turn into something much more permanent.

A fitting ending to a horrible day. Kate drove around the statue in the town's central circle three times. At home, Vanessa and Gwen expected to hear stories of her victory. She wasn't ready to face that. She finally turned down the tree-lined avenue that led to Café Foy. She could fortify herself with coffee before publicly embracing utter failure.

A quartet of giggling high-school girls sat on the sofa at the back of the shop. No Paul. Her heart sunk even lower, brushing the tips of her toes. She couldn't deny that she'd come in looking for Paul. She'd have to settle for the solace of being in the same place where he'd kissed her palm.

"You look like life kicked the crap out of you," Dee said as Kate took a seat at the counter. "Literally."

Kate lifted her hand to the cut on her cheek. "Bad day."

"Hmmm. It started out well enough."

Kate looked over at their sofa again. "It did." She suppressed a sigh. "Does he ever come in any other time? I mean Paul?"

"Only breakfast."

She didn't know where he lived; she didn't know his telephone number. "Give me some of his stupid black goo."

"He had Café Noisette this morning. He taught me how to make it. You want that?"

Anything to make him feel closer. "Please."

Dee went off to make the coffee. Kate put her elbows on the counter and rested her chin on her laced fingers. He taught people how to make coffee the way he liked it: an autocratic habit that would have put her off, if he wasn't so damned charming about everything else.

"One Café Noisette."

Dee put the mug in front of Kate. Steam stiff with bitter caffeine and pungent orange made her close her eyes. "Black goo to me."

"He won't drink it any other way."

Kate heard the twinkling challenge in Dee's voice. She opened her eyes, lifted the mug, and took an experimental sip. "Gaaaaah! That's awful."

Dee collapsed against the counter, laughing. "This is too funny. Foreplay by java."

"It isn't foreplay." Kate's voice rose, and the giggling high schoolers giggled all the more. "It isn't," she insisted in a lower tone. "I don't have the time in my life for a complicated relationship..."

Dee cocked her eyebrow.

“...with some mystery man I see only in the mornings at Café Foy.”

Dee smirked in a remarkably good imitation of Paul.

“What the hell kind of name is that anyway? Café Foy.”

Dee gave a sniff of disdain. “Café Foy was the most famous coffee house in pre-revolutionary Paris. Camille Demoulins gave a speech about democracy in the Café Foy in July of 1789, and two days later, the Bastille fell.”

Kate stared. “What’s the Bastille?”

“Oh my Lord.” Dee rolled her eyes. “Drink your Café Noisette.”

Kate drank. “Ugh. It’s awful!”

“You know, Paul is a big buff about European history. Promise me you will find out what the Bastille is before you sleep with him.”

Kate set down her mug, hard. “I’m not going to sleep with him!”

“You’re an idiot if you don’t.”

Kate opened her mouth to start the Work Comes First refrain. But instead, her jaw snapped shut. She couldn’t lie to herself, or to Dee. If she could just zip up the time between breakfast and now in a black canvas bag and throw it out onto the interstate, she would. She wished she’d called off work when Paul kissed her hand, and spent the day finding out what it felt like when he kissed her everywhere else.

The cut on her cheek throbbed and with the pain came a rush of guilt. Kate put a five on the counter.

“Have a nice evening,” Dee said politely.

Kate turned to go. She got three steps away, then went back to the counter. Dee was waiting, her lips turned up and her eyes mocking.

“I don’t suppose you know where he lives?” Kate asked.

“On Lincoln Avenue. In that ugly little green house with the incredible old garden.”

“The one with the black iron gate, and the huge hydrangea bushes?”

“That’s the one.”

All this time, Paul had been just six blocks from her bedroom.

“Hey, what happened to your face, anyway?” Dee asked.

The question landed on Kate like an eagle on a mouse. “I ... I’m a crime victim advocate. My client ... her husband tried to go through me to get to her.” Kate touched the cut on her cheek. It was swollen. She tried to smile, make a story of it. “He wore this huge diamond pinkie ring, and he clobbered me with it. I saw stars and hit the floor, and...”

Dee stared, guilt on her face as plain as a neon sign.

“How’s your client?” She finally asked.

“My client.” Kate took a deep breath. “She’s in the psych ward.”

Dee’s face curled up in horror. “Oh, God.”

“Yeah.” Kate found she could hardly whisper. “Bad day, but it started out okay.”

* * * *

Kate parked under the maple tree in the back yard, solid with decades of growth, leaves glowing orange in the streetlights, and stared at Gwen’s rambling Victorian. Lights burned in the kitchen, candles glowed in the dining room windows. They were waiting for her.

Lincoln Avenue. If she went back onto Hilltop and followed it east, past St.

Bartholomew's orthodox church, past the big old mansion that had been converted into the personal care home, and if she turned from Hilltop onto Minniver, and kept going on Minniver past the half-built house they'd been working on all summer, Minniver would meet up with Lincoln Avenue. She would be able to see the little green house from that corner, see the hydrangea bushes behind the wrought iron gate.

No use in putting this off. Abandoning her briefcase in the back seat, she climbed the gentle grassy slope, and then the off-kilter wooden porch steps. She opened the unlocked back door and went into the utility room. She could smell pasta steam, hot tomato sauce, basil and garlic.

Kate found Gwen in the kitchen, working over the stove. "Hey," she said quietly.

"Kate!" Gwen turned from the boiling pot. When she saw Kate's face, her expression went from hello to horror. "Oh my God! What happened?"

Paul kissed me on the palm of my hand. Kate burst into tears.

* * * *

"That," Vanessa said, topping off Kate's glass of wine, "was a bad day at work." She spilled open a sleeve of Chips Ahoy onto the nicked pine surface of the coffee table. "You should eat something."

Kate huddled more tightly on the sofa and stared at the wine glimmering almost black in the candlelight. They had left the pasta in the kitchen, untasted, and moved to the living room. Her friends had listened as she told them about the yanked plea, the attack, Ellie in the psych ward. They had listened to her and cried with her. But now the crying, and the listening, was over.

"None of it was in your control, Kate." Gwen moved past the sofa, plucking the wine from the coffee table and replacing it with a steaming tea cup. Kate caught the apple-sweet whiff of chamomile.

"It's my job to keep my clients safe." The words fell from Kate's mouth like little razor-tipped guillotines, cutting off any support Gwen was trying to give her.

Gwen settled into the high-backed rocker near the window. Her rich brown hair caught the dark red glints in the wine, and she stared calmly into Kate's eyes. "Stop trying to do impossible jobs."

Vanessa, restlessly pacing the floor, let out a short, cynical stab of laughter.

Kate's voice rose to defend herself. "I'm doing the best I can to make the world better and safer."

"Did you make your world better, or safer, today?" Vanessa asked.

"It isn't supposed to be about me."

"When is it supposed to be about you, Kate?" Gwen's stare was relentless. "How much of you is going to get bruised and cut up before it *is* about you?"

Angry words rushed up Kate's throat and threw themselves against her tightly clenched teeth.

Vanessa stopped pacing and verbally pounced. "Kate, you make next to nothing, you have no time for yourself, you give everything to these ... victims." She said the word as if it tasted like vinegar and anchovies.

All the time spent and debt dug for a BA and an MA, all the years now I've worked... She refused to admit that the investment had been a bad one. She lived as she'd been taught. She did good. She helped the weak. Why did it feel so bad?

Kate pitched her voice to sound irrefutably logical and reasonable. “Look, it was one bad day, one crappy situation. Someone has to stand by Ellie for once, and not run for the door when the going gets rough.”

Vanessa and Gwen exchanged a long look. Vanessa broke it, and looked down at her bare toes. “It’s not that I don’t think helping people is a noble idea...”

Kate sighed. She loved Vanessa’s vim, her brash hold on life’s throat, her daring. She hated Vanessa’s fixation on money and status and the mirror.

“...but, honestly, Kate, what is in it for you?”

“And,” Gwen chimed in, “when was the last time you slept in on Saturday morning? Had a pedicure?”

“Had a date?” Vanessa added.

“Exactly.” Gwen pinned her with that intense stare of hers. “What about Breakfast Paul?”

Kate came off the sofa, propelled by guilt and humiliation and the distinct feeling that she was about to go off like a bomb and send Kate-shrapnel through all the windows. “How can you even bring up Breakfast Paul now? Ellie is in the psych ward. I was attacked, and, when this is over, I will probably lose my job! How can you even think about Breakfast Paul now?”

Gwen hadn’t moved, hadn’t even jumped. She rode the calm wave that always seemed to carry her. “How can I not think about him, Kate?”

The question seemed so outrageously stupid that it stopped Kate from running away and bunkering up in her bedroom.

“You gave everything today, Kate.” An edge of anger sharpened Gwen’s voice. “Don’t you see that you are entitled to take a little something for yourself, too?”

Never for yourself, Kate. The mantra of her family, spoken in unison by the remembered voices of her mother and father, tolled through her mind. She turned away from Gwen and Vanessa. “I’m going to take a shower.”

To Kate’s surprise, they let her go. She all but ran to the third floor, locked her bathroom door behind her.

Never for myself.

She turned on the spigots in the old stand-up shower, pushed down the toilet seat, and collapsed. The third floor bath had barely enough space to turn around in: just the walled shower, a cracked pedestal sink, and a wobbly commode. Downstairs, Vanessa and Gwen shared a boat-sized slipper tub and acres of well-lit vanity space.

Kate looked at the yellowed plaster and stark white facilities: no adornment, no personal touches. A monk would find it harsh.

In her mind, she heard all the important voices in her life telling her to give to others, make things better, take nothing for herself. Her parent’s marriage, conducted in brief spurts when the family’s obligations allowed them to be together, had been focused on social activism. There had only been the mission, the duty. There had never been time for anything else. Certainly not love.

Kate peeled away her borrowed clothes, eased herself under the pounding shower spray. She bent her head so the water pummeled the tight muscles in her neck and shoulders, then lathered her hair with bargain-brand shampoo, washed her skin with unscented soap. She dried with a threadbare towel and rubbed in some plain body cream. Retreating to the bedroom, she dried her hair at the carved-wood vanity that Gwen had

furnished. Everything in the room, even after a year, was still exactly as Gwen had left it. She laid the drier on the vanity, looked around. The Hudson-Bay blanket, the latch-hook rug: all of it Gwen's. She treated this room like all the other rooms she'd ever slept in: just a temporary stopping place to lay her head, nothing more.

When was the last time I did something for myself?

The answer chilled her. This morning. When Paul had kissed her hand. After that, she'd failed miserably at her work and abandoned Ellie, lost and helpless, in the mental health unit.

Without bothering with a night shirt, Kate crawled under the blankets. She stared at the ceiling as a battle raged inside her. She wanted Paul. More than anything else she'd ever wanted.

As the moonlight crested the windowsill and crept across the floor, Kate wondered if her mother and father had been dead wrong. She only asked the question in the darkest of nights, in the privacy of her own mind. Even so, she always expected the ghosts of her parents to materialize in the night and shake their fingers in shame.

I do want a pedicure. I do want to sleep in. The voice echoing in her mind was thirteen years old, a girl who did not want to go with her parents to another rally or lecture or town meeting. It was the voice of a frustrated girl who wanted to stay home and read Nancy Drew.

I do want a date. That voice was her own, in the present, right now. She looked out the window. The lopsided orb of the almost full moon stared back. It seemed to whisper in her ear, Lincoln Avenue. Six blocks.

Kate closed her eyes and put her hands over her ears.

Chapter Six

Paul smudged the thick pencil line with his fingertip, blurring the edges of Kate's curls. Watercolors would have allowed him the technique to show the blond shimmer of frizz that surrounded Kate like an aura, but he'd stopped painting in color after the curse. With pen and ink, he'd have to be happy with the smudge.

Sander wants you, and if you play along and let him think he has you, he might tell you the demon's name.

Laurie's words rolled through him, far off thunder that threatened a storm. This was his third portrait of Kate today. He'd drawn frantically through the afternoon, racing against the setting of the sun. The crystal vase of flowers sat accusingly on the kitchen table. Beside it, the black envelope from Sander lay unopened. He'd closed himself off from the threats of the world, lost himself in the smooth sound and rhythmic friction of pencil against clean white paper.

But as sunset approached he couldn't hide the awful knowledge that Laurie might be right. He hadn't told Laurie and Vern about last October, but somehow they'd guessed it.

Sander Wald had arrived in town early, while the moon had been nothing but a pale sickle in the sky. Dawn had brought Paul back from the curse in the studio, on his knees before a slashed canvas. The scent of coffee brewed with cardamom and cinnamon drew him into the kitchen, where he found Sander waiting with a new robe made of silk, black as the black linen bond envelope now lying on his table.

"Hello, Paul." The hated voice echoed through Paul's memories. "I brought you a robe."

Sander pointed; Paul unquestioningly covered his nakedness. The obedience made Sander Wald smile.

"Did you like the car?"

I wanted to set it on fire. The words had echoed in his head, but he'd only nodded, unable to speak.

"The latest technology." Paul remembered the smug tone. "I had to order it this time last year to have it ready for you."

Paul said nothing. He had said nothing but good morning and good bye to Dee for three weeks.

Sander's eyes were like the tinted windows in the Mercedes: smooth and untroubled on the surface, but Paul couldn't tell what was going on inside. "Come now, Paul. Talk to me. We have only each other."

The words made Paul feel like a huge church bell without a clapper. Remembered, they crawled under his skin like worms.

"Take lunch with me," Sander said, the smile fixed back in place.

"Thank you." He meant to say, Thank you, no. But he didn't.

They drove the new Mercedes out of Bonaventure and into the city. They lunched at an old converted train station. Chandeliers and crystal goblets. Crisp napkins and sharp-creased waiters. Endless courses. Hours of eating. At first Paul tasted nothing, just sensed the weight of the food in his mouth.

"Do you remember that hotel in Paris, after the second war?" Sander said suddenly,

and laughed. “The chef there, what was his name...”

“Jacques LeTour.” Paul’s memory supplied the name, and he obediently recited it.

The steward refilled their glasses with a gold-glintoned chardonnay. The waiter brought them a plate of cheeses. Paul hadn’t had a cheese course since fleeing Europe in the sixties and returning to Bonaventure.

“LeTour, yes, that was it.” Sander steepled his hands and looked past Paul into their unnatural, shared history. “Do you remember...” Sander smiled, and the smile warmed his iced-over voice, “...do you remember the little tarts he used to make, with the hazelnuts and the mocha ganache?”

The words and the gentle, friendly tone hit Paul like bolt of lightning, stealing his breath, squeezing his heart, and sending him tumbling back through years he should not have lived. In his mind, he saw the ballroom of the hotel and heard the laughter of men and women reunited after the war, dancing and touching hands and hair and eyes, their loneliness over and nothing but peace and prosperity in front of them. The taste of LeTour’s hazelnut mocha tarts rolled over his tongue: the creamy texture of the ganache, the buttery flakes of the pastry.

From across the table, Sander laid two fingers on Paul’s wrist. “You are the only other person who remembers that, Paul. We are the only two.”

Paul felt himself crack like an egg, tears running down his face.

Sander merely smiled.

For eleven more days, until the moon was full, Sander Wald took him to lunch. Eleven lunches. Eleven afternoons of memories, gently spoken, and soft, warm touches on his hand.

Paul had been so thirsty, he gladly drank the poison.

The morning after the ceremony, the dark sedan pulled up to collect Sander. Paul sat in the kitchen, wearing the robe that Sander had given him. Sander paused in the hallway, all sharp creases and leather gloves.

“Until next year, Paul.”

Paul counted his steps to the door. He heard the knob twist, the hinges squeak.

“Sander, wait!”

After a moment, Sander reappeared in the kitchen doorway. “Yes, Paul?”

Don’t go. Don’t leave me. He’d almost said it. Almost begged.

“Paul?” Sander prompted.

“Nothing,” Paul said.

Sander’s eyes narrowed briefly, then he smiled that poisonously nourishing smile. “Next year, perhaps,” he said, and closed the door.

Paul hadn’t reached the sink. He’d thrown up all over the kitchen floor

Three days after Sander left, he’d dragged himself to Café Foy. Kate had swept in with her preposterous hair and her mocha soy lattes and saved him.

Paul had spent the afternoon capturing Kate’s likeness again and again, to remind himself why he was going to go along with Laurie’s plan. To remind himself he had a reason to risk. And to reassure himself that he would have the strength to pretend to give in to Sander’s attentions.

A soft, tentative rapping came at his door. Paul put down his pencil. It wouldn’t be Sander—he never knocked.

Kate?

Paul stepped out of the studio and toward the front door. More shadows than light slanted through the kitchen window and into the hallway. His internal clock put sunset less than a half-hour away.

More knocking, stronger this time. How would he drive her away before? If he didn't answer...

He watched the knob turn and the door swing inward an inch or two.

I've got to start locking that...

"Paul?" A ratty Nike toe edged through the door. "Paul?"

Disappointment and relief tugged Paul's heart in different directions. He reached out and opened the door all the way. Vern jerked his foot back onto the porch, stared at Paul through his thick lenses.

"I... Can I...?"

Paul waved him inside. He closed the door, but didn't move from the hallway. None of the coven had ever approached him like this; it was Sander's magical turf.

"What's up, Vern?"

"Nothing. Nothing new, really. Umm..." Vern looked down at his Nikes, pushed up his glasses as they slid down his nose.

"Did Laurie send you?" Paul asked. "To tell me again that there's no other way?"

Vern shook his head, shifted his feet, put his hands in his pockets. "It's not that. We had an argument, me and Laurie. I don't..." He peered at Paul, his brown eyes flickering behind the thick lenses. "She's wrong, I think. Her plan. It's wrong."

Paul sighed. One moment he liked this kid, the next he wanted to slap him. "She's not wrong." Paul sat down on the bottom step of the staircase.

After a moment, Vern sat down on the staircase, too. He sat on the third step, so that when Paul turned his head, he was talking to Vern's denim-covered kneecap.

"Laurie's right about Sander, how he ... feels." So strange to talk about Sander having emotions, like loneliness and fear. For a century he'd been a monolith to Paul—no personality, just power. "Last October, before the ritual, he..." Paul swallowed at a sudden acid bite in the back of his throat. "Last October he almost broke me." He told Vern the whole story, ending with how he'd almost betrayed himself.

Vern said nothing for a while, his silence conveying shock. Then Paul felt him pat his shoulder awkwardly. "She can't expect you to do this."

Paul stood up to escape the pity. "It's not too much to ask if it will break the curse this time."

"But that's just it." Vern stood up, too. "Sander is not going to trust you enough to tell you the name of the demon this year, not before Laurie dies."

Paul didn't much care if the curse broke before Laurie died. He did care how he could keep Kate close enough to love but far enough from the truth.

Paul turned to give Vern a shrug and a small, defeated smile. "She's right, Vern. It's the only way."

"It's not." Vern's hands clenched into fists. "It's not the only way."

Paul crossed his arms over his suddenly thumping heart. "You have a better idea?"

A grin broke open Vern's face. He started pacing, gesturing, rambling. "Last time, Laurie almost had it right. She made one huge mistake. She tried to use someone else's power against Sander, when we all know Sander's had all those years to get better and stronger at magic than we could ever hope to be."

Paul stared as Vern went on, waving his arms like some mad scientist.

"The key is to use Sander's own power against him. I've figured out how. I know I can do it. Gloria..."

A tidal wave of guilt crashed down over Paul at the mention of the innocent witch, dead because of his original crime and Laurie's selfish desires. "Gloria died," he said flatly.

"She didn't have to," Vern said excitedly.

"She died for me. Nobody else is going to do that."

"It's not your choice to make, Paul." Vern drew himself up to the top of his six feet. "It's mine, and I choose..."

Paul smashed his fist into Vern's chin. He had no other outlet for the anger and fear that ignited his blood. *His choice, my ass.*

Vern rocked backwards and sagged against the closed front door. Paul caught him under the arms and held him up. He pushed his face into Vern's, staring down through Vern's crooked glasses and into his wide brown eyes.

"It's my choice, you arrogant little prick, because if you mess up *you* get to die! Do you understand?" Paul shook him. "I don't get to die. I don't have a way out of this, and I am not going on with someone else's blood on my hands." Vern's head knocked against the door. "Do you understand? Do you?"

In the sudden silence, Paul could only hear his own ragged breaths and the roar of blood in his ears. The rage drained away into the prison under his heart, to nourish the demon. He stepped back, releasing Vern.

"I'm sorry."

Vern straightened, rubbed his chin.

"I'm sorry," Paul said again. "After a hundred years you start to lose your temper a little quicker than you did before."

"It's okay." Vern adjusted his glasses on his nose. "No problem."

The forgiveness tasted bitter. For a moment he considered explaining it all to Vern.

But if Vern knew about Kate, he'd be twice as willing to throw away his life. Gloria died because Laurie had been willing to risk her because she wanted Paul. He wasn't going to risk Vern because he wanted Kate. *I won't be like Laurie. I won't become what I hate.*

The first pain of transformation suddenly twisted through him, wringing out a groan.

"Are you alright?" Vern asked.

Laughter bubbled up from the ache in Paul's chest. He turned around to face Vern, laughing and not able to stop. "Am I alright? Of course I'm not alright. Look at the goddamn sky."

Another cramp seized him. He felt muscles and tendons begin to tear. He pushed past Vern and opened the door. Red clouds streaked the horizon.

"Where are you going?"

"To the garden." For unknown reasons, the demon preferred to take over outside. Paul found it easier just to meet the change in the garden and spare the thing any extra stress. He stumbled down the stairs, followed the path. He put his back against the maple tree his mother had planted on his third birthday and slid down onto his knees.

Pressure built in his head. His ribs ached as they were pushed out. He tried to fill his lungs, but the demon squashed them.

A pair of tattered Nikes appeared on the path.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“I want to see you change. I want to see it. Maybe I...”

“No!” Paul would rather have Vern watch him defecate or masturbate. “Can’t you just give me the privacy and dignity...” Blood gushed up his throat and spilled out of his mouth, drowning the words. He fell down onto all fours, choking.

He saw the ratty Nikes stutter-step out of his field of vision. “Oh sweet Mother...”

The demon reached out through his heart and broke him open. His arms and legs gave way. He fell onto his side, then flipped onto his back as the pain arched him, his fingers scraping.

His eyes popped open wide. He saw the purpled sky and the shadows of clouds, the red blaze of the maple leaves. He felt the demon crawl out of whatever prison held it during the day, and held Paul at night. He felt it break through the surface of his skin. His sight dimmed, losing the color of the sky, of the leaves—of everything.

Freed, the demon began forcing Paul into the hole it had just escaped. His bones were being snapped and crushed, his flesh shredded—every time. The prison sucked him in. His awareness of the night, the wind, the smell of the earth, the salty taste of blood, receded. The pain receded, too; his body stopped registering pain because his body ceased to be.

His consciousness remained, though, floating through nothing, having nothing but a helpless share in the perceptions and hungers and hates of the demon.

The demon could not see color. For one hundred years, Paul’s nights held no blues or violets, just flat blacks and depthless grays. The demon registered no smells. Nights came to Paul like stale air, no crisp snow or heavy rolling rain. The demon did not eat or drink, so his nights were a prison of hunger and thirst. The demon’s form was boneless, liquid, running over itself like lava, only dark and icy cold. It did not sense through touch.

If for some reason—such as Paul’s killing him—Sander Wald could not perform the reinvestment ceremony every year, the demon would take over forever, night and day. Paul would never see color or touch or taste or drink again.

The final bar on the prison scraped into place, and the demon took complete control of Paul’s space in the universe. It looked on the black shapes of the trees and flowers, looked up at the gray squirming clouds in the sky, and then focused on Vern.

With a muffled scream, Vern pounded down the garden path. Through the demon’s ears, Paul heard a car door slam, an engine rev, then tires squeal, as Vern fled from the horror.

The demon’s fury and frustration, sorrow and hate, etched Paul like a dry wind driving sand. It shot up into the sky, boiling up from the garden, rolling over itself past the roof of the house, past the tops of the trees.

Every night, for a hundred years, it had tried to escape like this.

It ripped through clouds, shredding ice crystals and vapor, until gravity finally took it back. For an instant it hovered, straining, thinning its liquid body as it reached and reached to get away. But there was no escape. It fell back to earth, tumbling and squirming like a ball of mercury, splashing against the garden path. Exhausted, it lay there, slowly reforming.

Paul, trapped in the prison, wished he could teach it to cry.

The demon’s body coalesced again. Paul knew that it appeared basically human, like

a disembodied shadow cast by nothing. But that shape could distort and stretch and compress, a freak-show mirror image come to life.

With its form regained, the demon gathered itself and flung itself into the air again. Straining, reaching. Over and over.

It knew about the flowers, the black envelope, Laurie's plan. It knew what was coming, as it reached toward the almost full moon and fell again back down to crash against the unforgiving earth. It was doing its best to try to escape.

* * * *

The moon hovered above the eastern tree line when the demon finally gave up. It seethed with frustration, its surface boiling with it. Hand over hand, it climbed to the top of the house roof. At the apex it hunched down and sat, quivering with rage.

From his placeless, timeless prison, Paul tried to reach it. He tried to imagine his thoughts radiating out through the demon's liquid core like ripples.

Tell me your name, and I can end it.

In response, Paul felt a flood of burning sorrow wash over his consciousness, stunning him. He drifted, mind limp, despairing. Could the thing not know its own name? Did it not understand the concept of names? Or did it simply not trust him enough to share it?

Perhaps the bludgeoning sorrow came from its inability to communicate with Paul. Perhaps what Paul perceived only as raging grief was the demon screaming its name, over and over, unable to get through to him.

Whatever the reason, Paul readied himself to try again. How could he ask the question in a way that the demon might be able to respond?

It was then, through the demon's flat eyes, he saw the battered Chevy come down the street and pull up to the curb in front of the house. Both he and the demon saw Kate get out and stand on the sidewalk, looking toward the house with her arms wrapped tightly around her body. Through the demon's eyes, she looked as insubstantial, unreal, as a character in an old black-and-white movie.

What is she doing here? Even from the roof, Paul could see the sadness, the fear, on her face. She had come to his house looking for friendship, for comfort. With all his mental strength, Paul threw himself against the bars of his prison. He felt the demon ripple in response.

Kate stepped toward the house, out of the demon's sight. Paul felt it stretch and flow, rolling down the porch roof and hanging its head over the side to watch her. She was ringing the doorbell. Paul heard the 'bing bong' echo through the empty house. She waited, then pushed the button again. And again.

The demon slithered down the porch rail, thinned itself until it stretched, like a shadow cast by the moon, across the plank floor, and looked up Kate's body.

She was wrapped in a denim jacket two sizes too big. The sleeves covered her hands completely. When she reached out to ring the bell, only the tips of her fingers showed before she crossed her arms around herself again.

Through the demon's eyes, Paul looked up and into her face. She swallowed convulsively, chewed on her lower lip. Her eyes darted left and right, then rolled up as she made a little sound of distress.

The curve of her cheek was slightly puffy. Paul saw the cut, vivid in the moonlight.

Imprisoned, unable to reach her, Paul threw himself again against the force that held him.

Kate turned suddenly from the door. The demon retracted, sliding off the porch into the bushes. Kate jumped, squealing. She'd seen it out of the corner of her eye. She shivered visibly, then almost ran back to her car.

The demon gave chase, speeding after her like a snake in the desert. It squeezed under the car as Kate went around it, and slipped into the driver's door as Kate got in. It flowed under the seat into the back, where it coalesced and crouched, watching Kate's reflection in the rear view mirror.

She half-laughed, half-sobbed, leaning her forehead against the steering wheel. "God, Kate, you're so pathetic," she whispered to herself. "Running scared of shadows." She laughed again, a bitter sound.

The demon's rage cooled into a surprisingly bitter sorrow that Paul couldn't understand.

Suddenly, Kate sat up straight and wiped her cheeks. Her hand shot out to the glove box and the demon pulled back, surprised. The glove box sprang open and a hairbrush tumbled out. She rooted around, spilling hairpins and coated rubber bands onto the floor, until she extracted a little notepad with a pen attached.

The demon lengthened its neck, so that it could peek over the seat at what she wrote.

Kate put the pen to paper, but it left no mark. Furiously she scribbled in circles until the ink flowed. She tore off the marred sheet and let it fall to the floor. On the fresh sheet, she wrote *Dear Paul* and then the pen stopped. She tore off that sheet, too, and started again. *Paul*, she wrote, *Had a bad day. Stopped by. Don't forget breakfast, please. Kate.*

She read it over, then tore it from the tablet and crumpled it. Paul heard her curse under her breath, words he would have bet she hadn't known.

She began writing again. *Dear Paul*—back to endearments—*Kate came to see you tonight, because she needs you.*

She started to write furiously, the pen almost piercing the paper. *Kate has never let herself fall in love before, and now I've fallen in love with you.* She'd switched from third person to first, and although Paul couldn't see her face and didn't hear her cry, he saw a tear fall and smear the ink. *I don't want to save the world, damn it. I just want to be happy.*

With a growl, Kate tore off the sheet, crushed it in both hands and threw it over her shoulder. The demon jumped as the wad careened off the seat and bounced against its swirling skin.

"So stupid, so stupid, so stupid." Kate jammed the key into the ignition, rammed the car into gear, and sped down the street. The demon hunched down against the floorboards, leaning and flowing as the car cornered far too fast for safety. A little avalanche of hair pins tumbled from underneath the passenger's seat, along with an empty coffee cup, and the yellow stub of a parking ticket.

Kate didn't drive far before swinging a hard left and turning off the motor. Still muttering to herself, she threw open the driver's door. The demon thrust itself up and out, barely escaping before Kate slammed the door. Catching itself on a tree branch, it scrambled up into the boughs to watch Kate march through the back yard of an old Victorian house. She went in the back door. After a few moments, a light flared in a third floor window. The demon launched itself toward it, skittering up the drainpipes and clinging to the window frame.

Through the demon's eyes, Paul saw Kate in her bedroom. She'd already taken off her jacket—he could see it sprawled inside out on a bedroom chair. He couldn't hear her through the window glass, but her lips moved and her hands gestured. The expression on her face wasn't hard to read: she was angry.

The demon watched, still roiling with that strange sorrow, as Kate dropped onto the edge of the bed. She leaned her elbows on her knees and cradled her head in her hands. Paul pressed against the limits of his prison, yearning to reach out, stroke her hair, take her in his arms, anything to soothe the pain he could read in the bowed shoulders, the fingers flexing in her curls.

A long, shuddering sigh shook Kate. She lifted her head, ran her hands through her hair, and rocked to her feet. Another sigh, and she turned her back to the window. Through the demon's eyes, Paul saw the reflection of her face and upper body in the mirror above the dresser. She put a fingertip to the cut on her face. Her bitter smile, her sorrowful expression, seemed so stark in the demon's colorless vision. Kate dropped her eyes from her reflection and pulled her shirt up over her head.

If Paul had a heart, it would have stopped.

The demon leaned closer to the window pane, fascinated. Paul stared too as Kate kicked off her jeans. She reached behind her back to unhook her bra. Without color, she looked like a pencil sketch come to perfect life.

Please. Paul sent the plea out through the demon's inky being. But he wasn't sure if he was asking it to turn away, or pleading with it not to take away the sight of her.

Kate pulled her panties down, hopping as they caught on her foot, and tossed them into the pile with her bra, jeans and shirt at the foot of the bedroom chair. Paul drank in the vision of her: the curve of her calf, the length of her spine, the tendrils of curls that feathered against her shoulder blades. The mirror reflected her face, so sad, and the polished weight of her left breast. She turned to take her nightshirt from the rumpled covers, giving him her profile, soft and round, like a drawing of pencil lines and subtle shadings. Then she raised her arms and the simple long t-shirt settled down over her body.

Kate climbed under her covers, fluffed the pillows. She reached out and clicked off the bedside lamp. In the demon's black-and-white vision, Paul could see the pale smear of her face by the almost-full moon. He saw the feathers of her lashes on her cheeks when she finally closed her eyes.

The demon stayed at the window, watching her sleep. Paul watched along with it, sensing a new feeling growing in the demon. He felt its rage cooling into ashes of loss, of grief, of hopelessness.

It isn't hopeless! He sent the words out like pebbles on the surface of dark water, tossing them, skipping them, hoping to reach something that would understand.

But the demon just turned from the window and let itself drop listlessly to the ground. Like a ghost, it drifted down the street towards home.

All I need is your name. Paul abandoned language, and thought only of *name*. He thought of himself, his being, what made him Paul and had kept him Paul through the century of the curse. He thought of Kate and her Kateness. Over and over he envisioned the curve of her as she stretched up to put her arms through her nightshirt, matching the vision with the idea of Kate. *Tell me who you are. Show me who you are!*

But all he felt in reply was a dull, aching sadness, as bitter and hopeless as the rage

had been. The demon drifted back into the garden and huddled under the hydrangea bush. It looked out through the puffs of clovery petals, silvered by the last of the moonlight, and mourned something Paul could not understand, until both he and the demon felt the first stirrings of dawn. A shiver stirred the still inky surface of the demon, and Paul felt an echoing pang through his unbeing. The bars of the prison were thinning.

The demon flowed to its feet and slunk to the back door. After a few attempts—the thing never had fully grasped the idea of latches and knobs—it drifted into the house. It paused in the hallway. Through its eyes, Paul saw the black envelope on the table where he'd left it, unopened.

Paul felt a sudden sharp pain, the first thing he'd felt that was his and not the demon's since sunset. His body was reforming. Bones were coming back from wherever the curse had banished them.

The demon stopped in front of the bedroom mirror, a thing it had not done for years, for over a decade. It lifted its eyes to its own reflection. The demon's eyes were flat, yellow, without a pupil. Paul couldn't read any human expression in them. But the demon stared into its own eyes, and Paul realized it was trying to reach him.

Name! If it would only give him a hint, a clue, something. *Name, name, name, name, name, name—*

Agony speared Paul. The demon fell into a heap, its reflection lost to its own eyes and to Paul's. Shivering and squirming, the demon snaked across the bedroom floor, into the hallway. It let itself tumble down the stairs, coming to rest against the closed studio door.

Paul felt his bones again, his heart. He tasted the coppery crust of the blood he'd shed during the sunset change. It was like climbing out of a pit of tar, every morning. It took every bit of his strength. He pushed his face up through the thick blackness, his newly reformed lungs burning with the need to fill with air. He broke the surface of the demon and gasped for breath. He pulled his body free of the thing, heaving and flopping, feeling the demon draining down into him, through his eyes and ears, his nose, his mouth, his pores. Finally, finally, he lay on the floor, naked, gasping, feeling the oily residue of the demon coating his skin. The prison formed just below his heart. He felt the decisive tactile click of the bars, and he opened his eyes.

The first rays of sunlight streamed in through the kitchen window and into the hall. From inside the prison behind his heart, Paul felt the demon's inconsolable wave of fury and grief rise up like a black tide.

Paul pulled himself to his feet and stumbled up the stairs to the bathroom. He set the faucets for steaming hot and hung himself under the pounding spray. He leaned his forehead against the shower tiles and felt the water beat down his neck, down his shoulder blades.

"We can't go on like this much longer," he whispered to the demon. In response, he felt a crescendo of rage that snapped at the end with bitter helplessness. "We just can't."

He thought of Kate's body, all warm graphite lines and smudged shadows. He thought of the sadness stark on her black-and-white reflection. Reflection. He remembered the demon in the mirror, its body living ink, pulsing shadow, with flat shark's eyes. How could she accept that? How could she love that?

Apparently Sander Wald could.

Rage that was not entirely the demon's electrified Paul's exhausted body. He dried,

dressed, and took the steps two at a time. He was at the door, his hand on the knob, when the presence of the white flowers and the black envelope reached out and tapped his shoulder.

Backing up, Paul stared through the kitchen doorway. The white flowers seemed so innocent, so harmless. Beside the tender petals, the black envelope seemed to throb with threat.

Does it matter what's inside? Paul did not want to give Sander Wald any more time, any more of himself, than he had to. But he couldn't leave without opening it.

Paul picked up the envelope gingerly, as if it might sprout teeth and snap at his hand. With one finger, he picked open the wax seal, and pulled out a single slice of crisp silver-white stationary, folded over once. He unfolded it. In flowing script, in black ink, one word: *Tomorrow*.

Paul let the slip of paper fall from his hands. *Tomorrow*.

That was today. Sometime today, Sander would arrive, and Paul would have to pretend to submit.

Paul's field of vision blazed blood red. Lurching into the kitchen, he knocked over the crystal basket, tore at the flowers. The stems cracked. The petals ripped in his fingers like butterfly wings. He crushed them in his hands, under his feet.

The overwhelming perfume of the damaged petals cooled his fit of rage. The crystal basket, tipped on its side, rocked slowly back and forth, water still leaking across the table to trickle onto the floor.

Paul turned and ran out the door, threw himself behind the wheel of the Mercedes. He didn't know if he was running from Sander Wald or running to Kate, and he didn't care.

Chapter Seven

Tink.

The small sound rang through the breathless dawn. Paul stood on the frost-crunchy lawn, watching Kate's bedroom window. Would she wake up? Would the neighbors wake up and call the police? From the demon's visit last night, he was sure it was the right window. And surely after looking so exhausted and so desperate and so stricken, she wouldn't have left the comfort of her bed just yet.

He chose a slightly larger pebble from the collection in his hand, wound his arm just a little tighter, and let fly.

Tink.

He counted six deep breaths, and then tried two at once.

Tink-tink.

The windowpane whipped up. "What in the hell..." Kate leaned out, her head whipping from side to side. An unlikely and enraged Juliet with her hair flat on one side from the pillow, she glowed with color: autumn in her hair and spring in her eyes. Gone were the pencil lines and smudges of shadow, the black-and-white dullness of the demon's sight. Paul could see the flush on her cheeks, the tinge of blood running under her skin.

"Paul?"

With a guilty start, Paul dropped his arsenal of pebbles around his shoes. "Good morning." He said it as if he were accustomed to waking her at dawn by trying to break out her window glass. "Sleep well?"

At first Kate's expression remained blankly confused and then, to Paul's delight, a smile bloomed across her face. She leaned against the windowsill as the smile turned into a teasing grin. "What's so good about it?"

She didn't seem crippled with grief, so that was good. With a flourish of both hands, he indicated himself. "What's not good?"

She leaned over the window frame, pretending to inspect him. "The shoes aren't good. I don't like them."

Without a moment's pause, Paul kicked off the lovely leather loafers and stood in his stocking feet. Cold and damp attacked his toes. "Better?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I don't like the pants. And the shirt's gotta go, too."

Paul unbuttoned his jeans and untucked his shirt tail.

Laughing, she said, "Stop, stop! You can't be naked in my back yard!"

Paul rebuttoned. He would've gladly stripped on the lawn if it made her laugh. "Come down here."

"Why?"

He could see her skepticism even from three stories below. What was it that made her even more wary of love than he was? "Because if you don't, I'll continue to take off my clothes." He lifted his shirt up over his belly.

He saw her hesitate for just a fraction of a second before holding her hands to her eyes in mock horror. "Wait, wait. Meet me on the porch. Fully clothed, please." And she disappeared from the window.

By the time Paul retrieved his shoes, put his damp feet back into the leather, and climbed the stairs, Kate was already in the open doorway. The nightshirt he'd watched her put on last night hung to mid-thigh, bits of the ragged hem tickling her knees. She looked bed-warm and tousled. Paul almost took her into his arms before he remembered that he wasn't supposed to know that she'd been on his porch less than twelve hours ago.

"So how was your big day?" he asked, desperate to know what had made her come apart in tears.

Instead of telling him, she rolled her eyes and produced a wry smile. "Big day, big disaster."

Paul reached out to brush the cut on her face. Kate turned her head sharply away. She looked down, clearly embarrassed. "What happened?"

Kate shrugged. "Bad day. No big deal."

Why is she not telling me? What had changed from last night to this morning? Didn't she need him anymore? No matter, he needed her.

"Come away with me," he said. "Just for the day. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner." At least until the sun goes down.

She glanced up through her lashes. "I probably should..."

"...go get dressed, so we can go." He put a hand under her chin, lifting her face. "Unless you want to go like that."

Her lips twitched.

"I could take my pants off, too, in solidarity."

She crossed her arms, leaned in the doorframe, and gave him a long, questing look. He began to fidget. "What?"

"How did you know?"

He created what he hoped was a quizzically innocent expression.

Green laser eyes examined his face, searching for answers. "How did you know that I needed you today?"

Paul couldn't look away. His hands were at his sides, her hands crossed over her chest. Even if they were touching, he wouldn't feel this close to her. "Right before the last star faded in the sky this morning," he said softly, "it whispered your name in my ear. And that's how I knew."

The expression in her eyes softened. "That's a great line."

He smiled. "I've got lots of them." He blinked, breaking the contact between them. "Go get dressed. I'll wait."

Obediently, she turned on her heel and disappeared into the house.

Paul sucked in a cleansing breath of cool, morning air, wondering if he knew enough great lines to tell Kate the truth about himself, about the curse, about everything. Because if he was going to try to seduce the name of the demon from Sander, he would need to know that Kate's love was waiting to heal him and cleanse him afterwards.

He returned to the Mercedes, leaning on the still-warm hood for only ten minutes before the back door opened. He saw Kate dressed more casually than he'd ever seen her, in denim and a white cotton blouse. Was he ready for this? The world was coming apart, and he had to jump from the ledge of his cursed life one way or another.

As Kate half-ran through the grass, her hair bouncing in the first rays of sunlight, the demon pressed against the bars of its prison. Somehow, they had both fallen in love with her. Paul caught her as she skidded down the dewy hill. For a breathless moment, she

leaned full-length against him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Paul asked. The cut on her cheek was puckered and red. He wanted to touch it with his lips, smooth away the hurt with a kiss.

"I'm okay now."

Her eyes whispered *my hero* and her body murmured promises. Her lips parted slightly.

Paul put his hands on her waist and pushed her upright, out of his arms. Truth first. Kissing after. "Miss Kate Scott, will you run away with me for the day?"

Kate's eyes filled with conspiratorial glee. "Yes, sir, I will."

Paul nodded, not trusting himself to do anything at all with his lips and tongue.

Together they climbed inside the Mercedes.

"This car," Kate said, looking around, "is amazing."

Paul turned the key and the motor purred to life. "This car was a gift," he said, surprised at the taste of truth on his tongue, "from a man who thinks he's in love with me."

Kate tilted her head and lifted her eyebrow in a remarkably good imitation of his own expression. "How provocative. You did say you aren't..."

Paul let his eyes move over her face and body. He remembered her unclothed curves in black and white, elegant and vulnerable. He let his eyes show her exactly how he felt, and was rewarded with her blush. "I assure you, Kate, I'm not."

Paul felt his heart beat faster, saw the pulse jump in Kate's neck. Then her eyes crinkled and her lips smiled and she laughed, a sound of giddy joy. Paul laughed with her. She rested her head on the creamy leather seat, her eyes still on him as he backed out of the driveway and headed out of town, running away, just until the sun went down.

* * * *

When the last gas station marking the edge of Bonaventure fell back behind the gentle rise of a corn field gone russet and gold, Paul began his interrogation. "So, what happened yesterday?"

Kate looked away and countered with another question. "Where are we running away to?"

Keeping one hand on the wheel, Paul brushed the cut on her cheek with the other. "Kate."

She tilted her head so that for a moment his palm cupped her face, until he moved it to change gears. "Telling you about my crash-and-burn will ruin the mood."

Paul waited, driving in silence until, with a sigh, Kate started her story. "It's the case I've been working on the whole time I've lived here. Ever since I've known you. Her name is Ellie. Her husband is a point man for drug distribution from New York and Atlanta. He raped and beat a competitor's daughter to death, made Ellie watch. That was the last straw for her, I guess, because she came to the police. I had the most experience working with violent crimes, so I got assigned as her advocate."

Paul looked back and forth from her face to the tricky, winding road. It seemed so incongruous, his Kate with her impossible hair and her soy mocha lattes and the no laughing game every morning, working with rape victims and cops in big urban jungles.

"I was taking Ellie to the D.A.'s office and bam, the courtroom door opens and he's just there."

“Who’s just there?”

“Ellie’s husband.”

“The drug dealer?”

“Drug dealer and murderer, in the flesh, no restraints, nothing. He saw Ellie and just ... attacked. I pushed her back, and he tried to go through me to get to her.”

The vision of it jumped to Technicolor life in his head: Kate being struck, Kate being knocked down. The sliver of his awareness still on the road jerked him back to himself. He swerved wildly as he barely negotiated a sharp turn. Kate bounced in her seat as he straightened the wheel and then slammed on the brakes, pulling off onto gravel. He jammed the gearshift, sending them both sliding towards the dash.

Kate fell back into the buttery leather seats. “What?”

Paul turned to her, his heart thudding irregularly. “Is this right?” He cleared his throat, forced his voice to a lower, calmer register. “You put yourself in the path of a known murderer and rapist intent on doing violence?”

Paul felt Kate’s hackles go up, a wave of bristling fury spiking from her. “Listen, buster, don’t even try to feed me some macho sexist crap about...”

Paul lifted his hand and placed a finger on her lips, shaking his head slightly. When she calmed and quieted, he traced the angry red cut on her cheek. “Is this the only place he hurt you?”

A red pick-up rattled by, tossing up a flurry of gravel. They both looked towards the sound. When he looked back to Kate, she looked immediately away.

“Why do you care?”

For a moment, shocked outrage echoed through him. Of course he cared. Just because he couldn’t save Alina, just because he was a vile, cursed thing, didn’t mean he couldn’t care. The demon poked him, a reminder that Kate didn’t even know about Alina. Her outrageous question could not be aimed at his weakness. A careful study of her profile revealed she spoke from her own weakness. Her jaw clenched and unclenched, as if she were tensing for a blow.

“Kate.” He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her in the seat. “Where else did he hurt you?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Her voice sounded dull and far away. Her next words sounded memorized, recited. “You can’t hope to save another without sacrificing something of yourself.”

“Kate,” he pressed, giving her no quarter, no escape.

With a shrug, not meeting his eyes, she twisted in her seat. She slipped her jacket from her shoulder and pulled the tail of her shirt from the waistband of her jeans. She lifted the white cotton and showed him the bruises on her ribs. They looked so different, in color.

“It still hurts a little.” She quickly tucked her shirt back in. “But I’m okay.”

Their gazes hooked.

A little shyly, she added, “Thanks for asking.”

Paul looked away first. He put the Mercedes into gear and pulled back onto the road. Inside him the demon fizzed so violently with rage that he was afraid it would show on his face. His own emotional reaction to the bruises was more complex than just anger. Oh, he wanted to kill the man who’d hurt Kate so casually. But mostly he admired her courage. Admired it, and was even a little jealous of it.

“Kate.” He said the name, rolling it in his mouth like a rich, red Burgundy. He shifted gears, and dared to look at her. She watched him curiously. “I...” *I love you even more.* But he certainly couldn’t say that. He felt as if he was balancing on a sword edge of a bridge. If he could get across the bridge without falling, or cutting himself, he’d finally, after a century of waiting, be home.

“I don’t know you at all.” Her eyes flared with alarm as she misunderstood. Fear of rejection haunted her expression. He calmed her with a smile. “Introduce me.”

She smiled back, tentatively at first, and then with more confidence and trust. “Okay.” She settled back in her seat, pulled her legs up to cross them. “I was born in New Hampshire. My grandmother was a civil rights lawyer during the sixties. My mother was a hospice nurse, and my father was a doctor with the World Health Organization. He specialized in hemorrhagic fevers.”

He saw it immediately, why she wouldn’t hesitate to step in front of an enraged murderer. She probably didn’t realize she had any other options.

Kate went on, her voice sliding into a storyteller’s rhythm as he guided the Mercedes up into the countryside. She strung together memories of risks taken, battles fought. Never a story about a Christmas or a Fourth of July or a birthday. She presented her growing up as a battle plan, her life as a military unit and not as a family, right up to the moment of her parent’s sudden death.

He interrupted her. “What’s your favorite color?”

She stuttered to a stop. “What?”

He took his eyes from the road long enough to skim her with a half-smile. “Your favorite color? Your favorite ice cream flavor? Your favorite song?”

The questions raised a blush on her cheeks. “I ... I don’t...”

“If you say you don’t like ice cream, I’ll push you out of this car.”

She laughed and said with mock indignation, “I like ice cream, and you wouldn’t dare!”

“Alright then, what’s your favorite?”

He saw her cast around in her mind. “Vanilla?”

Paul barked out a laugh. Even after one hundred years without the moon, he had lived more deeply than Kate. She’d been so busy fighting battles, she hadn’t taken the time to taste and touch and see.

“Okay, smarty.” Her eyes sparkled merrily. “What about you?”

Paul sat back smugly behind the wheel. “My favorite color is the red of a good, mature Burgundy, when you hold the glass up to a candle flame. My favorite song—I have two: *The Letter Duet* from *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Everybody Hurts* by REM.” He flashed her a triumphant grin. “My favorite ice cream flavor really is vanilla.”

Kate quirked her mouth. “Very charming, but that’s not what I meant.” She turned in the seat to challenge him. “I meant what about you? Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

Paul turned his attention back to the road, and kept it there. “I’ll tell you when we get where we’re going.”

Kate made a show at peering out the window. The trees had thinned into pastures and barns, cows and sheep. “Where are we going?”

Without a conscious choice, he’d put the car on the path to Mapleton. Much younger than Bonaventure, without the weight of history, Mapleton was a fairy story town built specifically to charm away dollars from patrons of an exclusive resort and spa nearby.

“We’ll know when we get there, won’t we?” he teased.

Kate let out an exasperated sigh, made a show of falling back against her seat. Paul smiled, not only because she was so provocatively cute but also because she had been successfully deflected from her questions. He wasn’t ready to start the sordid story of his life. Not yet.

After a moment, she said, “It’s bad, isn’t it? That I don’t have a favorite color, or a favorite ice cream? You think I’m boring.”

Paul tilted his shoulders in a shrug. “Not boring. Badly educated.”

“And you’ll teach me the right way, will you?”

Paul rolled over in his mind the things he had experienced in his unnatural life, the tastes and the sensations he could share with her. For the first time, he found a reason not to hate his curse. He wagged his brows and leered at her. “Ah, and what can I teach you first?”

“You can teach me how to feel happy without guilt.” She said the words so softly that he wasn’t sure he heard her clearly.

“First off, you have to keep smiling. I don’t want to run out of jokes before lunch.”

Kate’s cheeks reddened. Apparently he wasn’t meant to hear that comment.

“Sorry.” She scrunched her fingers in her curls. “I’m not used to this ‘relax for the day’ thing. I’m used to taking charge, getting things done, being on my own.”

He couldn’t stop himself from flicking her a raised brow. She hadn’t been taking charge and getting things done last night.

She sighed. “Okay, fine. Maybe I don’t do so well on my own all the time.” Again, in that soft, confessional voice, she said, “I came looking for you last night. For help.”

And his curse had kept him from comforting her. Frustration lashed along Paul’s nerve endings. Kate, she who so rarely admitted weakness, had reached out to him and he’d been unable to hold her, to listen, to love.

“I saw you.” The words slipped out his mouth before he could stop them. “Last night.” If he couldn’t help her then, at least he could tell her the truth now.

“You what?” The words were quivering, angry cat tails.

“On my porch.” He glanced over at her, apologies in his eyes. “You were crying.”

Her outrage hit him like a slap. “Why didn’t you come out? I rang the bell and rang the bell and you just ... watched me?”

“I’m sorry. You have no idea...” He reached for her hand. Kate pulled it away. “—how sorry I am. I swear. But I couldn’t come out.”

“Why not?”

Because I was trapped inside the body of a demon. The truth snagged like barbed wire in his throat.

Suddenly Kate gasped. The air between them iced over. “You’re married.”

Paul couldn’t stop himself from laughing. “If only it were something so simple.”

“Why then?” She spat out the words, but her eyes and her flush and her shaking hands spoke volumes about the depth of her betrayal. “Why?”

Paul gripped the wheel, staring at her. His mouth moved soundlessly. He pleaded with his eyes. He just wasn’t ready to tell her. Not yet. He wasn’t ready to risk everything yet.

A white flash pulled Paul’s attention back to the road.

“Paul, look out!”

He saw fur, a tail, a collar. He pulled hard on the wheel. Brakes squealed. The car skidded to a stop, throwing them both against their safety belts.

The little white dog continued on, oblivious.

Paul deflated against the steering wheel. *This is not going well.* They sat, car skewed across the center line. Silence built like a static charge.

“Why didn’t you come out, Paul?” Kate’s voice was quiet, but stubborn. “I really needed you.”

The words clawed into him. Miles ago, he’d been her hero. Now he’d let her down, and when he told her the whole story there’d be more disappointment to come. He wasn’t ready for that truth. Not yet. Not so suddenly. Instead, he opted for a more tactical honesty.

“Kate.” He rested his cheek on the steering wheel as he looked over at her. “Have you ever been in love?”

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes flew wide. “I ... I ... I...” She crossed her arms on her chest and glowered at him. “What kind of question is that?”

“Have you?” he pressed.

“Have you?” she shot back.

Paul let his eyes linger on her, and nodded. “Once.”

Kate’s mouth snapped shut. A flush rose up her throat, and she subsided into the leather cup of her seat.

Paul put the car into gear and began rolling down the road, gathering speed. Soon he would run out of other, more pleasant truths to tell. He put his eyes on the center line, and took advantage of Kate’s steaming silence.

He turned the gentlest of corners. A wooden sign with deeply etched words welcomed them to Mapleton.

“Look,” Paul said, “we’re here.” It seemed too ironic that his final battle with the truth would happen in a little valley so quaint and perfect it looked like it was just waiting for someone to shake the snow globe and move it into Christmas.

Chapter Eight

Is he really in love with me? The thought made her feel like she'd hatched a swallow in her stomach. Now and again it would swoop, bump her heart, and send the most delicious sensation of shivers right through her.

She'd never been in love before, but she wasn't going to tell him that. He'd probably deduced it. Someone who doesn't know their own favorite flavor is someone who hasn't bothered to stop and fall in love.

Did she love Paul? She didn't know, couldn't know. She had no idea what it would feel like if she did.

He'd seen her at his house, heard her ring the bell, but couldn't come out. What did that mean, couldn't come out? Was he chained to the bed or something?

Paul took the car once around Mapleton's center: quaint storefronts and a cobblestone avenue ringing an island-like park. In the center of the park rose a massive maple tree, gone to flame with autumn's change. Paul parked and they sat in silence. Kate looked over at Paul, forced herself into brutal objectivity. Could those blue eyes be lying? Could all those expressive twitches and gestures and faces be nothing but a mask?

"If you lied to me about not being married..." *I'll break something of yours in exchange for my heart.* "If you lie to me about anything..."

"No lies," Paul said. "I promise."

"Why didn't you come out, last night?" Kate asked.

"Because I couldn't." Paul pointed through the windshield. "Look, we're here."

Kate raised her eyebrows. "I'll walk all the way back to Bonaventure. Don't think I won't."

"I'll tell you everything you need to know, Kate. But, let me tell it my way." He flicked her a shy glance. "Okay?"

Kate caught and held that glance, searching the dark shadows of his eyes. She saw fear—what could he be afraid of?—but no lies. She took a deep breath and decided to trust him. "No wife would ever have let you out of the house, looking like you did that first morning. You just don't look like the marrying kind."

Paul suddenly burst into laughter. "That would break my mother's heart to hear. I can imagine what she'd say: *Mon Dieu! I tried so hard to make him acceptable to some woman somewhere!*"

His laugh was infectious. Kate felt herself smiling. "Your mother is French?"

Paul's laugh stopped abruptly. He frowned, as if suddenly confronted with a puzzle. "My mother is dead. I haven't spoken about her in ... in a very, very long time."

In the silence that followed, Kate's stomach growled loudly.

Paul tilted an eyebrow at her. "Could you be hungry?"

No dinner last night, no breakfast yet this morning, she certainly could. Kate glanced around, saw a window full of pastries and a sign that said Baked Dreams. She pointed at the shop and then, with vaudevillian exaggeration, batted her eyelashes.

Paul's eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to bend me to your will, Kate Scott?"

A thrill ran through Kate. "*Can* I bend you to my will, Paul Tristel?"

He blinked, and all his teasing humor disappeared. "Tristel is the name I go by now.

Dumond is the name I was born with.” He seemed to shake himself internally, then pointed to the pastry shop with a thin smile. “Come on.”

Before she could formulate a question—*the name you go by now?*—Paul got out of the car. Not wanting to be left behind, she jumped out, too. Fascination and trepidation jangled dissonantly inside her. What sort of man changed his name? A retired spy? A criminal on the run? She joined him at the hood of the Mercedes, questions bubbling up on her lips.

He shook his head slightly. “Let’s get some breakfast first, and then I’ll tell you.”

Kate felt her eyebrows climb. “Will you tell me everything, or just enough to make me wonder more?”

A strange smile quirked his mouth, but that was his only answer. He took her hand and led her inside the pastry shop. A delicious cloud rolled aside Kate’s questions the moment the shop door opened. Cinnamon waltzed with sugar. Coffee jazzed the air. The little bell on the door jingled as Paul closed it behind her, his hand resting on the small of her back. The casual contact warmed her more than the promise of breakfast.

Paul bent to murmur in her ear. “Go and stake out that table,” he gestured with his chin, “there in the back, and I’ll get breakfast. No soy lattes today.”

“I like soy lattes!”

“You like vanilla ice cream, too,” he teased. “Trust me, Kate.”

She sensed he wasn’t just talking about his choice of breakfast beverage, so she didn’t argue. Her obedience earned her a raised eyebrow, but she wanted to show him she was willing to trust him.

How bad could his secret really be?

She claimed the designated table, tucked in a nook far away from any other patrons. The chairs were upholstered, the table round and painted in soothing tones of gold and green. Kate sank into one of the chairs and watched Paul order at the counter.

An elderly woman appeared to help him. Immediately Paul charmed her with a grin. When he chose to smile like that, his eyes went from inscrutable dark pits to flashing blue stars, and the usual hint of sadness lifted as his face animated with wordless communication. The woman behind the counter pulled out a tray of cream-filled puffs, and Paul waggled his hand in a show of ambivalence. She pulled another tray. He approved with a blissful expression and a tapping of his fingers over his heart.

Kate remembered how he appeared the day she’d first met him: the stiff peaks of uncombed hair, the gritty stubble on his cheek, definitely not married. He’d been more than just disheveled and unwashed. He’d seemed blurred behind a black cloud of grief and hopelessness. Whatever his secret, it wasn’t pleasant to keep.

He turned to throw her a quick smile over his shoulder.

He seemed much happier here with her. And she was happier, too. Whatever his secret, she didn’t much care. This man had rescued her heart, and she had rescued his. Was that love?

Laden with a tray of pastries and two steaming mugs, Paul approached the table.

Do I love him? The question made her go still inside. He was the crumb she’d kept herself alive on this past year, as she slogged through the motions of the life everyone else expected her to live. Did she love him, or was it just time for her to figure out if she really did like vanilla best?

Paul set the tray down on the table. “What are you thinking about so hard?” he

asked, sliding into the seat beside her.

"I..." *I was wondering if I love you.* She looked into his friendly blue eyes. "I..." She shook her head. "I was wondering what is in that mug, if not a soy latte?"

His eyebrows rose, but he didn't call her on the little lie. Instead, he put one of the steaming mugs in front of her. "A compromise. American style, *au lait*."

Kate peered dubiously into the cup. "No chocolate?"

"Keep your chocolate where it belongs." Paul dipped his finger into a tartlet with rich-looking filling, and held the finger to her lips.

Love or not, it was definitely the hots. Her eyes linked with his, Kate hooked the dot of custard with her tongue. When the creamy flavor melted in her mouth, that sensual pleasure overwhelmed her. The sexy tingle morphed into something that made her throat an erogenous zone. "Oh, wow. Is it legal to eat this for breakfast?"

Paul grinned and touched the tip of her nose with his finger. "Only when you run away for the day." He put another pastry beside her coffee mug, a flaky horn filled with a lumpier mixture Kate hoped contained cream cheese. With lifted brows and wide eyes, he asked if she approved. She smiled to tell him that he had made a good choice, with the pastry and the coffee, and with the running away. Their gazes linked and melded. Everything else melted away, running like watercolors, until there was only Paul.

I wish he would kiss me.

He blinked and looked away. "My mother was born in Paris." He said the words quickly, like pulling off a bandage. He flicked her a quick glance, and then looked down and spoke into his cup of coffee. "She was the youngest daughter of a tremendously successful merchant. Tea from China, silk from Tibet, coffee from Brazil, oak planks from America. My grandmother came from a titled family before the Revolution, so my mother had the best of both worlds: new money, old blood."

A titled family. It sounded so outlandish and old fashioned. "Are you a long lost duke or something?" she teased.

Paul did not smile. Into his coffee he said, "My mother was the youngest, the only daughter among seven sons. My grandfather doted on her, which was why I ended up here. In America."

He paused to gather his thoughts. It seemed so hard, almost painful, to tell her about who he was. "Listen, Paul, that's all ancient history. Why don't you tell me who you are now?"

A bitterly humorless smile thinned his mouth. "I would rather stick to the ancient history." He put a spin on the words she didn't understand.

"I'm sorry. I'm listening."

That earned her another shy flick of a glance, before he went on. "My mother never behaved like a dutiful youngest daughter should. She went off to school and promptly fell in love with a man who was penniless, Irish, and Anglican. They were forbidden to marry. In defiance, my mother immediately became pregnant with me. Because she was my grandfather's favorite, she was allowed to secretly marry her Irishman, have me, and we were shipped off to America."

"You never knew your father?" She could guess, the way he called him her Irishman.

Paul shook his head. "He died on the sea voyage. I was only a year old when we left France."

Kate frowned, did some quick math in her head. All along, she had assumed Paul to

be a little older than her. Certainly no older than forty. But forty years ago, the husbands of French aristocrats, even undesirable Irish husbands of exiled French aristocrats, did not die on boat trips across the Atlantic. That had gone out with Ellis Island.

"You aren't eating your breakfast."

Kate pulled herself out of her jumbled thoughts to see Paul pointing at her pastries. He stopped his story to take a bite from his, as if to encourage her. To please him, she lifted the little tartlet to her mouth. The chocolate flavor hummed like a violin across her tongue.

Her appreciation must have shown on her face, because Paul smiled—his first genuine smile since he'd started his story. "Exceptional pastries here." He indicated the elderly woman behind the counter. "She learned from her grandmother. Exceeds her grandmother's talents, in my opinion. Try the other one."

At his urging, Kate took an experimental bite of the pastry horn. The filling was cream cheese, as she'd hoped, flavored delicately with honey and warm spices, cupped inside buttery flakes as light as silk flags on the wind.

All talking stopped, so that they could focus on the delicacies. Kate even liked the coffee, rich and sharp, without the cloying sugary mocha. She was draining the last few drops, even the crumbs of her pastries consumed, when his last comment struck her squarely between the eyes.

Exceeds her grandmother's talents, in my opinion.

Kate looked over to the counter, where the elderly proprietress was counting out change. She wasn't a day under eighty. Kate returned her attention to Paul, studying his face carefully while he was preoccupied with chocolate filling. There were no tell-tale age lines around his eyes or jaw. His hair color seemed natural.

But it couldn't be.

If he had sampled that woman's grandmother's baking, he had to be older than forty. If his father had died on an immigration boat from Paris, he had to be *much* older than forty.

Paul caught her looking. His mouth full of pastry, he formed the question with lifted brows and upturned palms.

Kate asked him outright: "How old are you?"

His eyes narrowed in a strange combination of relief and bitterness. He swallowed his bite of pastry, washed it down with coffee, before answering. "I am much older than I look." He did not meet her eyes. "Are you through? This is a nice town for walking. Would you walk with me?"

Mystified, Kate just nodded. *I am much older than I look*. Was he some European movie star, surgically preserved, hiding out in their little town, chased from the spotlight by some scandal? She thought of his car. Was he some rich eccentric paying for an illegal life-extending course of treatment?

They stood up and Paul left a surprising large bill as a tip. Rich eccentric might be it. She laughed to herself. How envious Vanessa would be. Paul offered her his arm and tilted his head in invitation. She tucked her arm through his, and linked, they walked out onto the street.

The sun was halfway up the sky. A thin layer of high clouds diffused its light. Not the sharp, bright day of yesterday. Everything seemed covered in golden muslin, and the air lay heavy with the promise of rain.

“Come on.” Paul turned and started following the sidewalk that led around the circle of shop fronts. For a while they walked in silence. Kate forced herself to relax and respect the pace he’d set for his revelations. It was his secret to share, she reminded herself, his story to tell.

Besides, being with him under a gauzy sky, walking on his arm, she felt hidden and safe from her own problems, her own failures. She had not taken a day off in a year. On Paul’s arm, walking past a tobacconist shop’s masculine perfume, she could acknowledge that Vanessa and Gwen were right. It was time for a change. Today, this moment, walking in companionable silence on the arm of a man she might already love, a man she wanted to try to love, was her first step toward that change.

“I was not always this shining paragon of manhood you know now,” Paul said suddenly, his voice mocking.

Kate tried to find a nice, encouraging way to tell him she didn’t care. “Who you were doesn’t much matter, does it?”

“It helps to understand what I am,” he said in a curiously flat voice, as if they were discussing a science experiment instead of a person.

“What I am?” she echoed, and immediately wished she hadn’t. His expression grew stony, his lips press together into a frowning slash.

Kate let the topic go along with the leaves swirling on the sudden kick of wind. She squeezed his arm and said, “Let’s walk.”

She saw his shoulders relax, and he flicked a shy smile in her direction.

They made a half turn around the town’s center, pausing to look in windows and making small talk.

At an antique shop, Kate examined what she thought looked like a simple kitchen ladder back. “Wow. That’s pretty steep for a chair, don’t you think?”

“It’s from the nineteenth century.”

“Oh.” Kate looked up at him. “You know a lot about historical stuff?”

“Not by choice.”

Odd answer.

Paul led her away from the antique shop.

“Did you know that the Bastille was a prison in France?”

Paul cocked a look down at her. “Yes, I did know that.”

Kate nodded. “Me, too.”

Paul laughed, obviously mystified. He unhooked their arms and linked their hands instead.

They walked on. A breeze kicked up again, ruffling through Kate’s hair with intimacy. It was as if she had never felt the wind, until today.

They came to a window packed with hand-made chocolates. Kate leaned in and read the calligraphy label. “Double chocolate truffle with framboise cream.”

Paul made an appreciative noise deep in his throat. “That might make me rethink vanilla as my favorite flavor.”

That shop didn’t open until noon. Kate looked at her watch. Maybe, by then, she could manage something as rich-looking as that. Maybe they could share it. She conjured up a vision in her mind: a picnic blanket, a bottle of chilled champagne, Kate taking a bite of the truffle as Paul held it just a little high, so that she had to stretch to put her lips against it.

“Do you like that?”

Startled from her reverie, Kate focused and found they were standing in front a jeweler’s window. Paul was pointing at a display of estate jewelry.

“The choker,” he said. “Do you like it?”

It was a delicate braid of gold links, burnished into the deepest, richest color, each link cradling a sparkling point of a diamond. From the center hung a teardrop yellow gem, its facets winking in the display lights.

“What kind of stone is that?”

“It’s a topaz, I think.” He gave her an appraising look that raised a blush to her cheeks. “It would catch all the lights,” he took a curl between two fingers, “in your splendid hair.”

Kate turned away from the compliment. “It’s lovely.”

“Come on, I’ll buy it for you.”

The price tag was not hidden, and there were four figures before the decimal point. “Don’t be crazy.” She laughed, warmed by the compliment and the gallantry of his offer, and pulled him away from the window.

He allowed himself to be led away. “I could get it for you,” he said, after a while. “It would be an honor.”

She grinned and squeezed his hand. “It would overpower the understatement of my ensemble.”

He laughed, deep and hearty, and put his arm around her shoulders. Kate settled against him, wondering if, in his history, there had been women who would have giggled in delight and let him buy that necklace for them.

He confirmed it by saying, “I knew lots of women who would be wearing that necklace right now, in my wicked, wicked past.” The laughter drained from his voice. “Of course, they all had husbands who should have bought it for them. I specialized in brightening the lives of women with dull, unaffectionate husbands.”

“How naughty,” Kate teased, trying, again, to let him know that his wicked, wicked past meant nothing to her. Whatever secret he was hiding, whatever mistake or sin he’d committed, she really didn’t care. Not under this honey-smeared sky and the tickling gusts of wind. “You would have been good at brightening the lives of women with dull, unaffectionate husbands.”

“I was good at it, very good at it. Until at one of my mother’s ridiculous costume balls, I met a woman named Alina Wald.” His voice trembled when he said the name.

Children had assembled under the big maple tree in the middle of the park—a kindergarten class, all dressed for Halloween. Superheroes and princesses, firemen and fairies.

“What was your costume?” Kate asked.

“I wore a chain mail shirt, told everyone I was Lancelot.”

“What did she come as?”

Paul paused for several breaths, then said in a rough voice, “I can’t remember. But her husband didn’t come in costume, which was against my mother’s rules.” His lips quirked in a rueful smile. “My mother was not often denied anything. So Wald was hustled off to be given a costume that suited her.”

“And you moved in on his wife.” Kate flicked him a sideways glance. “Bored and unloved as she was.”

“I danced one waltz with her.” His hand spasmed once on Kate’s shoulder, and she wondered if he was remembering how it felt to hold this Alina woman. “She asked me to meet her, privately. In three nights time, when the moon was full.”

“And you agreed.”

“I assumed for a tryst, and agreed. I was dressed as Lancelot, for Christ’s sake, how much more obvious could it be?”

There was a ragged, desperate edge to his tone that unsettled Kate. She tried to move the story along. “Her husband came back, though, and ruined your fun?”

“He came back, yes. My mother had stuck a chicken mask on his face. He wasn’t happy about it.”

“He wasn’t happy about you dancing with his wife either?”

“He said, ‘You will unhand my wife this instant.’ And I said,” he paused. Kate saw his throat work as he swallowed. “And I said, ‘She has very lovely hands. I do not think I would chop them off for anything.’”

Kate laughed. “Very cheeky of you.”

“Well,” his voice came out oddly hoarse, “I was as cheeky as you, in those days.”

“In those days.” Kate rolled her eyes. “You sound like an old man telling stories from his porch rocker.”

A sigh shook Paul, a sigh so deep that Kate felt it echo through her own body and tap her heart. He led her to a black iron park bench, where they sat. He cradled one of her hands in both of his.

“So what happened?” Kate prompted.

“I insisted that Alina was such a charming creature that she must join my mother and me for tea the next day. Sander refused, of course, saying that her days were filled for the remainder of their stay. And to that I said, ‘Let’s strike a deal. You may have her during the day, and I’ll have her at night.’”

Kate laughed. “And you’d already planned to meet her under the full moon, you sly dog. Did she show?”

“Of course she did,” Paul sounded a little annoyed that she might think he was stood up. “They always came to meet me.”

Kate watched him, grinning. “And...?”

“Alina was more than bored and unloved. She wanted to leave her husband. I thought she meant for me, but then she showed me the bruises...”

Kate felt her smile drop, and her spirits fall like a stone right past her throat, past her heart, and into the pit of her stomach. “You helped her, right?”

For most of the story, Paul hadn’t even looked at her. Now, though, he met her gaze straight on. “I failed her. I completely failed her. Sander followed her to the garden. When I couldn’t stop Sander, she killed herself.”

Shock froze Kate’s words, her thoughts. Then compassion ignited inside her. She put her hand on Paul’s arm, wishing she could take him into her arms. But he sat stiffly, like a man waiting to take his punishment.

“I’m sorry,” Kate finally said.

“So am I.”

Paul’s head dropped. Kate watched uncertainly. He’d experienced tragedy sometime in his youth, and she felt sympathy. But none of this explained why he hadn’t left his house when she’d rung the doorbell, so obviously in need.

The wind swirled brown, red, and yellow leaves in a tide around their feet. In the park, a little girl ran after a pair of angel wings caught in the breeze and tumbling over the grass.

“Paul?”

He didn’t move.

“Paul?” She made it a hissing whisper, and he started, blinking down at her. “Is this your big secret?”

She saw his throat work as he swallowed. His lips parted, but then he just shook his head and looked away.

Kate took her hand from his, touched him under his chin, guided him until they were face to face.

“I don’t care about your secret, Paul. You’ve given me more life in one day than I’ve felt since I was thirteen. All I care about is you.”

His eyes stared into hers, eyes that she wanted to drown in forever. She brushed his lips with her thumb. So soft. It had been over a year since she’d kissed a man. She felt her body leaning towards him.

He jerked his chin from her hand and looked away. “I have to tell you everything first.”

She felt herself snap inside. “I don’t care what bank you robbed, what heart you broke, what law you broke. I don’t care.”

He dismissed her words with a roll of his shoulders. “You’re very courageous, Kate, your heart has no limits. I see that. But it isn’t so simple.”

“It is that simple!” She caught his hands in hers. “You have a big deep dark secret. I get it. So tell me, get it over with, and then let’s go somewhere and make love!”

Chapter Nine

Paul felt his eyes widen into circles of shock, even as his body enthusiastically endorsed the idea.

“Wh-wh...” Paul was stuttering. Stuttering! He took a deep breath and snapped his mouth shut.

Kate's mouth curved in a smile of cunning self-satisfaction. Tilting her head, she said, “I bet you’ve never been in the back seat of that beautiful car.”

Wrong, wrong, this is wrong, wrong, wrong. So his conscience said. Sternly. His body remained conveniently deaf to everything but the low, sexy tone of Kate’s voice. “What would you bet?”

“If you win, you can buy me that necklace. If I win, I get to kiss you.”

Paul couldn’t stop himself from chuckling at her audacity.

“Made you laugh,” Kate said.

“You win.” The words left Paul’s mouth before he could think about them. Kate smiled in a way that made his heart stumble, then gallop. She raised her eyebrows and slid slowly, slowly across the bench until her thigh rested tightly against his.

Let’s go somewhere and make love. He hadn’t touched a woman since Alina, since the shame of the curse. How could he? He’d sentenced Alina to death, damned himself forever, because he couldn’t keep his hands from Alina’s body. He hadn’t dared to lay a finger on another inch of female flesh. Not even Laurie’s, when she’d offered.

Kate lifted her head towards his. Her eyelids fluttered.

Paul’s hand struck, snake-quick, closing on the nape of her neck and holding her still.

Kate’s eyes popped open.

“Not until you know everything,” he said. She deserved to know what lived inside his body before she allowed him inside hers. His mind said that. His heart said that. His body disagreed. He controlled it, barely.

“Then tell me everything.” Her breath was warm on his face, sweet from the pastries at breakfast. “Whatever it is, it won’t change how I feel, and what I want to do.”

Paul saw no fear in her eyes. He saw desire without shame, and a willingness to give back everything she would take from him, and more. No woman had ever looked at him like that.

If I tell her everything, she’ll never look at me like this again.

His skin ached for contact, crawled with the need to be touched. A hundred years, so alone. He could just say it, explain everything, and trust her.

If I tell her, she’ll be afraid of me. She’ll hate me.

As hungry as his skin was for her touch, his heart was hungrier for her love.

“Come on,” Paul stood up, escaping the conflict of having her so close. He could almost hear his nerve endings scream with frustration.

She stood, too, cocking her hips and crossing her arms on her chest. “Where are we going now?”

He saw equal parts anticipation and trepidation in her stance. She thought he was taking her somewhere for sex. “We’re going back to Bonaventure.” He turned on his heel

and marched back to the car.

"Back to...?" She put herself in front of him. "Oh, come on, Paul, what, are you gay again now?"

Her words slapped him. She was fighting dirty and she had a free pass to do it, because he hadn't told her any of the rules. Not trusting what response he might make, he moved past her and started walking. Faster.

"Paul! This just isn't going to work..." she practically had to skip to keep pace with him... "if every time I come on to you, you freak out."

Paul fished in his pocket for the keys to the Mercedes. "You're right." She was, too. "This just isn't going to work." He couldn't tell her about Alina and the curse. He was too afraid. And if he couldn't tell her, he couldn't touch her.

His words stopped her cold. "What?"

He opened the passenger door. "Get in the car."

She crossed her arms on her chest and planted her feet. "I will not." He saw hurt peeking out from behind her stubborn anger.

"Fine, then. Call for a ride. Or walk." He got in and closed the door behind him.

Kate didn't get into the car until he actually started the engine and put it in gear. Then she threw herself into the soft leather seat.

Paul felt the emotional steam rising from her. Fine. Let her be mad. Let her go away mad. For both their sakes.

He kept his back and his emotions rigid as he drove out of Mapleton. Once, he thought he heard Kate make a small noise. Was she crying? Had he made her cry?

He put on the brakes, jerking them both as he stopped too abruptly at the intersection. Left went down the mountain and home. That's the turn he should take. Deliver Kate to home and safety, let her go away mad, let this stupid idea of a love affair die the death it deserved.

He risked a glance over to her side of the Mercedes, only to see the back of her head. She was staring out the side window, her body half turned away in rejection.

He looked straight ahead and gripped the steering wheel. Seemingly incongruous thoughts flashed like lightning through his head. Laurie dying. And the envelope in his kitchen. Tomorrow. Which was today.

Without using his blinker, he turned right instead of left.

"This isn't the way back home," Kate said, her voice icy and flat.

"No." He shifted gears. The Mercedes gathered its muscles and began climbing further up the side of the mountain.

"Do you know where we're going?"

"No." He really didn't.

Kate seemed to chew on this information for a long moment. She settled back in her seat. He could sense that her anger was still hot, but no longer scalding. She threw him a glance, and he felt it as if she reached out and ran her fingers down his arm.

"Is there some reason why you freak out when I ... bring sex into this?" She paused. "A French thing, or something?"

"No." He had wanted to soften his voice, but the syllable came out just as rigidly as the last two times. "I mean..." He paused to collect his thoughts, so he could clarify. He didn't want to add to the tension by being ambiguous. "There's no French thing."

"But there's a reason?"

He didn't say anything. What could he say? How could he tell her? *Hey, a hundred years ago this crazy magic guy put a curse on me for helping his abused wife. And now every night I turn into a demon.* She'd demand he stop the car, get out and back away slowly, dialing 911.

Frustration spiraled through him, both his and the demon's. His hands gripped the steering wheel convulsively.

Kate sighed, a sound of patience running thin.

The road wound around a curve and met two others in a Y. Paul pulled up at the stop sign, wondering which way, right or left.

Kate said, "Is it because you don't love me, and you don't sleep with people you don't love?" Her voice was small, but had the ring of courage. It was the worst reason she could think of, and she was asking it, outright.

He almost just said "no" and let her find more courage to ask if he was saying no he didn't sleep with people he didn't love, or no he didn't love her. But if he was too afraid to tell the whole truth, he could at least speak part.

He pulled out, turning right again, climbing further. He took a deep breath. "I love you, Kate. I've loved you for the better part of the past year."

She let out the breath that she'd apparently been holding. "Good." Her voice was shaky. "Because I'm pretty sure I..."

Paul raised his hand. "No. Don't say it. Not yet." It wasn't fair. She couldn't know if she loved him or not until she knew all of it, all of him.

Kate kicked the floorboards and threw her head back against the buttery leather. "Oh my God, are you going to ruin ALL the romantic moments or what?"

Guilt and shame ignited his own anger in response. "You don't know..."

"I don't care about your stupid secret, Paul Tristel or Paul Dumond or whatever the hell your name is—Bob or Bill or Pete. I just don't care!" She twisted in her seat, faced him full on, her hands waving. "If I want to tell you I love you, Buster, I will, and I don't need your damn permission. And if I say I want to sleep with you, then you should be humble and grateful and THANK ME instead of acting like I just farted in church."

"Kate..."

She jabbed his shoulder with his finger. "For your information, Mr. High and Mighty, I don't sleep with just anybody, and it's been a very long time since I found someone I wanted to sleep with, or even kiss. A very, very, very long time, so..."

The words broke across him like a slap. He didn't hear another word. A very, very, very long time, she'd had the audacity to claim. He hadn't kissed a woman in more than a hundred years.

The road did offer up an answer: a wide pull-off onto an abandoned driveway, nothing more than two weed-choked tire tracks. He swerved, throwing them both off balance. The Mercedes sank in the mud.

"What are you doing?" Kate shrieked. "Are you crazy? We're going to be stuck..."

He jammed the gearshift, spilling them both towards the dashboard. He came across the seat divider with his upper body, capturing her head in his hands. He held her still, and he kissed her. Sensations showered down on Paul, even though Kate held herself rigid in her anger and outrage and surprise. He breathed in the air she breathed out. Her mouth softened under his, softened and opened.

His hand tightened convulsively in her hair. It was like coming up for air after being

held under the water. The demon went absolutely still.

Kate's hand ran through his hair, resting at the nape of his neck. His nerves endings exploded in quivers. Her other hand splayed against his chest, her fingers flexing in the cloth of his shirt. His heart pressed out through his skin, straining toward her touch.

He willed himself to concentrate on the kiss, the liquid hot place where he stopped and Kate began. He loosened his hold in her hair, moved his hands to frame her face. He eased back and kissed her bottom lip, sucking it gently, before smearing his mouth hungrily against hers again. She kissed him back just as hard, just as hungrily, her tongue pulling him closer and closer. His body shimmered and disintegrated into pure sensation.

He put one hand around the back of her head, cupping her and holding her still. The other hand moved open-palmed down her body, skimming curves, down between her legs. He felt her tense, then she laughed softly against his lips as he fumbled with the seat release. The seat jerked back suddenly, taking her with it. She laughed again, and the sound of it danced and twirled through Paul's nerves.

"A very, very, very long time." He climbed over the gearbox, put his knees on either side of her waist. She laughed again, throaty and deep, as her arms went around his neck and he leaned into her for another kiss. "I haven't," he licked at her upper lip, "kissed anyone," he sent his tongue swirling down her arched throat, "in about one hundred years."

"Exaggeration never hurt anyone." She arched her body against him.

Paul leaned back as far as he could and took her wrists in one of his hands. He lifted them above her head, and, with his free hand, skimmed the thin cotton shirt up over her head. Kate's eyes widened a little, her lips parting to catch her breath.

"Too much?" Paul asked.

After an instant's hesitation, Kate shook her head. "No. Too much for you?"

"Yes." He stared at her, still holding her wrists. He wanted to keep her motionless, touch her everywhere, make her twist and scream and writhe. This was Kate, his Kate, under his hand, under his body, her eyes blinking too quickly, her breath coming too fast. He laid one finger against her captured wrist, and slowly, slowly, dragged the tip down the exposed inside of her arm.

Kate sucked in a sharp breath. Her eyes locked on his.

His finger swirled in the crook of her elbow, moved into the hollow of her underarm.

Her body squirmed just a little, but her eyes stayed steady, challenging him.

His finger stopped when it met the lacy top of her bra. He couldn't keep his eyes away. He had to look down and marvel at the sight of his fingertip brushing slowly along the lace, over the rise of her left breast, down into the valley between them. He watched the outline of her nipple swell against the white cotton cup.

With a sound that wasn't entirely human, he fell on her, grinding his mouth against hers, his body against hers.

Suddenly she winced and groaned—in pain, not pleasure. He jerked back.

"The bruises," she whispered.

Paul looked down. His knee had abraded into the tender blue spots above her ribs.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll be..."

Kate rolled her head and reached for him. "I don't care." She rose up from the seat, arching her body against him. "I don't care."

He knew she wasn't just talking about the pain.

One hand tangled in his hair, asking for more kisses. The other began fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. The sensation captivated him, the way her hands were shaking. Then she caught his lower lip in her teeth, demanding his attention there. He braced his hands on the seat and touched her only with his mouth. She used two hands on the buttons of his shirt, pulling it loose from his belt. He felt the brush of her fingers on his stomach, felt the muscles contract, felt his hips push against her. He couldn't stop it.

She flicked the last button and pushed the shirt open on his chest. She lifted her body and he lowered his. Skin on skin. His nerves flared. His skin melted. He couldn't tell where she began and he ended. He kissed her and it was like falling into water, like drowning. Her fingers began to ease the tongue of his belt from the buckle, and he lifted his hips, pressing his erection against her hand, desperate to be touched, to be loved again.

Her cell phone rang.

"No!" The sound ripped from her.

The insistent buzzing cleared Paul's brain. What was he doing? He couldn't do this.

"Throw the damn thing out the window." Kate's hands ran up his stomach, his chest, to cup his face in a plea. "Please."

He tried to make his heart slow, his breath come normally. He shook his head, leaned over her body—her sweet, willing, loving body—to feel around for the squalling little device in her purse.

He felt her arms fall to her sides, felt the whisper of air against his shoulder as she sighed. "If it's not my stocking, it's my hair. If it's not my hair, it's the car breaking down. If it's not the car breaking down, the world is about to be smashed by a meteor."

Paul leaned his back against the dash, and handed her the cell phone.

She took it, flipped it open. "Kate Scott." Her voice was still hoarse. The passion drained abruptly from her face, and she scooted up straight in the seat. "Ellie?" She listened, her brows drawing down into a frown. "Hold on, hold on. You're not at the hospital? When did you leave?" A pause. "I was probably out of range. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry." Kate's voice talked over the voice in the cell phone. "It's okay, Ellie. It will be okay. It's your choice. I told you that, and I'll back you." Another pause. Unconsciously, Kate nodded her head, validating and encouraging even though it couldn't be seen. "Listen, Ellie, listen. Can you get to the office? I can meet you there in two hours. You'll be safe, and we can talk about your options. There are shelters you can go to, they will never find you. I promise." Another pause, longer. "I promise," Kate said again, in a voice that Paul would believe anytime, anywhere. "Two hours. At the office. I promise."

She clicked the phone off and looked up at Paul. Her lip quivered, and her eyes filled up with tears. "I have to..."

He laid a finger against her beautiful, perfect lips. "Do you want me to take you straight to your office?"

A tear slipped out over her lashes. "Home first. I'll need my car."

He leaned down to kiss away the tear, but she turned her head and wiped it away herself. "I can't. I have to get it back together."

Wordlessly, Paul eased himself back over the gearshift and into the driver's seat. He reached into the back seat, picked up Kate's shirt and offered it to her. She took it without meeting his eyes and shrugged it over her head immediately.

"I'm sorry," she whispered when she was dressed again. "We have to hurry."

With his own shirt still unbuttoned and open, Paul spun the Mercedes out of the mud and onto the road.

Kate made another call on her cell phone. "Dowd, it's Kate. The hospital called you? Great. Look, I told her to meet me there in two hours. Just hold her until I get there. Don't let Frischler know she's there. She doesn't want to testify. She wants to disappear." Kate listened for a moment, her mouth coming open by degrees. "Since when do we care about the DA's case? If she doesn't want to testify, I'm not going to do anything but help her stay out of that witness box." Another pause. "In two hours, maybe less. Just keep her there." She closed the phone with a muttered curse.

Paul focused his attention on driving as quickly as he could down the winding mountain road. He tried to ignore that his skin still danced with the electricity of Kate's touch, that his lips were still warm and tingling, that under his belt he was as eager and desperate and hard as he had ever been. His body and soul and heart felt stretched on a rack, quivering, straining, helpless. The demon wails rippled through his blood.

Kate didn't speak. She took a brush from her purse and began dragging it through her tousled curls. Paul could see the self-recriminations, the guilt, written plainly on her face. She blamed herself for indulging while someone was counting on her. He put his eyes on the road again and drove a little faster.

When Bonaventure came into sight, Paul was suddenly gripped by the sense of no time, no time, he had run out of time. The black envelope, Laurie dying, and the sun hung so low in the sky.

"Kate."

She jumped a little; they had been silent for so long.

The car came to the first stop sign. Kate's house was just six blocks away.

"Listen, can you meet me?" Another stop sign, a left turn. "Can you meet me in your backyard, there, by that big tree? At dawn?"

She threw him a startled look. "At dawn?"

He nodded. "I'll explain everything then. I guarantee it." Showing her was the only way he could make her understand. Make her believe. "Will you?"

She looked at the cell phone in her hand. "If I can. I don't ... there's no way to know how long I'm going to be tied up. Wait. No." She straightened her spine. "Yes, I'll meet you. Under the big tree. At dawn." She looked over at him, her green eyes steady. "I promise."

It was that same tone, and he believed her.

He pulled up into her drive. She already had her purse balanced on her knees. "If I kiss you goodbye I won't be able to get out of this car, until..." She couldn't even look at him.

"At dawn." He pointed out the windshield. "Right here. The big tree."

Kate nodded, reached across the gearshift to grip his arm. Love and need and confusion and frustration went up between them like lit gunpowder. She jerked back as if burned, then hopped out of his car and into hers.

Her little blue Chevy whipped from the lot, squealed away while he sat, the Mercedes idling, frozen with the audacity of what he would do, come dawn.

Chapter Ten

Paul sat behind the wheel of the Mercedes as it idled at the curb opposite his house. Kate was gone, lost to him until dawn. And when she saw what sunrise did to him ... well, it was better than what sunset did to him. Even so, Paul feared she would run screaming out of his life forever. And now the basement light was on. The barely discernible flicker crept like a spider down the back of his neck. Only one person ever went into the basement, and only at one time during the year. Sander.

Paul pressed his forehead against the warm leather cover of the steering wheel. The engine's purr vibrated through his skull. "I can't do this."

What was left of his life had depended completely on Sander for a hundred years, longer than people knew their parents or lived with their spouses. He hated Sander. The emotion was like acid at the back of his throat, like broken glass under his skin. It was the one reliable truth of his cursed existence.

This year, right now, he had to go inside and pretend that the acid of his hate had transformed into submissive milk. And his hard-on for Kate still hadn't subsided.

"Shit." His voice sounded hoarse—half with anguish, he thought, and half with left-over excitement. "Shit!"

Damn Alina anyway. He couldn't retreat by cutting his own throat. The unforgiving mechanics of the curse made his body vulnerable only to violence from Sander and Sander vulnerable only to violence from him. In the heat of the Provencal summer of '52, he'd put the muzzle of a .45 against his temple and tested it. He'd laid on his apartment floor for days, feeling the itch as his skull regrew around the bullet hole. Suicide was not an out. And if he killed Sander, the demon would overwhelm him, and he'd be trapped inside that black-and-white prison forever.

The demon sent him a bolstering shot of rage. Paul clenched his eyes shut and dug his fingernails into the leather of the steering wheel cover. The demon strafed his nerves with more anger, this time edged with desperation.

It wasn't just for himself he had to try this. He had to be the man who made Kate happy, who made her realize that life was a dance and not a military march. If he didn't pretend to submit to Sander and get the demon's name, Vern might go ahead and throw his life down at Paul's feet, along with Gloria's and Alina's. And whatever that thing was locked up inside him, and whatever it was that locked him up inside it every night, deserved to be free as well. He could free them all, even Sander, if he could just learn the demon's name.

Paul lifted his head and took a long, gulping breath. He could still taste the lingering presence of Kate in the air. His lips remembered the vibrations of her laughter as he'd kissed his way down her throat. The flesh of his stomach contracted under the remembered feather sweep of her palms.

He looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror. His skin glowed with a flush of excitement. His lips parted and touched and parted again in their need to kiss or be kissed. And behind the fly of his jeans, he remained eager and hard. It had been too long. He couldn't call his body to heel.

Paul dragged his fingers through his hair. *Alright then. Let Sander think I look this*

way for him.

He put the Mercedes in gear, pulled back onto the street, and eased into the driveway. His hands shook when he turned off the ignition, sending his key ring rattling against the steering column.

“Shit.”

Propelled by the demon’s rage, he managed to move himself out of the car, up the stairs and through the front door. Immediately Paul scented his enemy: a musky, sophisticated cologne.

I have to do this. For Vern. For the demon. For Kate.

“Sander!” He hated the taste of that name in his mouth.

Paul heard the soft tread of footsteps rising from the basement. Smoothly oiled locks clicked like claws across glass. The basement door opened, and out of the darkness stepped Sander Wald.

“Paul.” He smoothed non-existent wrinkles from his gray silk shirt. Silver glittered at the cuffs. He smiled, breaking the smooth mask of his face. “It’s so nice to see you.”

Every year, Sander’s smallness shocked Paul. In his mind, Sander loomed like a shadow in a funhouse mirror. In person, he was like wheat, thin and flimsy and topped with gold.

“I brought some wine.” Sander locked the basement door behind him, then held out his arm to invite Paul into the kitchen.

Paul crossed into the kitchen, feeling Sander at his back like an executioner’s axe. In the center of the table stood a bottle and two matched goblets. Around them, carefully arranged, were the remnants of the flowers, the white petals gone to brown and curled up at the edges.

So much for looking submissive. Paul swallowed a bitter laugh.

“You didn’t like my flowers, I see,” Sander said, sliding past him to sit at the opposite side of the table.

“Why did you send them?” Paul asked, managing to allow honest curiosity to cover up his disgust.

“Sit down. I’ll pour.”

Paul remained on his feet, waiting for an answer. Any sudden show of submission now wouldn’t ring true. “Why did you send them?” he said, putting a faint echo of belligerence in his voice.

Sander sighed. His fingers sifted through the ruined petals. “It was meant to be a sign of a truce, Paul.”

Paul barked out a disdainful laugh.

Sander shot to his feet. The chair legs scraped against the floor.

Paul took an involuntary step back. He saw a light gleam in Sander’s eyes. He liked fear, and Paul didn’t have to pretend to be afraid. Humiliation flooded through him, and the light in Sander’s eyes burned brighter.

Maybe he has broken me after all. Fear wailed through him. The demon infused him with angry strength. Paul flung a mental arm into his memories and drew Kate out to stand beside him.

“A truce?” His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat.

Sander smiled, gentle again. “Sit with me, Paul. Drink with me.” He sat, and tilted the bottle for Paul’s inspection. “Meo-Camuzet’s Vosne-Romanee Les Chaumes 2001.”

A very good Burgundy. Paul's current favorite.

With his feet, Sander kicked the chair out from under the table towards Paul. Paul jumped, and Sander showed more teeth. "Sit."

Paul sat.

Sander filled the two goblets. The wine danced with deep red shadows as he held out the glass.

"Drink."

Paul took the goblet. He forced himself to let his fingers brush Sander's in the exchange. A horrible flurry of sensation danced through his palm and up his wrist. His erection refused to wilt.

Sander raised his glass. "To another year."

Paul had a vision: smashing the goblet on the tabletop and plunging the jagged remnants into Sander's throat. But he just raised his glass, too, and whispered, "Another year."

"I've had better years, I'm sorry to say." Sander twirled the wine, sniffed delicately. "How was yours?" He took a sip, slurping air through his teeth.

Paul didn't trust himself to answer. He held himself still, his fingers tight around the stem of the goblet.

"Try the wine, Paul."

Under the coaxing veneer, Paul heard absolute command. He didn't realize he'd obeyed until the shimmering bouquet of the Burgundy danced in his mouth. For a moment, the sheer pleasure of it overwhelmed him. He tasted faded roses on the finish. An instinctive murmur of appreciation escaped his throat.

"Even after all this time, you still enjoy the taste."

Did he hear envy in Sander's tone? Paul put his goblet back on the table, all his senses on alert. "A truce, you said?"

Sander's lips turned upward. Paul had the distinct feeling of putting his foot in a snare. "I found that I missed our lunches." In one dizzying moment, the ice of Sander's face melted. His eyes glowed with softer emotions: regret, affection, even a hint of embarrassment. "Did you?"

The floor seemed to slip away from beneath Paul's feet. He clung to the table so he wouldn't fall.

"Did you miss them, Paul?" Sander prompted.

"No," Paul said, but he heard the confusion in his voice. He didn't have to fake it. He'd been so lost and lonely, so grateful to spend time with the only person left on the planet who knew him, his past, who shared something with him beyond an impersonal common humanity. If it weren't for the echo of Kate's laughter, the imprint of her kiss, he would be saying "yes" and meaning it, saying "yes" and asking for more.

I can't do this. I can't pretend. If he did, it might not be pretend. It might be real. He might not just break, but come apart completely.

The demon threw itself against the walls of its prison, rattling Paul's bones.

Sander's tongue flicked out and wet his thin lips. "I had thought," he said, his voice wrapped in disappointment, "when I left you last year that we were on the cusp of coming to an understanding." He stood up. "I'll be back for the ritual."

An animal part of Paul wanted to scream *get out get out get out*. It wanted to tear out Sander's throat. But he thought of Kate, reached across the table, and grabbed Sander by

the wrist. "Don't go." The words burned his throat like acid. His over-sensitive nerves felt the thud of Sander's pulse, the wiry whorls of hair on Sander's wrist.

Sander tilted his head like a hawk. "What did you say?"

Paul couldn't force the words through his teeth again. So he cleared his throat and said, as distinctly as he could with his jaw rigid and his tongue lead in his mouth, "Please."

Sander put a finger under Paul's chin and guided his face up towards his. He fixed Paul with a stare that probed down past his skin and prodded at his inner organs. Something came into his eyes. Something wild. "Say it again."

Paul swallowed, working his jaw loose. "Please."

"No. What you said before."

Paul closed his eyes. His free hand shook, the fingers flexing in and out of a fist. His heart rapped and he couldn't catch his breath. Tears pressed against his eyelids. "Don't." He opened his eyes and let the tears leak out. His lungs spasmed, and he grabbed just enough air. "Don't go. Don't leave me."

The wild light in Sander's eyes flared. "Alright. If you insist, I'll stay." He sat back down again.

Paul let go of Sander's wrist and focused on the simple act of breathing: in-out, in-out.

"I'm pleased to hear you want my company." Sander said it with an almost coquettish glee. "As I said, I missed our lunches." He looked at Paul expectantly.

He had to say something that would demonstrate Sander's power and Paul's weakness. Quickly. He couldn't think of anything but the truth. "I don't understand. I should hate you." And Paul did hate him. Except for a few heartbeats, a few minutes maybe, during those lunches. Maybe more than a few minutes, at those lunches.

"How did you feel when I left last year?" Sander's eyes scanned his face, slicing the flesh, pulling at the veins beneath, as if he could milk out the answer he wanted.

Again, Paul fell back on the truth. "I didn't bathe, I didn't eat. Not for days."

The wild light flared again. "That's because I am all you have." His voice was a flat command, making the statement indisputable fact. Then it softened again, faking friendship. "You and me, Paul. Everything else has changed around us. Everything else has left us behind. There's nothing left but the two of us."

Paul lifted a still-shaking hand and tapped his chest. "Not just the two of us." *Just tell me its goddamned name.*

"Yes." Sander's lips thinned, as if he'd tasted something bitter. "A necessary evil, that."

The demon's fury squeezed the air from Paul's lungs.

"It's a poison, Paul. And the ritual is the antidote we both must take, to stay alive." Sander's voice dropped into a sensual tone. "You *do* like being alive?" He flicked the ridge of his wine goblet. Shivers of sound lifted from the crystal.

Paul thought of Kate and her untasted life. "Yes," he whispered, more truth. "I love being alive."

Sander stood up, taking his wine with him, and walked to the sink. He stared out the window, his back to Paul. "But you haven't exactly used your immortality to the fullest, have you? Closeted away in this stupid little town." He threw Paul a glance over his shoulder. "You're a monk, cut off from the world."

If you only knew, you bastard. He had Sander on the hook now. He could feel the line tugging. He had to play it just right. "I stopped running away from you, didn't I?"

That earned Paul a flicker of a smile before Sander turned back to the window. "I'll admit that, for a while now, the last decade I suppose, I've been finding the joys of immortality running a little thin."

Paul found that hard to believe. He swallowed another burst of inappropriate laughter.

"I woke one morning in Italy, somewhere." Sander's voice faded into the memory. "It snowed the week before and it was starting to melt. All the hills were scabby with dirty patches of what was left of it. And I wondered how many times I've seen snow fall and melt, fall and melt, fall and melt." He tossed Paul another glance. "You understand."

It wasn't a question, but Paul nodded nevertheless. He did understand. For decades, when the leaves began to fall he had lapsed into depression, cried for days. If the years were dragging Sander down, he might be vulnerable. He just might let the demon's name slip, if Paul played the game right.

Sander went on, talking to a point outside the window. "I felt alone, Paul. Alone. There was a driver I could call who would take me anywhere in Europe. I had a plane and a pilot that could take me anywhere on the planet. I had a wine cellar with vintages before the Great War, paintings by the great masters. Lots of zeros in my accounts. But I felt alone." He paused to sip at the wine. "I even considered coming here and letting you kill me."

Paul leaned forward, the demon pressing against his ribs. Laurie had been right. They could both smell the way out.

"It seemed like a win," Sander said. "I'd taken everything from this life. I could go on to the next life in peace, knowing you would be lost forever, trapped inside ... that thing, day and night. But I came back, and here you were, and I wasn't alone. You'd seen the things I'd seen, lived the times I'd lived." Sander placed his wine on the sink board. "And I realized, Paul, that you were my gift."

Gift from whom? Paul didn't dare ask it aloud.

He didn't even seem to be talking to Paul anymore. His voice had sunk low. "I had thought that *she* would be the one I could make mine, completely. And then you almost asked me to stay. And tonight, you did."

He didn't say *you are mine, Paul*. He didn't have to.

Sander whirled on Paul, knocking over the wine glass on the sink board. Ruby fluid drained down the ridges into the sink, staining the white porcelain. "Ask me again, Paul." His face was rigid with pleasure. He didn't look entirely human. "Ask me again."

Paul's head began to pound, hammers at his temples. His soul revolted from these demands. The demon shored him up with a burst of fury, just as the image of Kate coalesced behind his tightly closed eyes. He took a ragged breath, forced himself to look at the man who had done worse than kill him. He pushed the words out past clenched teeth. "I want. You. To stay. With me."

"Again." A greed like sexual hunger burned in Sander's eyes. "Again!"

If it was as if Sander was reaching through flesh and ribs, into Paul's chest, and squeezing his heart. His ears rang with pressure. He forced the words out. "Don't leave me." Part of him meant it. If Sander didn't appear every year to perform the ritual, Paul would be lost. Nothing could frighten him more. He came to his feet. "I want you to stay

with me. Please stay with me.”

“No,” Sander said.

Panic convulsed Paul. He almost went to his knees. The world seemed to crack, bolts fanning out from the impact of Sander’s denial. He felt himself plunge into icy black waters he hadn’t even known were waiting to drown him.

Sander smiled, all glittering eyes and teeth. “I won’t stay with you. You’ll come back with me to Europe, instead. We will be immortal companions. Forever.”

* * * *

Kate hit the stairs of her office building running. On the drive over, she’d methodically isolated the emotions and the sensations still rolling through her nerves, folded them neatly, and tucked them away on a back shelf of her mind. She’d been out of range of a cell tower when Ellie had needed her most. She’d failed because of her selfish pursuits. So she packed away her heart and led with her ambition, her determination, and her logic. Only a lingering sense of loss and frustration haunted her, echoing between the peak of her heart and the valleys of her body.

I love you, Kate. I have loved you for the better part of a year.

The remembered words whispered over her skin, raising shivers and sending ripples deep inside. The wall she’d built between then and now was humiliatingly thin. Inside, Ellie needed her to be strong, needed all of her attention.

She dodged her way through the front desks, still at a run. She skidded to a stop outside Dowd’s office, knocked on the door once, and pushed her way inside.

Dowd looked up from his desk and Kate saw the beacon of panic in his face. *Oh, shit.*

“Well, it’s about time you put in an appearance.”

The voice clawed Kate. She stepped away from ADA Louisa Frischler, perched on the chair opposite Dowd’s desk. Where was Ellie?

Kate looked from Frischler to Dowd. Dowd refused to meet her eyes.

“My witness has flown the coop, Scott.”

Kate forced herself to focus on the sharp-faced ADA. She began silently counting backwards from ten.

“She was monitoring Ellie’s rooms, Kate.” Dowd said in a whining tone. “She knew when Ellie checked out. She just showed up here. I didn’t call her. Ellie was waiting, just like you told her, and then...”

And then Cruella DA arrived. Kate could imagine the scene: Frischler telling Ellie she had to testify, Dowd looking away with a shrug.

“She ran,” Kate said.

Frischler leaned forward in her chair. “I need that girl back, Scott, and I need her toughened up to testify.”

Dowd chimed in. “Please, Kate, we need to cooperate with the District Attorney’s office. I’ve gotten calls on this case. Calls from high up.”

Kate saw a nerve jump under Frischler’s eye. *Aha, so she’s getting pressure, too. It’s not just her political ambitions at stake here.* Kate had seen this before, in the bigger cities. Victims and criminals were maneuvered like chess pieces, neither being seen as human, neither being seen in the context of compassion or mercy or justice. It was all about the win.

“Get her back for me, Scott.” In Frischler’s voice all the weight of that pressure focused on Kate and landed in her lap. “This girl is your problem to fix.”

Somewhere deep inside Kate, something fundamental cracked. She sank into the nearest chair, winning expressions of surprise from Dowd and Frischler both. Normally by now she would have been in a shouting match, probably toe to toe, with the ADA, with Dowd wringing his hands and pleading for cooperation. But something was different. A day with Paul had changed her. She saw the world with new eyes.

Her parents had taught her that it was sacred to work within the system, to follow the rules, and make things better that way. Their ghosts pressed her to perform as the ADA demanded, because in the scope of the greater good, Ellie should testify. The safety of society demanded that her husband be tried, locked up, executed. He distributed the misery of heroin, methamphetamines, and cocaine. He had raped, tortured, and murdered. The demands of the greater good eclipsed the weakness and fear of one woman. It was Kate’s responsibility to find Ellie and make her testify, so that the safety of society was served.

Just like the demands of the greater good had eclipsed Kate’s need for the attention and devotion of her parents, her need for the reassuring cycle of holidays, her need for a sense of self.

“She has to testify,” Frischler said, and Kate heard behind her clipped words the phantom voices of her family.

Kate looked up out of the pit of her memories and her conditioned beliefs, looked straight into Louisa Frischler’s eyes, and said, “That’s a bunch of bullshit.”

Frischler’s mouth dropped open. Dowd dropped his head into his hands.

“She doesn’t have to testify. We had a deal worked out that would have put that guy in jail. But you and your office decided that wasn’t good enough. He had to be made an example. Well, that’s not my problem, Louisa.” Kate stood up, and so did Frischler, a quivering, bony twig of indignation in a navy blue suit. “I’m not going to waste my time getting you or anyone else elected. I put this thing together so that Ellie was protected and that rat bastard went to jail. You screwed it up. I am not here to clean up your mess.”

Feeling as if a yoke of stone had been lifted from her shoulders, Kate turned to leave. But Frischler grabbed her shoulder and yanked her around.

“Look, you glorified babysitter, everything I have rides on this case. That woman testifies, do you understand me?”

“So subpoena her,” Kate said sweetly. “If you can find her.”

Kate turned on her heel and walked calmly out of the office. She slid behind the wheel of her comfortable old car. She sat in a soul-nourishing quiet until Louisa Frischler burst through the outer doors and stamped down the stairs. She watched as the other woman threw herself into an Audi and roared away.

Confident that Frischler wasn’t going to do anything as stupid as follow her, Kate started her car and headed toward the city. She extracted her cell phone—her traitor cell phone—from her purse, and scrolled quickly through the numbers until she found one for the Good Shepherd Women’s Shelter. It rang, and rang, and rang, before a tired-sounding woman answered.

“It’s Kate Scott. Is Ellie Harris there?”

They had arranged this meeting place on their first consultation. If ever things go so bad you don’t know where to go, she had told Ellie, go to the Good Shepherd.

“She’s waiting for you,” the woman at the shelter said. “She’s really upset.”

“Tell her I’m on my way. Alone.”

Kate disconnected, returned the cell to her purse, and pushed her foot down on the accelerator. By the time she pulled into a parking space on the street outside the shelter, the setting sun streaked the sky with red and gold. She glanced at her watch. Too many hours until dawn. She would go inside, calm Ellie. By calling the right numbers, saying the right words, she could open the secret door to the abused women’s underground. She would help Ellie escape, but Ellie would be her last. At dawn she would start a new life, with Paul. A new life with many, many favorite flavors.

Walking briskly past a couple of girls hooking on the corner, Kate pushed open the double steel doors under the sign of the Good Shepherd. A thick, humid heat immediately soaked into her, and she smelled too many bodies in too small a space as she walked past the open door of the shelter proper. From the corner of her eye, she took in the figures and forms of the women inside: some hunched in self-protection, some stretched out flat in the sleep of the exhausted, some angular with the attitude of false bravado that kept them from crying.

She pushed open the double doors that led to the administration wing. Chaos greeted her. A receptionist was talking wide-eyed into a telephone. She saw Kate and waved her hand, gesturing her helplessness and fear. One of the directors—Kate knew her, a tall commanding presence called Sister Olivia—was standing beside the door of her own office, peeking through the crack in the door and saying, in a gentle, soothing voice, “She’ll be here any moment.”

Kate’s heart leaped up into her throat. “I’m here now.”

Sister Olivia did not turn, but Kate saw the tension in her shoulders ease a little.

“She’s here, Ellie, do you want to talk to her?”

Kate did not hear the answer through the door, but Sister Olivia stepped aside. Kate looked through the crack, into the Sister’s little cubbyhole office. Ellie was slumped on the floor in the farthest corner.

“Ellie? It’s Kate. I’m here.”

Ellie cradled a handgun, the barrel pointed carelessly in the direction of her own face.

Chapter Eleven

Immortal companion.

Paul came out of his chair, knocking it over, but there was nowhere to run. Who could have guessed at Sander's intention? Did he know about the witches? Did he know about Kate?

How can I say no? Paul's miserable half-life hung on the whim and nod of Sander Wald. The money that paid for the house that sheltered him, that paid for the food he ate, came from Sander. The influence that kept him hidden in plain sight, the succession of false identifications, the arrangements necessary to make the house appear to be properly sold from his old name to his new, all the pretenses and frauds that concealed his unnatural life—it all depended on Sander Wald.

"Think of it, Paul." Sander said, another command.

Paul obeyed. His brain ran projected images through his mind's eye, images out of focus and jumpy because he was too afraid to look closely at the possibilities. A never-ending life of days given to Sander Wald. The last small measure of his independence, his selfdom, turned over to his torturer. The moon would rise full tomorrow night. Sander would complete the ritual, and Paul would have no choice but to follow him to Europe. The fragile life Paul had carved out for himself—the ritual of morning coffee, the tending of the garden, Kate—would be gone, forever.

Beneath Paul's heart, the demon screamed. Its abject fear crashed like waves through Paul's blood.

"No more loneliness, Paul." Sander Wald stood in front of him, very close, almost touching. Paul had not been aware of him moving. "I will always be with you. I am the only one who knows you. I am the only one."

The demon prodded Paul sharply at the exact moment Paul saw one more desperate chance. If Sander truly wanted to be the only one for Paul, he had to reduce the eternal triangle to an eternal pair.

"Anything you want, Paul." Sander caressed him with the words.

The demon thrummed with excitement, urging Paul on. "Anything?" he murmured, as if he were trying the thought out.

"There is nothing in this world I can't give you. A particular vintage of wine? You can ask for it at breakfast, and have it with dinner. Anything." Sander snapped his fingers. "It will be."

"The opera in Venice?" Paul asked, keeping his voice soft with hesitant wonder.

"A private showing of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, especially for you."

Paul's thoughts skittered through luxuries that Sander might consider acceptable.

"All my shirts made in London?"

Sander chuckled. "They will send a dozen per week, so you never need wear them twice."

Forcing himself to lean his upper body towards Sander, Paul raised the stakes. "A woman?"

Sander's eyes narrowed. He lifted his hand and traced the line of Paul's jaw. Paul hoped he would misinterpret the trembling as excitement, not the disgust it really was.

“Any woman, anywhere, any way, anytime,” Sander whispered, “so long as I can watch. And make ... suggestions.”

Sander’s musky cologne filled Paul’s throat as he took a breath to make his final gambit. “What about a woman ... with you ... in Provence ... under the stars?”

Sander didn’t hesitate. “Anything.” The caressing finger stopped, and Sander crushed Paul’s jaw in his hand. “Anything...” he showed even, white teeth, “...under the sun.”

Paul’s muscles exploded as rage, brighter and hotter than the demon’s, ignited in his brain. His hands went around Sander’s throat. He drove Sander back, back, and back, his feet stuttering, until Sander’s head bounced against the kitchen wall.

The demon drank Paul’s rage, flooding him with frustration. Paul felt the warning. He just didn’t care. He set his legs, his body crushing Sander against the wall, his hands crushing Sander’s throat.

“Kill me...” Sander’s face purpled and his eyes bulged. “...and you have ... two ... days.”

Two days. It sounded like a fair trade to Paul’s rage-maddened brain. Two days of freedom before the ritual went uncompleted and the demon overwhelmed him. Two days of freedom and an eternity trapped in the demon sounded like heaven, compared to forever as Sander’s immortal companion.

He had lost so much. He couldn’t give Sander Wald everything he had left. He increased the pressure on Sander’s throat, saw Sander’s eyes roll back into his head.

Forgive me, Kate.

And then the prison bars cracked.

Paul looked out the window to see that the light had gone from the sky.

Pain impaled Paul as the demon shattered its prison and began clawing and chewing its way to the surface of his skin. Paul dropped to all fours, gagging. More pain, as Sander Wald kicked him in the ribs. He toppled and skidded on the kitchen floor, curling around himself, trying to find some protection from the both assaults. The demon burst through his skin, arching Paul’s body, flooding his mouth with coppery hot blood. He cracked in half. The demon folded him, rolled him up, just shards of bone and fractured, inside-out flesh. He slid gratefully into the prison, thankful for the sudden cessation of pain, for the suspended nothingness.

The demon’s eyes took over, and Paul saw Sander Wald gone to black-and-white harshness, staring at the final transformation. The demon pulsed hot and cold with rage and terror. It skittled back, flowing around the toppled chair to coalesce into the tiniest form it could underneath the protection of the tabletop.

Through the demon’s eyes, Paul could see the hatred in Sander’s expression as he took a step forward and spat. “It’s always you, isn’t it?”

The demon cowered, but Paul surged. *Get him to say your name! Your name! Your name!*

Sander Wald jumped forward, his hands out. The demon shrank away. Sander laughed, a hollow, empty sound, and turned. Paul listened, heard the footsteps, heard the slam of the door, heard the purr of the Mercedes’ motor. He saw nothing but the kitchen floor as the demon huddled there, frozen with terror.

* * * *

A gun. Oh, God. Kate closed her eyes for a moment, reaching inside for strength. This, she hadn't anticipated. "Ellie, can I come in?"

"Kate." Ellie sobbed the word. "She said I had to do it."

"She was lying, Ellie. You don't." Kate gave her cell phone to Sister Olivia, whispering, "There's a number in there, listed under 'Ellie Hospital'. Ask for Dr. Shaheed, let her know that Ellie's suicidal."

The sister took the phone and instantly flipped it open.

"When did you call the police?" Kate asked.

"They should have been here already."

"Shit." When the blue lights and sirens arrived, Ellie would assume they were coming to take her, to force her to testify.

Raising her voice from a whisper, Kate said, "Ellie? I'm coming in the room, okay?" Without waiting for confirmation, she slipped inside the door.

Ellie pressed the barrel of the gun against her jaw line.

Kate stopped just a few steps inside the room. "Bad day, huh?"

Ellie rolled her eyes. Tears ran down her face. "I talked to one of the doctors today, and he said I should testify."

Kate gritted her teeth. It was the natural reaction when faced with the situation: Ellie should testify. She wanted to grab Ellie and shake the courage into her.

"If I testify, he'll *kill* me." The word managed to convey exactly what Ellie had seen her husband do to his rival's daughter. Faced with that, a bullet in the head would be the way Kate would choose to die, too.

"You don't have to testify." If she could make Ellie understand that option, make her believe it, Ellie wouldn't have to choose tonight between being raped and murdered and shooting herself. Kate had to make her see that alternative. "One call, Ellie, and I can have you somewhere he won't find you. In two weeks, you can have a new driver's license and a new name. You can be an accountant, if you want."

Ellie laughed, a jarring sound that grated down Kate's spine. Ellie didn't, couldn't believe that she had that chance.

"If I don't testify, he won't go to jail." Ellie stated the obvious in a blank whisper, talking more to herself than Kate. Guilt. Ellie felt the pressure to do the right thing, felt the pressure of the greater good. But she was just too terrified. "If I don't testify, he won't go to jail, and he'll kill me. If I do testify, if he can't kill me, someone will for him." Tears coursed down Ellie's face, dropped onto the barrel of the gun.

"Ellie, you can hide. He won't be able to find you." But even as she said it, Kate recognized it for the half-truth that it was. Ellie's husband might be able to find her. As long as he lived, Ellie would always look over her shoulder, would never truly be safe.

"Even if I kill him, someone will take revenge." She said it so coldly that Kate felt the stirrings of real panic. "There's no way out."

Kate risked a step forward. "There is a way out, Ellie, I promise you. Just give me the gun."

Ellie pressed the barrel against her cheek, gripping the gun possessively, her only means of control. Her only source of comfort and power. She wasn't giving it up. *It should be me she's holding on to, not that gun.* But she had been out of cell range. She had been in a car, having her shirt ripped off, like some teenager.

"Oh, God, Ellie, I am so sorry. About all of this, about everything." Kate hugged

herself, reaching for some transcendental help, strength, and cleverness that weren't natively hers.

Finally, for the first time, Ellie looked at Kate. The gun moved away from her cheek. "You don't have to be sorry, Kate." Ellie spoke as if Kate were a child, her tone steady and gentle. "I could have left him a million times, but I didn't. I liked having the money, I liked having the jewelry. For a while, it made me feel safe."

Kate froze inside. These were hard revelations. Ellie had stripped off self-deceptions. She was seeing things almost but not quite clearly. Kate's sense of impending doom deepened. "Ellie, none of this is your fault. You were his victim."

Ellie kept talking in that same gentle voice, looking through Kate instead of at her. "And after a while, we were just doing business. He'd hurt me. Then he'd bring me a new fur coat or a new necklace. Payment in full."

From Kate's memory burst an image, a necklace in a jewelry shop, the delicate gold links each cradling a diamond.

"I could have walked out any day, sold it all at a pawn shop." Ellie's voice dropped to a whisper. "I could have left. But I didn't."

How could she explain to Ellie that she really couldn't have left? How could she explain the insidious power of an abuser like her husband, who didn't just bruise her skin, break her bones, and rape her? Her husband had stolen her soul, piece by piece, hurt by hurt, taking away her ability to choose, her ability to walk out, to escape. To explain that now would only highlight Ellie's helplessness and powerlessness, would only make that gun all the more important to her. Kate needed Ellie to hate that gun as much as she did.

"Ellie, listen to me. Ellie. Ellie!" Kate forced her to look and to see her, pulled her out of her madness. "If you do this, he wins. He doesn't go to jail, and he wins absolutely. As long as you are alive, he's scared of you." *You have the power to make him fear, Ellie. Use it instead of the gun.* "As long as you are alive, you can hurt him with just a couple of words."

"But I'm afraid!" Ellie's voice wailed the words. Tears gushed down her face. "I'm too afraid."

"It's okay to be afraid!" But she knew it wouldn't help to hear. Ellie had lived her life afraid, cowering under the thin shield of furs and jewels and money. What soul she had left was not strong enough to continue living in fear of her husband, without the sick trade-off of hurt and reward. "I'm afraid all the time, Ellie. Everyone's afraid."

"You're not afraid," Ellie accused.

Kate barked out a laugh. "Are you kidding? Today I found out that I'm so afraid of life I don't know my favorite ice cream flavor." She paused, latching on to some shred of hope. "What's your favorite ice cream flavor, Ellie?"

"Fudge swirl." She said it without thought, without hesitation.

Live for fudge swirl.

Through the windows of the office came the ghostly flashes of police lights. Ellie raised the gun.

Kate held out her hand, palm up. "Now come on, Ellie, you knew they'd have to come."

"They're going to make me testify."

"No, they just want to make sure everyone stays safe."

"Safe?" Her voice rose and cracked on the word.

Oh, shit. “Ellie, please don’t. Put down the gun, please. Please!”

Ellie pressed the barrel to her temple, both hands on the grip, one finger poised on the trigger. “I don’t know how to be safe.”

Another terrible truth. “But you can learn, Ellie. I can teach you.”

“I don’t deserve,” Ellie gritted out the words, “to be safe.”

And now they had reached the pit of self-loathing that lay at the bottom of who Ellie was. Kate had a chance, a narrow chance, but a chance.

“You deserve to be safe and a lot more, Ellie.” She saw the expression of denial sneer across Ellie’s face. *That’s okay, I expected it.* “If you didn’t deserve it, I wouldn’t be here. I think you’re worth it, Ellie. If you didn’t deserve it, this whole place wouldn’t exist.” She raised her hands to take in the Good Shepherd. “Sister Olivia wouldn’t be here to help you if you didn’t deserve it.” Kate tried to drag Ellie out of the pit of her self-hatred, let her see that she was loved, was supported, that she wasn’t alone and worthless.

“He hurt you,” Ellie whispered. The gun had not moved. “He hurt you because of me.”

Kate fixed her eyes on Ellie’s face. “I think you’re worth a few bruises.”

A gentle smile curved Ellie’s mouth, so sad that Kate felt her heart break. “I don’t.”

Ellie pulled the trigger.

Chapter Twelve

Kate had never seen anyone die before. She'd only ever encountered the clinging residue of violence: the bruises and the tears. And this time, the body.

She sat in the lobby of the Good Shepherd, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. Despite its weight and the sticky heat of the shelter itself, she still lost control to shivers. Waves of chills hit her, setting her teeth to chattering. Her muscles ached from them.

She had given her statement to the uniformed policeman at the scene, and again to the tired-looking detective in a wrinkled suit. The medics had pronounced her physically unharmed but suffering from traumatic shock.

Shock. An understatement. Her emotions threw themselves against the walls of her heart like lunatics. One moment, she was oily with guilt for not preventing Ellie's death. The next, she was gripped with irrational anger. If Ellie hadn't already shot herself, Kate would have wanted to kill her.

A medic stooped down on his heels and offered her a cup of coffee. "Will you be okay? Should you call someone to drive you home?"

Kate wrapped her hands around the steaming paper cup. Bitter steam wafted into her face. She closed her eyes against it. "I can make it."

The medic made a noise in his throat—agreement or disagreement, Kate couldn't tell. When she opened her eyes, he was gone, and they were carrying out the shiny black bag with Ellie in it.

Sister Olivia followed the gurney. She paused beside Kate. Kate put the untasted coffee and the blanket aside, stood up to meet her.

The tall Sister merely smiled sadly and gripped Kate's arm. She did not say anything stupid.

"I'm done with all of this," Kate said, marveling at how cold and calm her voice sounded.

"That's a shame. You're good at what you do."

Kate felt her mouth quirk in a not-so-nice smile. "I may be good at it, but it's not good for me." She looked at her watch, discovered with surprise that it was 2:30 in the morning. Four hours to dawn.

"Thanks for your help, Sister Olivia." She and the sisters of the Good Shepherd had worked together since the moment Kate started her career. She had known other members of the order in all the other cities she'd worked.

"Thanks for your help, Kate Scott."

They shook hands in a strange, somber ritual, and Kate went to her car. Part of her mind was aware enough to warn her that the detachment she felt was a symptom of her shock, and that sometime soon the comforting distance would collapse and she would be inside the horror and terror.

She pointed her car toward Bonaventure.

She'd never seen a person die before. The life-force that had been Ellie: there, and then gone. No transition. There, and then gone.

The freeway was deserted, damp from rain that had finally started to fall. By the time she reached her exit, it was lashing down from the sky, plinking against the roof, slapping

the windshield.

I should go home. Logical processes seemed far away, too, floating together with her emotions, receding into the fog. Go home. Take a hot bath. Warm some milk. Go to sleep. Yet when the car stopped moving, she found herself parked at the curb outside Paul's house without a memory of making all the necessary turns. The driveway was empty; the Mercedes missing. The windows were all dark. Kate sat for a moment in the car, in a bubble, high above everything.

He isn't here. I should just go home.

Instead, she got out of the car and stood looking at his house while the rain poured down. When droplets fell from her hair onto her nose, startling her, she made her way to the porch.

Dripping and shivering again, she pushed the doorbell button. The old-fashioned chime echoed inside the house. No one answered.

She lifted a fist and pounded on the door. She didn't feel the impact of her hand against the wood.

She looked around. There was an old rocking chair on the porch. *I'll sit in that, until he comes back.*

But just as she turned from the door she heard the click of the latch. The door swung inwards a few inches, as if in invitation.

Kate hesitated, staring into the seam of darkness between the jamb and the slightly opened door. She waited: for a voice, for a hand to pull it open further, for anything. A chill crawled up the nape of her neck.

The door creaked open another inch. Kate jumped back, her heart stuttering. "Paul?"

Her memory danced back to this morning—was it just this morning?—when she had asked Paul why he hadn't come out of the house—was it just last night?—when she had arrived on his porch in a state. He'd said he couldn't, but he'd never told her why.

The inky blackness beyond the door offered no answers. Deep inside the thick blanket of clouds, thunder rumbled. The wind gusted, rattling the porch roof. Rain prickled against Kate's back.

Go or stay. Dawn was too long a wait. She looked over her shoulder, at the wind-driven rain pummeling the trees and the sidewalk. The wind drove a sheet of it into her face. Go or stay.

Hesitantly, she lifted her hand and, with just the tips of her fingers, pushed the front door open all the way. Nothing jumped out to get her. The entry room was lit by a small emergency light in the ceiling. She saw a tiled floor, a credenza against the left wall, stairs leading upwards. Other than that, she saw only shadows. She stepped inside.

"Paul?" Her voice fell flat in the silence.

The wind gusted and the door banged shut. Kate whirled, then laughed a little, to let off the tension. The same wind that had blown open the door had blown it shut again. No one was here. She was alone in Paul's house.

Oddly, she found the silence and the emptiness soothing. At home, Vanessa and Gwen would be swarming on her with questions and comforts and solicitation, and that would collapse the distance separating her from fear and anguish and anger. She wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

Besides, this was the place where Breakfast Paul lived. Other than their trip to Mapleton, Kate had never known him outside Café Foy. If he wasn't telling his secrets,

maybe she could find a few answers for herself. Anything was better than thinking about the way the whole room had shuddered when Ellie pulled that trigger.

Kate began to explore. On her left, the first open doorway led to the kitchen. She groped along the wall until she found a light switch. When the overhead light chased away the shadows, Kate felt her shoulders relax from tension she hadn't known was there.

Her nose twitched. Something smelled strange. On the table she saw an open wine bottle and a pile of crushed flowers. She lifted one of the browned and bruised petals and sniffed. She ran her finger down a cracked and splintered stem.

Lightning flashed outside the window. The kitchen light flickered. One ... two ... three ... four... She got to six before the thunder rolled, throaty and deep.

Had Paul sent the flowers or received them? The stems and petals gave no answer, so she continued her exploration.

Across the hallway from the kitchen was a closed door. She expected a bathroom or a closet. What she found, when she clicked on the light, was an artist's studio.

Paul never told me he could draw.

Canvases tilted on easels. Sketches papered the floor. Three sketches were tacked to the wall near the door, sketches of the same man. Kate didn't recognize his features, but he was handsome in a hard way. In one picture, he stood in a garden surrounded by faceless people in top hats and feathered headpieces. In another, he roamed the narrow streets of some European-looking old city. And in the last, he stood at the top of the stairs of Paul's house—just outside the studio—wearing a well-cut suit with wide lapels straight out of the seventies.

Weird.

The crisp lines and subtle shadings created an almost photographic reality in the portraits. But there was something wrong. Kate slid her eyes over the drawings, trying to find what it was that bothered her.

There. In each picture, blended in so well that it was almost hidden, a figure with a smooth body shaded entirely black except for tilted cat eyes seemed to be slinking after the man, trying not to be seen.

Very weird.

A shiver traced Kate's spine. The disturbing figure in the drawing eddied through the comforting sea of distance she'd put between herself and Ellie's suicide. Her stomach clenched. She smelled hot, old copper pennies. Her ears started ringing, just like they had after Ellie pulled the trigger...

Kate turned off the light and shut the studio door, leaned against it, breathing deeply. Maybe some of that wine.

She went back into the kitchen, found a glass sitting on the edge of the sink board. She rinsed it out, filled it from the bottle, and went to stand at the bottom of the stairs.

There was a small door on the opposite wall, probably leading to the basement. After the strange drawings, she felt no desire to investigate. Upstairs seemed like a better idea, so up she went.

A bathroom met her at the top of the stairs. She eased her head inside. A towel lay in a heap by the tub/shower combo. A toothbrush lay on the edge of the sink. Paul's toothbrush. She imagined him standing in front of the medicine cabinet mirror, wearing underwear—tightie whities, boxers, or bikinis?—while brushing his teeth. A tingle

zipped up the inside of her thighs. The comforting distance between her mind and her emotions wavered. A flood of feelings—fear, anger, arousal—washed over her.

Kate whirled, put her back against the wall. She looked down the stairs, towards the comforting puddle of light spilling from the kitchen. She gulped some wine. Her hands shook, dribbling wine onto her shirt.

“Shit.” It wasn’t her shirt. It was Gwen’s. The stain would never come out. “Damn it.”

It was a nice, safe problem on which she could focus and feel in control. She had to get out of the shirt and get it under some water.

Right or left, she had a door each to choose from. She tried the left door first, saw an unused guest bedroom with a brown leather suitcase beside the bed. When she opened the right door, she found Paul’s bedroom.

Bingo.

She felt around for the light switch and flicked it. Out of the corner of her eye she saw something move.

* * * *

Still, still. Stay still.

Paul tried to will the demon to blend in with the shadows behind the bed. He had no heart that could be pounding, locked away in the prison inside the demon, but Paul felt the demon’s own excitement race through his awareness like an electric pulse.

It had opened the door for Kate, followed her through the house while Paul watched, trapped inside and helpless. He’d seen horror contort her face when she ran from the studio. He worried that she’d seen the pictures he’d drawn of her. That strange panic had evaporated, and she’d started swearing over a wine stain.

What’s wrong with her? He couldn’t ask until the sun rose.

“Gwen’s gonna be so mad,” Kate muttered.

The demon flattened itself and stretched underneath the bed. Tilting its eyes, it peered up past the old blue dust-catcher, into the room, and up at Kate.

She had his favorite chamois shirt in her left hand, and was pulling the wine-stained white shirt off with her right.

Not again.

It was worse this time, because he’d seen her skin flushed with excitement, felt the texture. Though the demon’s eyes it looked polished and cool, like marble, but he knew it was soft and warm. He’d touched it. He’d do almost anything to touch it again.

Kate shrugged Paul’s shirt over her shoulders, paused to turn her cheek into the old fabric and breathe deeply. It was the shirt he’d worn yesterday at breakfast. He’d just thrown it on the bedroom chair. She was smelling his skin from the fabric of his shirt.

Paul threw himself against the bars of his prison, desperate to get to Kate, to touch her, to do so much more than just touch her.

Look away, he begged the demon. Look away, damn it!

But it didn’t. Fascinated, it stared as Kate turned toward the mirror above his dresser. She stopped, her fingers on the shirt’s buttons.

“Shit, look at that.”

Wine had seeped through the cotton shirt and left a dark red stain on the swell of the left cup of her bra. Her reflected face gave back a wry smile.

If she takes the bra off, I just quit.

But she didn't. She put her finger to the little bit of lace above her cleavage, smiling sadly at her reflection in the mirror. Even without color, Paul could see the shades of regret and self-reproach in that smile. He would recognize those emotions at a hundred yards. He'd lived with them for a hundred years.

As he watched, Kate's smile melted and her eyes froze into a thousand yard stare. Reflected in black and white, she looked like a classical statue, a study in marble. Then her chest heaved. A fire flared behind her eyes. Her fingers closed around his wristwatch on the dresser and she flung it against the mirror. The glass cracked, and she screamed.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

The demon recoiled under the bed. Glass broke against the wall. Red wine splattered on the floor.

"Why-why-why-why-why would you do that?" Her voice rose up into a screech. "Why?"

The plug of the bedside lamp jerked from the socket and whipped over the floor like a snake. The lamp crashed against the far wall. The demon scuttled back into the corner, pressing its liquid body against the wallpaper.

"What am I supposed to do?" Kate fell to her knees, her head bowed and her fingers clenched in her curls. "What am I supposed to do?"

Her forehead came to rest against the mattress as her words dissolved into heaving sobs.

Inside his prison, Paul watched in shock. What had happened with her client? Something very, very bad. He couldn't ask, couldn't find out, until dawn gave him his voice back. He couldn't even hold her while she cried.

The demon raised its arm. Slowly, the limb stretched and thinned, reaching out across the rumpled bedclothes.

Paul's frustration turned to terror. *No, no, no, no...*

The demon's inky fingertips hovered above Kate's curls.

No, no, no. Stop!

One finger extended. Paul watched it thin into a tentative point at the tip. He looked down the unnatural length of the demon's arm and saw its finger slide gently into one erratic corkscrew curl.

Kate gasped. Her head jerked up. The demon's arm snapped back. Paul stared into Kate's face for an instant, the tears glistening on the skin of her cheeks.

She pitched backwards, her heels coming out from under her, her arms windmilling. Like a crab she scuttled away. Her high, shrill gasps sliced through the room.

The demon flowed from under the bed. It reformed in front of the bedroom door, pushing it closed and blocking Kate's escape.

"Holy fucking shit ... shit..." Kate scrunched against the far wall, crouched over her knees, stuttering through exclamations. "Jesus God ... holy ... shit."

Paul floated in a vacuum of shock, watching as the demon took the last good thing in his life and drove it into a brick wall.

Kate came to her feet.

The demon lengthened itself to keep them eye to eye.

"Shit." Kate covered her mouth with one hand. The other hand flexed in and out of a fist. Her breaths, ragged, fast, filled the room.

Then she gasped once. Silence.

Her eyes closed. Her hand dropped. "It's you, isn't it?"

Bodiless, Paul hung in his prison. *Me?*

Slowly, Kate slid down the wall to rest on her heels. "I couldn't help you before you shot yourself. Why are bothering me now?"

Without the distraction of physical sensation, Paul's floating mind put it together instantly. Her client committed suicide. Everything made sense. The violent rage had been her coming back from the shock, the sobbing a release of grief. She thought the demon was the ghost of her dead client.

What else could she think?

Kate picked up a shard of the broken lamp base. She came to her feet and threw it at the demon.

Paul experienced the impact as a far away ripple.

"Leave me alone!" Kate sank down again, plopping into a cross-legged heap of tears and curls and soft, lost sounds.

The demon looked down. Paul looked with it. At the center of its body, the black surface puckered. The porcelain shard pushed through, inch by inch, and came loose with a sucking plop. It shattered against the floor.

The demon looked back at Kate. She stared, revulsion on her face.

Just leave her alone. Please.

The demon ignored him. It watched Kate. Paul could sense its fascination. It wanted something from Kate. He couldn't begin to guess what.

He remembered his relentless erection. Could his desire have been transferred into the demon while it was trapped in his body?

The demon took a small, smooth step towards Kate.

She flattened her back against the wall.

Leave her alone!

It stretched and flowed, covering half the room in one curving motion.

Kate whimpered, pulling his shirt tight around herself. She rolled her head away from the demon. A tear slipped free from the corner of her eyes. "Oh, Paul, where are you?" she whispered.

A frisson electrified the demon. It drained down towards the floor, pooling itself in front of Kate. She stiffened, but didn't pull away or look at it.

Paul felt the first faint light in the sky like a trumpet note from miles away.

The demon took Kate's right hand and lifted it. Kate's eyes followed the motion. It pressed her hand against its center. Paul felt another jolt of excitement eddy through the demon's substance. The demon looked down at the place where it held Kate's hand: white flesh pushing against blackness. Then it looked up at Kate and with its other hand, pointed to her lips.

Anger and fear bloomed across Kate's face. She pushed the demon away. "I'm not going to kiss..."

Paul felt a ripple, like when she'd thrown the lamp shard. The demon looked down. Paul saw Kate's hands penetrate the surface of the demon's skin, the smooth white marble sliding into the slick oily blackness.

Kate screamed. The demon whipped back. Paul felt its anger, its frustration, its disappointment.

She's mine, not yours! The prison walls wouldn't crack, no matter what he threw against them. *Leave her alone!*

The demon slunk back.

"Get away and stay away!" Kate was on her feet, panting for breath. "Stay away!"

The demon lifted its hands. In the colorless sight they seemed to swirl like oil just under the surface. The demon put its hands against its middle again, looking down so that Paul could see. It looked at Kate, raised its hands, and again bowed its head, folding the black fingers over where its heart might be. Veins of light pulsed beneath its surface.

A bolt of understanding hit Paul. *It's trying to explain that I'm inside.* It hadn't been trying to lure Kate into kissing it. It had put her hand above Paul's prison, and pointed at her lips because his name had been the last thing she'd said. It was trying to make her understand. And it was taking more risks than he had, to show her the truth.

Kate straightened her spine. "I'm leaving. Get out of my way."

No!

The moment Paul shouted the thought, the demon moved to block the door.

Keep her here until dawn. He could feel the sun growing closer. Gathering light still invisible to a human eye tugged at his awareness like the moon at a tide. Dawn was less than an hour away. *Keep her here until we change. Then she'll understand.*

"Oh cut me a break." Kate lowered herself to Paul's bed. "Just let me go home, please? Do you know what kind of day I've had?" She dragged her fingers through her curls. "You're probably some stupid stress hallucination. That's it. I freaked out at the Good Shepherd and right now I'm in some lockdown ward, pumped full of anti-psychotics that aren't working."

She drew her knees up to her chin. "Do you know what I should be doing right now, if there was a God in Heaven?" She turned her exhausted eyes to the demon.

Paul, through the demon's eyes, stared hungrily at her face. The courage of her humor outshone the teary blotched cheeks. She was the most beautiful woman Paul had ever known.

"I should be just waking up right now in this bed." She tapped her fingertip against the rumpled covers. "Paul should be walking in right now with a big chocolate milkshake, and graham crackers with strawberry jam." She closed her eyes. "Which we could eat after we made love again. For the fifth or sixth time." She looked back at the demon. "Is that too much to ask for?"

If Paul had a throat, he didn't know if he'd cry or laugh.

Kate squinted at the demon. "You could bring me a chocolate milkshake, at least. Useless hallucination."

Moving very slowly, the demon pointed at the pillow.

Kate shoulders shook in a chuckle that ended in a sigh. "Okay. That way if you want to kill me, I'll sleep through it."

Still curled up, she flopped onto her side.

Let her sleep, God, please. Paul imagined the lines of horror and exhaustion smoothing from her face. He and the demon could watch over her until dawn. And then after, he and the demon could slide into bed beside her and hold her while she slept. Is that too much to ask for?

Downstairs, the front door banged.

Kate sat straight up. Her lips formed a word: Paul.

It was Sander's voice that boomed it through the house. "Paul!"

The demon's surge of terror and Paul's shock of horror formed a circuit around one thought: What will he do to Kate?

Kate looked to the demon and whispered, "Who is that?"

Do something! Paul screamed at the demon. Then Kate's eyes went wide and filled with fear, as the demon rushed her.

Chapter Thirteen

Kate tried to scream around the shock of cold, oily fingers pressing over her mouth. The thing pushed her past the bed. Kate stuttered her feet, trying not to fall. Her back hit wooden louvers. Light flashed inside the thing's inky form. Kate reached behind her, opened the closet. The thing pushed her inside and flowed in to follow, pulling the door closed behind them. Kate collapsed against comforting cotton and denim, her heart hammering. The thing squatted like a guard dog at the closet doors. Ripples moved over its slick surface.

Outside the closet, the stranger was on the move. Kate heard shoes tapping against the floor, fast-stop-fast, a rhythm of searching.

"I know you're here." The stranger's voice came from the bottom of the stairs. Kate tensed, almost jumped up. She thought he meant her. "Paul! I know you can hear me."

Paul isn't here. It's just me, you, and ... She didn't know what to call it. The fact that its form blocked the light filtering through the louvers told her that either it was a real, physical thing, or her hallucinations were better than most. Would Mr. Mystery Man see it, too?

"This can't wait for dawn, Paul!"

Paul is going to be under the maple tree at dawn, Kate told him silently. *He's going to explain everything*. She looked at the black thing, scrunched into a wad and definitely trembling now. *He's got a lot to explain*.

"I was thinking about our chat this afternoon." The stranger's voice softened into a gentle, reasonable tone, like an adult talking to a skittish child or colt. "You were surprised. I can understand that. I am even willing to forgive your reaction. If you agree."

"Agree to what?" Kate whispered.

The black thing's quivering increased visibly. Clearly it and the stranger were enemies, just like Paul and the stranger were enemies. But what the hell was that black thing?

"It wants you to reject me, Paul. It wants to win."

Kate's eyes fixed on the shivering bit of darkness huddled against the louvers.

"What's it like at night, Paul? Does it let you feel anything? Taste anything? I would."

In Kate's mind, a shining triangle formed. Paul at the top point. The stranger outside on the left base point. And the quivering black thing on the right base point. She had no idea what the hell was going on, but at least she grasped the pattern of it: a three-way struggle between Paul, the man outside, and the inhuman creature that seemed to think the worst thing that could happen to Kate would be to fall into the hands of the man outside.

"It wants to feel the warmth of the sun on its back, just as much as I want to see the glow of the moon on your face, Paul."

The stranger's words fell in Kate's mind like raindrops in a pool. Ripples fanned out, gathering up memories. The car was a gift from a man Paul said loved him. Of course! The stranger had bought Paul the car. And probably sent the flowers she'd seen in the kitchen. And he wanted to see Paul's face in the moonlight, just like she had when she

knocked on the door tonight. The hair on her arms and neck stiffened as she fell through the tunnel of her own memories. In her mind she stood again on the porch in the rain, waiting for Paul to answer the bell. Twice, now, she'd done that. He never explained why he couldn't come out at night...

"I don't want to hurt you anymore, Paul. Believe me."

Kate focused on the black form shivering beside the closet doors. She saw the shimmer of connections, as if against its inky surface. Her mental triangle folded up into a straight line. *Holy shit...*

"An eternity of days is more than most people get, Paul. How you live them is your choice."

The thing had tried to communicate with her, had been willing to watch over her while she slept. Willing to hide her from the man outside. She didn't want to believe it. Her rational mind rejected it. But she couldn't deny what her eyes could see and her heart could sense.

Slowly, she reached out and put her hand against the black thing's quivering flank. "Paul?"

The creature's sulfur-yellow eyes swam through its inky form and focused right on her.

"This is why you didn't come out that night." She didn't make it a question. She knew.

The thing compressed itself, trying to escape her touch.

Kate held out her hand, palm up. "The man outside. He did this to you, didn't he?"

Electric streaks pulsed across the black surface. Slowly, it raised one arm. The limb lengthened, the fingers reaching out and stretching, until its cool, oily touch brushed Kate's upturned palm.

"God damn it, Paul, YOU WILL COME WITH ME!"

The voice echoed through the house. Kate jumped. She banged her head against a shelf above, dislodging a pair of brown loafers.

THUD. *Oh, shit.*

Footsteps banged up the stairs. Through the louvers, Kate saw a man's leg in elegantly cut trousers, a man's hand clutching in and out of a fist. She could feel the force of his presence like a hand pressing against her chest.

The black thing—Paul?—lay almost supine, shivers breaking the surface of it over and over again.

Anger crystallized in Kate. Cold, faceted spikes of anger. The stranger had done this to Paul. She'd heard him speaking. She'd seen the flowers. He was the same kind of man who drove Ellie and women like her to suicide.

"I've found you," gloated the stranger.

Yes, you have. She couldn't afford to be weak, certainly couldn't afford being found cowering in a closet.

"Don't worry," she whispered. She took a deep breath, pushed wide the louvered doors, and stepped out into the bedroom. Her shoulders back, her chin tilted up, she acted as if this revealing of herself should be accompanied with a fanfare of trumpets.

The man's jaw dropped and he stared.

Kate smiled kindly, in a way that she might smile at a cute little dog. "Paul's not here. I've just come by to collect some of his things."

“What?” The word dropped from the man like a bomb.

“I don’t think he’ll be coming back, didn’t he tell you?” Kate turned back to the closet and took a few hangars worth of shirts. She risked a glance down, and met wide yellow eyes. She put the shirts on the bed. “Is there something I can help you with?”

The man took a step towards her. He was shorter than Paul, leaner and finer of bone. A sharp-edged man with a thin, pointed chin and overly thick lips. He radiated authority and threat like no other human being Kate had ever met, and she’d met a lot of bad people. Concentrating on keeping her hands from shaking, she matter-of-factly folded a shirt.

“Who are you?” asked the stranger.

Kate affected a surprised pause, the shirt held up in midair. “He didn’t tell you that, either? I must apologize for his rudeness. That’s not like him at all.”

Her lack of demonstrated fear, her casual tone, perhaps even her odd appearance from the closet all seemed to have put the stranger off balance and bought her some time. For that Kate was grateful. She arranged the folded shirt on the bed, pulled another from its hangar. From the stranger’s soliloquy she gathered that something important would happen at dawn. She risked a quick glance over her shoulder at the window. Was that a streak of lighter blue on the horizon?

“You’re one of his witches, aren’t you?” The man took a threatening step closer as he said it, putting a deep spin of scorn on the word.

Kate felt her eyebrows go up and her jaw drop. Witches? She tried to turn her surprise to her advantage. “Please.” She curled her lips into a snide smile. “We’ve hardly met, and you insult me immediately.”

No sense in claiming to be something that she wasn’t so early in this game. Besides, his tone and body language clearly said that he didn’t think much of the witches, whoever they were. Through lowered lashes, Kate watched for clues in the stranger’s reaction. He straightened his spine and tried to slice her open with his eyes.

“Who are you?” he asked again, his tone commanding an answer.

Kate’s thoughts whirled. Continued defiance would only make the man try to dominate her. She wanted to keep surprising him, keep him off balance.

She fashioned a charming smile, charming like the ones she’d seen on so many faces of sociopaths, put down the shirt, and held out her right hand across the bed.

“I’m Kate. It’s very nice to meet you.” She paused a beat and let just a hint of mocking brighten her eyes. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

The man took her hand and jerked. Kate had been expecting it, so instead of falling onto her face against the blankets she managed to end up on her knees, wobbling slightly as the mattress gave under her weight.

The man put his face in hers. “Who are you?” he asked again. His eyes traced her features. “You don’t have any magic in you.”

Kate leaned forward. The man jerked back an inch before catching himself. She put her lips next to his ear, as if to whisper a secret. “Maybe you aren’t looking closely enough.”

The man pushed her away. Kate stumbled back, laughing to cover the pounding of her heart. She had no weapon if the man decided to get violent. He didn’t have too much of a height advantage. The best she could hope for was to surprise him with well-practiced self-defense moves and get out of the house before he could really hurt her.

“Where is the demon?” the man asked. He’d moved so that he had a clear shot at her. “Where is it?”

It’s a demon? Kate forced herself to resist looking at the closet. She set her feet, the better to use his weight and momentum against him, and said, “I don’t know about the demon, but Paul is with *me* now.”

The stranger screamed and rushed her like a bull. A black form streamed from the closet, tangling up his feet. Kate skipped aside as he went down. She heard his jaw crack against the dresser. The black thing grabbed her wrist and they were running before the stranger screamed again, this time in frustration.

I must make it to the car before he catches me. Kate repeated it in her mind as she caught herself on the newel and stutter-stepped down the stairs.

The black thing slid down the stairs like a sled, hitting the hallway before she even made it halfway down the stairs. It waited, hand out, and then suddenly it arched, its whole body shaking.

Kate threw a look over her shoulder. The stranger was coming out the door.

I’m not going to make it. The man was going to catch her, and kill her.

The black thing pulled itself to the door that opened into the studio. It was clearly in pain as it fumbled with the doorknob.

Kate opened the door for it, trusting that the thing had a reason to hide in the studio and not make for the front door. She turned, meaning to drag it inside with her, but it slammed the door shut in her face.

Kate heard the stranger grind out the word, “No!” She saw a chain lock. She threaded it just as the stranger crashed against the door.

Kate skittered backwards. She banged into an easel. It tilted, spilling the drawing it held to the floor.

“Get out of there!” the man shouted, pounding against the wood but not trying to break the lock.

In the glow of gathering light, Kate looked down at the canvas on the floor and saw herself. It was a pencil drawing, smudges and precise lines working together to create the illusion of motion and light. A drawing of her, in her own bedroom. There—the Hudson Bay blanket on the bed, the woven rug on the floor. Jeans lay accordion-scrunched at the base of the chair. And she was depicted about to drop her nightshirt over her head. She was depicted nude, perfectly. Down to the light of the almost-full moon streaming in the window, and the bruises on her ribs.

Kate recognized the tableau. Last night, after she had fled Paul’s empty house without leaving a note. Paul—in the guise of that black thing—must have followed her home and watched through her third story window. That’s how he knew she needed him. He’d been watching all along.

“He’s mine! Do you understand! All mine!”

The shout brought her eyes up to the door again, and in the new sunlight she saw the three portraits of a man, with the black shape hiding in the background. With a shock she recognized both. She’d been hiding in the closet with the black thing. It had pushed her into this sanctuary. The man was pounding outside on the door, clearly unable or unwilling to come inside the studio.

Kate cast around with her eyes. The room was cluttered with canvases and sketches. She saw herself repeated several times, mostly scenes from Café Foy. There were more

portraits of the man, too. And many of a woman Kate did not recognize, a woman who, even in pencil sketches, had a beauty that made her shiver.

She'd met the man in the pictures, and the black thing he'd called a demon. Who was the beautiful girl?

The pounding on the door stopped abruptly. In the sudden silence, Kate heard the morning symphony of chirping birds.

The stranger sneered, "Oh, this one must be ever so special..."

Glass shattered outside the door.

"—if you're willing to ruin a bottle of Burgundy for her."

"Get away from the door."

Kate abandoned the drawings, pressed her palms flat against her side of the door. "Paul?"

"Paul? Paul? Paul?" the stranger mocked, but the placement of his voice told Kate that he'd moved away from the studio door, as Paul had commanded. "That was such a performance, Paul. Stay with me, Sander. Don't leave me, Sander."

Sander. Now Kate had a name. She felt less helpless against him.

"You were stupid enough to believe it." Paul's voice, hard and cold, came from the other side of the studio door. One quick knock against the wood under her cheek made Kate jump.

"Kate. Get out of there."

Her fingers scrabbled over the door chain, couldn't slide it open fast enough.

* * * *

Just as the hinges swung, Paul's conscious mind registered that he was naked, clammy with sweat from the change. The demon had fought hard against going back into its prison. It didn't trust him not to kill Sander and doom them both. Paul couldn't blame it.

Sander stood at the bottom of the stairs, hands out in a position of surrender, eyes moving from the jagged edges of the broken bottle Paul held in his right hand to the door opening behind him. From the corner of his eye, Paul saw the tangle of Kate's curls peek out from the studio.

She knows what I am. The thought tightened like a fist around his heart, even as the sight of her tousled head and freckles stirred his erection again.

Kate's eyes moved up and down his naked body once, twice, then locked onto his face. Paul saw too many questions in them.

"It was you," Kate whispered. "In the closet."

Paul shook his head, because she hadn't quite figured it out completely. How could she? It was so insane, all of it. "Just go, Kate. Get out of here now. I'll explain it all later."

Her eyebrows climbed and he could feel her outrage like a cold wind.

"How pathetic." Sander plopped down onto the lowest step. "I should have sent a woman to trap you. By the look of things, any woman would do."

Anger flared in Kate's eyes. "Shut up." Her voice was cool and even and utterly serious.

Panic flared in Paul at their confrontation. Sander didn't dare kill Paul, because that would end his immortality. But he could kill Kate, and that blow would break Paul

forever.

“Do you have any idea what’s going on here, little Kate?”

“No,” Paul said at the same moment as Kate said, “Yes.”

Sander laughed.

“She doesn’t know anything,” Paul said again, raising the broken bottle to emphasize his point.

Sander narrowed his eyes. “She knows how to make you hard, Paul, and that’s enough for me to hate her.”

“Shut up,” Kate said, her voice ice. “Shut up or I’ll kill you.”

Sander laughed again, long and loud.

“Kate, just get out of here now.” Paul grabbed her wrist. At the connection with her flesh, his groin tightened. He felt himself swell to full length. He’d never felt so vulnerable. “Get out now.” He shoved her towards the front door.

Kate caught herself on the door knob. “I’m not...”

“Go back to your house. Wait for me.”

“Paul...”

“GET OUT!” His anger and fear, as well as the demon’s, powered his shout.

Kate went still, the light going dim in her eyes. Then she set her jaw, pulled the door open, and, without another word, went out into the morning fog. She slammed the door shut behind her.

“This can’t go on, Paul.”

Paul dragged his eyes from the slammed door, back to Sander. He sat on the step, his chin balanced on his fist.

“This can’t go on, and you know you can’t win.” Sander smiled. “Why put her through all this? You know what I can do to her.”

The demon wailed helplessly. Paul felt something come loose inside him, like the tearing of muscle or snapping of bone. The pain, the fear, the humiliation was too great.

“This can’t go on,” he whispered. With sure, single-minded steps, he crossed the floor, gathered a handful of Sander’s hair, jerked his head back and put the broken bottle to his exposed throat. “This can’t go on.”

His ribs shuddered as the demon threw itself against the prison bars, screaming in frustration and rage.

Sander’s eyes rolled in the sockets, straining to meet Paul’s. “Go ahead.” Sander croaked out the words. “Even if I won’t have you, neither will she.”

Paul pressed the broken glass into Sander’s flesh. A ribbon of blood ran down his throat. The sight of it made Paul smile. He pushed harder.

The demon exploded against the prison, rocking Paul internally. His head swam and he stumbled back. He looked down at his hand, the broken bottle in it, the thick smear of blood on the glass. The red of the blood faded to black as the color drained from his vision. His bones cracked and threatened to give way. The pain drove him to his knees, pain that he’d never felt in the light of day.

The demon subsided back into its prison, leaving Paul on all fours, gasping. When he raised his head, he saw Sander staring, a hint of fear in his eyes.

“That has never happened,” he said softly.

Paul ignored him. He was too afraid to string words together.

The demon gave an exhausted whimper. It felt almost like an apology.

I should apologize. He'd almost cost them both any chance of being free.

"This can't go on," Sander whispered again.

Paul brushed past him, up the stairs. He threw on clothes, splashed water on his face. When he came back downstairs, Sander had not moved. He didn't speak to him as he left the house with no intention of keeping his appointment with Kate.

Chapter Fourteen

If he thinks I am going to run away from all this, he's crazy.

Behind the wheel of her car, the motor skipping a bit in high idle, Kate watched the front door of Paul's house and waited. She knew damn well he didn't plan to meet her at her house and explain everything. The lie had been so apparent in his voice, as obvious as his erection. Her breath hitched as the memory flashed through her mind.

Her reactions were ridiculous. She was not some tender virgin. She'd had sex before. Plenty of sex. Enough sex. Almost enough. She'd spent a romantic night in a Jacuzzi suite in Newark, frolicked naked in a flesh-shockingly cold river in Pennsylvania. She'd once even had a frenzied, spine-bending bout in the back of a Toyota with a man whose last name she'd never known and whom she'd never seen again. Every time Vanessa accused her of being an iced-over, career-centered she-bot, Kate told that story to prove her wrong. But nothing that had ever happened to her body before mattered, now that Paul had kissed her.

Why can't I fall in love with a normal loser? A guy with a wife, a gambling problem, a heroin addiction. It was just like her to fall for the only man on the planet who turned into an inky black demon every night.

The front door of Paul's house opened. Paul came out, dressed in jeans and a denim shirt, looking perfectly normal. He walked with purpose, his feet pounding against the ground, cutting through the morning mist like he had a plan. No sign of Sander Wald.

Paul threw himself into the Mercedes. Kate slid her car into drive, wrapped her fingers tightly around the steering wheel. She'd made peace with her strengths and her failings. She could stand to be the Kate Scott who failed Ellie, the Kate Scott who abandoned all the values her parents taught her. She could not bear to be the Kate Scott who lost Paul. That meant not running away, no matter how weird it was, no matter how scared she was.

The Mercedes backed out onto the street, then headed east, away from her house.

She'd been right. Paul never intended to come to her house and tell her the truth. He probably never planned to see her again.

Kate waited until the Mercedes gained a half a block, then pulled out behind it. Traffic was sparse so soon after dawn. Kate felt sure Paul would notice her as she trailed him out of town, down a rural road, just the Mercedes and her little blue Chevy. But he drove fast, didn't slow up or swerve or give any sign that he noticed he was being followed.

Without a flicker of a signal, Paul veered down a driveway hidden by low-hanging branches and blown-down leaves. Kate kept driving until she found a place to pull onto the grassy verge. She left her car locked by the side of the road and backtracked until she came to the driveway. She peered down the narrow lane, just a pair of tire tracks covered in leaves, really. She couldn't see where it led.

Turning up her jacket collar, Kate took a dozen steps balanced on the ridge of one of the tire tracks, then stepped off the lane and into the scrabble of leafless trees and brambles beside it. Moving slowly, sending birds flying up as she went, she traced the driveway back into the woods for what she guessed was almost a mile, until she finally

saw Paul's Mercedes parked by a little frame house, smoke rising from the chimney. Oddly, she'd expected a house of gingerbread. Surely this house belonged to the witches, whoever they were. And whoever they were, Kate was betting they knew the whole story.

Keeping to the woods, Kate circled the house until she found a bay window looking out over the autumn remains of a vegetable garden. Through the window she saw a kitchen and three people: an older woman leaning on a cane, a young man in ripped sneakers, and Paul. The older woman and Paul were gesturing and shouting. The young man sat by the window, watching and looking upset.

Bingo.

She backtracked a bit so that she could cross the yard without being seen. Then, with her back against the damp bricks, she eased back. Crouching, she tucked herself in a corner where she could just barely see, and just barely hear, what was going on inside.

"You've ruined everything. Everything!" the woman with the cane shouted. Kate couldn't see her from her hiding place. "You just couldn't keep your dick in your pants, could you? That's how you ended up in this mess to begin with."

Kate could see Paul, and she never wanted the cold, angry look on his face directed at her. "You're just jealous I wouldn't take it out for you."

The young man came out of his chair. "Stop it, both of you. Just stop it!"

"You stay out of this," Paul said, at the same moment the woman with the cane said, "You've no right to speak to me that way."

The kid pushed Paul toward a chair. "Sit down." He pointed out of Kate's line of sight. "And you sit down before you fall down, for Goddess' sake."

Goddess? Witches they must be, but Kate thought that only women were witches.

The woman with the cane hobbled into view and sat down in a chair beside the one Paul still refused to take. "He's right, Paul. Sit down. We'll find an answer to all this."

When she spoke, Kate saw the paper-thin skin of her face shift over the planes and angles of her skull. Whoever she was, she was losing to an illness. She wore a scarf tied around the top of her head, and Kate saw no wisps of hair escaping from under the silk. Chemotherapy, she guessed. Cancer.

Paul still refused to leave his feet. "You said you had another way," he said to the kid. "You told me you'd figured something out."

"What?" Now the woman came out of her chair and the kid took two steps back, his hands up defensively.

"I didn't tell you," he said to the woman, "because you don't think rationally about Paul."

Kate saw the outrage explode across the woman's ravaged face.

"It's true, Laurie. I'm sorry, but it's true." The kid crossed his arms and planted his feet. "Neither of you think rationally about this."

Laurie. It was the name for a carefree girl, someone with braids and gingham dresses. It didn't fit the woman in the kitchen, so obviously stalked by death.

"I don't think rationally? Well pardon me," Paul said, his voice thick with sarcasm. "After a hundred years it gets harder to keep one's eye on the ball." He plunked into the chair.

A hundred years?

"Tell her your other way, Vern."

Vern? Laurie and Vern? Those were witches names? She'd expected something more

mysterious and grand: Rhiannon and Cuthbert. No wonder Sander didn't take them seriously.

"Yes, tell us this other way," Laurie said, an edge in her voice that could scar diamonds.

Vern had his back to Kate. She saw his shoulders rise as he took a deep breath. "I don't know if it would work now. We've lost any element of surprise. He's going to be expecting something."

"Vern." Laurie's tone mixed warning and command.

Vern obeyed. "You took the wrong track, the last time. With Gloria."

Kate's head began to spin with data overload. *Who was Gloria?*

"You tried to use your power against Sander," Vern said to Laurie. "Sander is stronger than all of us combined."

"We know that," Laurie snapped, clearly not happy to be reminded of it.

"You were right in the idea of disrupting the ritual," Vern said.

Ritual?

"But we'll never match Sander's power. So we should use his own power against him."

Kate saw Laurie's face go from angry to thoughtful. She blinked rapidly, three times, and then her eyes drifted into a thousand yard stare. "His own power against him..."

"How?" Paul asked.

Vern shrugged. "There's a way we could set a person up like a battery waiting to be charged. All Sander would have to do is touch them. Touch them, and not kill them."

"Yes..." Laurie whispered. "Yes, I see." A smile broke across her face. She seemed delighted by the idea and proud of Vern for thinking it.

"But who would be your magic battery person?" Paul asked, and Kate could see the fear and anger in his face.

"Well, I thought me," Vern said.

"No," Laurie said instantly.

Vern nodded. "It can't be me now. Sander would sense my magic immediately. He'd never let me get close. He'd assume I was a threat."

"No," Laurie said again. "You can't risk yourself like that."

Whoever the kid was, he was important to Laurie.

Vern turned his back on Paul and Laurie and his face towards the bay window. Kate froze, trying to sink into herself. Vern ran his hand through his scraggly hair, eyes rolling around as he seemed to search for words. His eyes rolled around until they found Kate's peering in the corner of the window.

Shit! Kate didn't dare to breathe.

Vern's eyebrows climbed up into his badly cut bangs.

Kate put a finger to her lips, shook her head ever so slightly.

Vern made an *ah-ha* face. Very distinctly he said, "I can think of one person who could pull it off now. Only one person."

The kitchen went silent.

The realization sliced into Kate like lightning. *He means me. Holy shit, he means me!*

It must have shown on her face, because Vern nodded before he turned back to face Paul. "Sander will never expect it of your Kate."

"No way!" Paul exploded out of his chair. Vern took a hopping step back. Even Kate

jerked away from the window pane. "Absolutely not. Never. Never! Sander already wants to kill her. He wants to kill her to break me!"

"All the more reason he'll let her into the ritual," Laurie said softly. She looked up at Vern admiringly. "It's perfect. It's brilliant."

"It's not going to happen!" Paul paced the kitchen, back and forth out of Kate's view. "I won't let her be risked like this. I won't put her in danger, and I won't let you do it either."

Kate prickled. If there was a way she could rescue Paul from whatever it was, she'd do it. The choice was hers, not Paul's.

"You stay away from Kate." Paul pointed at Vern, then at Laurie. "You definitely stay away from her. You'd probably get her killed out of spite."

Laurie gasped in outrage.

"Just stay away from her, both of you!"

He moved out of Kate's line of sight.

"Where are you going?" Laurie demanded, rising from her chair and leaning heavily on her cane.

"I'm leaving. I'm never coming back."

"Paul, wait! What are you going to do?"

If he answered, Kate didn't hear it through the window glass. She did hear the front door slam, and then, a moment later, the Mercedes start.

"Vern, go after him," Laurie urged, grasping his wrist.

"No need." Vern turned around, bringing Laurie with him.

Kate stood up from her crouch, gave a little wave through the window. "Hi," she said to the staring, slack-jawed Laurie. "I'm Kate."

* * * *

The witches did not welcome Kate into the bright, airy kitchen to talk. Instead, they led her into the finished basement that seemed to serve as an office. An office with pentagrams. Neither Laurie nor Vern had spoken to her on the way down. If they were trying to intimidate, they were doing a good job.

Laurie flicked her hand at an armless task chair on casters. Kate sat. Laurie took the position of power behind a massive oak desk. Vern stayed on his feet. Kate felt waves of anxiety washing from him, preferable to the waves of hostility radiating from Laurie.

"So." Laurie dropped the word like a bomb. "How much didn't he tell you before he..."

"Laurie," Vern said softly. The mild tone didn't mitigate the criticism, though, and Laurie's face flushed bright red. "We need her for the spell."

"He can rot like that for another hundred years for all I care," Laurie said between clenched teeth, and shot Kate a glare that set her teeth on edge.

"I care," Kate said. "And since you need me for your spell," how ridiculous even to say that word out loud, "I believe that someone should do me the favor of explaining what the hell is going on."

"You see, he didn't tell her anything," Laurie said to Vern. "He just picked her up and used her."

Kate came out of her seat. "He did not."

Laurie stood just as quickly. "Oh, please. You're as clueless as a snowdrop."

“And you’re about as friendly as a Venus Fly Trap.”

“Why should I be friendly to you? Poor little girl, out of her depth, no idea what she’s stepped into.”

Kate leaned across the old oak desk. “I don’t know what your problem is with me, or with Paul, but I’m going to save him.”

Laurie smirked. “You, save someone?”

The inside of Kate’s head reverberated with the shot of Ellie’s gun, and she slammed her fists down against the desk’s hard surface.

Laurie jerked back, leaning heavily on her cane for balance.

“Ladies!” Vern appeared at the side of the desk. He put one hand over Kate’s, and took Laurie’s hand with the other. “We really don’t have time for this.”

Laurie’s gaze wavered, then her eyes dropped. “You’re right. We don’t.”

Kate flickered her glare from Laurie to Vern. “We don’t?”

Vern gently guided Kate away from the desk and back to the task chair. “We don’t. The ritual is tomorrow night.”

Kate lowered herself into the chair. “The ritual. Of course.” She flicked a look at Laurie. Her jealous anger had drained away. Now she looked mortally tired, physically and spiritually. “Um ... what ritual, exactly?”

“Let’s begin at the beginning,” Laurie said, her voice flat with resignation. “You will see why I want to hate you, Kate. After that, you can decide to forgive me or not.”

Kate felt the anguish of the woman’s approaching death. Her own voice came out softer, too. “If you explain what’s going on, I’ll be grateful.”

Laurie acknowledged the graciousness with a tilted brow and faint smile. She opened a desk drawer and pulled out a manila file folder. “Let me tell you a story.”

Vern unfolded a metal chair and sat down next to Kate.

“There once was a girl born to a wealthy and well-connected Parisian family. A bit of a rebel, this girl, she insisted on marrying a penniless Irish heretic. She insisted so firmly that she bore him a son, and named him Paul Dumond.”

Kate interrupted. “I’ve heard this story. Her father shipped her to America, but because she was her grandfather’s favorite, she lived well. Paul’s father didn’t.”

Laurie took a deep breath. “Paul was born in 1868.”

1868. Kate felt her eyebrows rise.

“When Paul was forty-two...”

Kate did the math in her head. 1905.

“—he met a woman at one of his mother’s parties. His mother was famous for her parties.” She opened the file folder, extracted a plastic protective sheet, and offered it to Kate.

The news clipping inside it was yellow and cracked, but Kate could make out that it was a gossip column. In bold, a paragraph began *La Parisienne Welcomes the Frost on the Pumpkin*. There was a blurry black-and-white picture. Even through the decaying image Kate could see that the woman photographed in her peacock-feather hat was Paul’s mother. The resemblance was unmistakable. The date on the clipping was October 17, 1905.

“The woman Paul met at his mother’s autumn party was named Alina. And her husband’s name was Sander. Sander Wald.”

Cold fear trickled down Kate’s spine. “I met him.”

Laurie gave Kate another newspaper clipping protected by a plastic sheet. The headline, bold and assertive, declared *Wife of European Noble Takes Own Life*. She scanned through the article. ... *just married one year ... Cinderella story turned tragic ... husband missing, feared dead, too*. There was a picture with this article, too. A tall, stunning woman who seemed to breathe light, even captured in the old newsprint. And in Paul's drawings. Alina Wald was the image of beauty repeated over and over in Paul's studio.

"Paul told me some of this story," Kate said. She thought of the honey-smeared sky over Mapleton. It seemed so long ago. "He said that Alina had been abused, and she came to Paul for help. He said he failed her. He said she died." She snapped out of the memory. "Did she really kill herself?"

"She did," Laurie said. "After Sander discovered her with Paul."

Kate looked at the newspaper clippings. "All this happened in 1905," she murmured, to remind herself. If she hadn't already spent time in a closet with a demon, it would be hard to believe.

"Women were still bought and sold in Europe at the turn of the century," Vern said. "Suffrage was years away in America. Women like Alina had little hope then."

"Or now." The irony tasted like rusty metal in the back of Kate's throat. "It's what I do. Or used to do. Did he tell you?"

Vern shook his head, and Laurie cocked hers to one side curiously.

"I was a victim's advocate. I worked with survivors of rape and domestic violence. Up until yesterday, at any rate. When my client..."

The hair along Kate's arms and around the nape of her neck sprang straight up. The air in the office went still. It was as if Kate could almost hear the far-off ringing of bells, if she strained the limits of her senses.

"What?" Laurie prompted.

"My client committed suicide last night. Right in front of me. I couldn't stop her. I didn't save her."

Hope broke like sunrise across Laurie's ravaged face. "Oh blessed Goddess, the wheel is turning." She looked at Vern, and the slow grin spreading across his face. "The wheel is turning!"

Kate never expected the news of her professional disaster to be greeted with such delight. "What wheel?"

"This world," Vern said, "is all about balance. What Sander did messed up the balance of the world."

"I've been waiting most of my life for the scales to tip back," Laurie said.

"What exactly did Sander do?" Kate asked, knowing that finally this had to be the key.

Still smiling like an idiot, Laurie gave her another newspaper clipping from her folder, a sidebar to the story about Alina's suicide. It was a biography of Sander Wald. Born in 1853 into the Hapsburg Court, the younger son of someone called a landgrave, he was a well-known figure in Europe's esoteric circle.

"What does that mean, esoteric circles?"

"Sander Wald is a ritual magician," Laurie stated simply.

Kate was still mystified. "Magician. Like, watch me pull a rabbit out of this hat?"

Vern laughed, a short sudden burst of surprise, and Laurie dropped her head into her

hands. "Thank you, Goddess, for your mercy in this our time of need."

Vern laughed again, and Kate realized that she had said something very, very stupid.

Vern explained. "Sander Wald was a student of Rasputin, and a secret teacher of Aleister Crowley."

Kate stared at him blankly.

"He was expelled from the Temple of the Darkened Moon in 1899. You've never heard of it?"

Kate shook her head.

"Never mind." Laurie pulled her head from her hands, rubbing her knuckles over her eyes. "Trust me when I tell you that Sander Wald is a very dangerous and very capable man."

Kate remembered the malicious energy that had poured from Sander. "I believe you."

Laurie picked the story back up. "Paul agreed to meet Alina in his mother's garden folly, on the night of the full moon, when Sander would be busy with his magical workings. The house Paul lives in now is built where the garden folly once was."

Kate sensed the beginning of a pattern, like the weaving of a spider's web.

"Paul only told me this part of the story twice in all the years I've known him, and both times, he was drunk," Laurie said flatly, "so my details are sketchy. When Alina thought that she'd have no choice but to go back under Sander's power, she slit her own throat. Sander worked a spell over her body, a very unholy, very evil spell." She paused and looked directly into Kate's eyes. "A curse."

"A curse?"

Disbelief must have shown on Kate's face. A hint of anger showed on Laurie's. "Don't doubt now, Kate. Not after everything I've shown you."

Kate looked down at the newspaper clippings. The woman was dying. Why would she go to the trouble to fabricate such a wild tale as this?

She looked back up at Laurie, then at Vern. Neither of them would make fun of her. "There's a demon in this curse, right? Because I've met it."

Laurie smiled, and Vern let out his breath.

"Sander conjured a demon over Alina's dead body, and melded it somehow with Paul," Laurie explained. "They share the same space in the universe. Paul exists during the day, with the demon trapped inside him. And Paul is trapped inside the demon every night, while it lives in his place."

A chill shook Kate right down to her bones. It hadn't been Paul touching her last night, trying to communicate, urging her to sleep. It hadn't been Paul who pushed her into the closet, tried to save her from Sander. She'd thought Paul turned into the demon. But the demon was its own thing, not under Paul's control. She'd befriended a demon. The thought chilled her to shivers.

"Sander fashioned the curse so it would go on forever. Every October full moon he has to recast the spell and bind Paul and the demon. Neither one of them will die as long as every year the spell is cast. They aren't vulnerable to disease or regular injury, just violence done one to the other."

"So that's why Sander's here, to..." she floundered for the word.

"Re-bind the three of them together for another year: Paul, Sander, and the demon. Unless..." Laurie looked to Vern.

“Unless someone uses Sander’s own magical energy to disrupt the ritual.”

“Someone like me.”

Vern nodded, and Kate felt the sticky strands of fate tie her up.

Chapter Fifteen

Apparently assured of Kate's help, the witches took her into the kitchen and plied her with tea. Kate felt compassion for Laurie, so obviously close to death, and a shared sense of adventure with Vern after the episode at the window, but she didn't trust either one of them. They hadn't given her the whole story yet.

Cupping her hands around the warm mug and its fragrant contents, Kate leaned against the counter. Laurie sat in the chair nearest the window, directly in the weak sunlight. Vern sat nearby.

May as well ask, if no one is going to volunteer to finish the story. "So, who's Gloria?"

Vern shook his head ruefully. Laurie's thin face went cold and hard. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"I listened at the window," Kate reminded them. "I know that you tried something like this before, and failed."

"I said, it's none of your concern," Laurie snapped. If she had enough strength reserves, Kate thought, she would have just left the room to avoid the subject.

Kate looked to Vern. "It isn't fair to ask me to do this and not tell me everything."

"No one's asking you to do this," said Laurie in the Venus Fly Trap voice.

"*I'm asking her to do it,*" Vern said, in the same soft tone he used each time he challenged Laurie, a tone that vibrated with respect and love, but also his own dignity and power.

He had a lot of presence for just a kid. Kate guessed Vern couldn't be too far into his twenties. She remembered herself at that age: brash, nothing-left-to-learn, ready to tear down the world and rebuild it without the bad parts.

When Laurie stared at the floor and refused to speak, Vern met Kate's questioning gaze. "This happened about ten years ago, so obviously I'm relating what I've heard second hand. I wasn't there."

Kate nodded, accepting the terms of his story-telling.

"Gloria was Laurie's protégé, the best and brightest witch in the coven."

A part of Kate still bristled at the improbability of this all. It seemed ridiculous that they were talking about covens and demons, curses and spells, without laughing.

Vern was definitely not laughing. His expression showed a borrowed grief as he shot a look at Laurie. "Gloria had such a deep natural talent, such a connection to the Goddess, that Laurie believed she could be a match for Sander. But she wasn't, and Sander killed her."

"She died because of me." Laurie's voice was dry, dead leaves in the wind. "I had come to love Paul, you see. It seemed fated. I would save him from the curse, and we would live happily ever after. I knew Gloria wasn't strong enough. But I was running out of time."

The question trembled unspoken on Kate's lips, but Laurie's sadness was so profound she felt she couldn't ask it. Why had she been running out of time?

Vern answered the unspoken question for her. "Paul doesn't age. Laurie does."

"I was forty-five years old then," Laurie whispered. "He wasn't going to see me as a

desirable woman for much longer.” She laughed, a painful sound. “Not that he ever did.”

The reason for Laurie’s hostility came clear. Paul had not loved Laurie. He did love Kate. Now could Kate trust her? She looked to Vern, who watched Laurie with eyes filled with shared pain. Could she trust him?

“What do I have to do?” Kate asked, putting her mug on the counter. “To save Paul, what do I have to do?”

“Tomorrow,” Vern said, “before dark, before the ritual, we’ll bespell you.”

Again, the matter-of-fact references to magic shook her. Skepticism and uncertainty tickled the edges of her resolve.

“We’ll turn you into a battery waiting to be charged. Then, when Sander touches you, you’ll be as powerful as he is, for a while.”

But if she let Sander close enough to touch her, he would probably take the chance to hurt her. Badly. If not kill her outright. “This seems like a really overly-simple plan.” Kate hugged herself. “What exactly am I supposed to do after I’m ... all charged up?”

“Disrupt the ritual. You’ll have to work on instinct. That’s why it would have been better if I had been the one, but now it has to be you.”

Disrupting the ritual sounded easy enough. She was pretty accomplished at disrupting all manner of things. But... “What exactly is a ritual?”

“This is a waste of time.” Laurie levered herself out of her chair, leaning on her cane.

“It’s our only chance,” Vern said.

“I can do this.” Kate spoke with a confidence she didn’t feel.

Laurie shook her head. “You’ve never been around magic, much less something as horrible as Sander’s curse.”

“I saw the demon. I wasn’t ... completely unhinged by it.” Kate remembered how it had tried to comfort her, tried to help her sleep. How it had rushed from the closet to try and save her from Sander. “I think it likes me.” Of course, then she’d thought that the demon was Paul. She hadn’t known it was its own creature entirely, with Paul’s essence imprisoned inside it somehow.

“Have you seen Paul change?” Laurie asked.

Kate shook her head.

“Be there with him when the sun sets. See what you’re volunteering to deal with.”

Laurie raised her skeletal head. Deep in their sockets, her eyes gleamed with unshed tears and frustrated fury. “Realize that if you do this, you will most probably die.”

The words hit Kate like a punch to the stomach.

“Be there for Paul’s change,” Laurie said. “And if you still want to try and save him, come back here tomorrow afternoon. Vern will get you ready.”

“Laurie,” Vern said in that soft voice.

Laurie slashed her hand through the air, silencing him. She teetered, the motion throwing off her balance. “I’m tired. I’m tired of all this. I need to rest.” Hobbling on her cane, she left the kitchen without another word.

Alone in the watery sunlight leaking through the window panes, Kate looked at Vern. He stared after Laurie for a few deep breaths, then looked back at Kate.

“Well,” he said, “that went well, didn’t it?” He shook his head and sighed. “But she’s right. Watch Paul change.”

“Have you seen Paul change?”

Vern closed his eyes and shuddered. Kate did not ask him anything more. “I know

you'll be back tomorrow, though," he said, opening his eyes again. "I know you will."

She thought of Paul, pictured the demon, felt the force of Sander's hatred. "Why are you so sure?"

Vern smiled, an edge of sadness to the curl of his lips. "You love Paul. I know the look. I've seen it on Laurie's face, too."

I love Paul. Kate clung to that fact, her life preserver in this strange sea.

Vern walked her out to the end of the wagon-track driveway. "Remember that it's normal to feel revulsion and terror when you encounter something supernatural."

"Like the demon," Kate said.

Vern shook his head. "The demon is natural, just out of its natural place. It's the change that's all wrong."

He squeezed Kate's shoulder once, and then they parted. He walked back to the little house, and Kate walked up the road to her car. She slid behind the wheel, put the key in the ignition. The Chevy threatened not to start. Finally, the engine rolled over on the third try.

When this is all done, I'm getting a new car. She eased back out onto the main road, now well-traveled by lunch-going drivers. *Of course, if this works out well, I'll get to drive Paul's Mercedes, so who cares.*

After going almost a mile, she realized she was just driving out of town, with no destination in mind. *I can't do this alone. I should call Vanessa. Or Gwen. Gwen would know what to do.*

But she couldn't imagine finding the words to explain something that she only half-believed, even after all she'd already seen. So she drove on alone. She found a diner, ate a lunch she didn't taste. She ordered coffee and noticed only the bitterness. Oh God, for an extra-large nonfat soy latte now. She ordered apple pie. More coffee. Watched the big white clock behind the counter tick away much faster than she thought it should.

When she parked at the curb outside Paul's house, the dashboard clock glowed 5:42. The afternoon clouds were streaked with red.

"Why can't I fall in love with a heroin addict?" She commanded her legs to get her out of the car and into the street. Reluctantly, they obeyed. "Why couldn't I meet a convicted felon? Something easy?"

She paused at the wrought iron gate that led to the porch. Was Paul inside? Was Sander Wald?

Instead of going to the front door, she followed the garden path around the back of the house until she found what she was almost sure was Paul's bedroom window. From her understanding of the layout of the upstairs, and the vaguely familiar curtains, she was almost sure.

Looking around at her feet, she found a handful of small pebbles, smooth river rock mixed in as mulch around a fading hydrangea. Choosing the lightest, smallest one, she took aim and threw.

Plink.

She waited.

Plink.

Nothing.

She chose a bigger stone this time, threw just a little harder.

Crrrrrack!

“Shit!” She dropped the stones, covering her mouth. Had she broken the window? She rose up on tiptoes, trying to see.

“What are you doing?”

She whirled and crouched the way her self-defense classes had taught. Her heart hammered in her chest, beating the breath out of her lungs. When she saw Paul step from the shadows, she gulped for air.

“Kate, what are you doing here?”

His expression was cold, without feeling. Irrationally, Kate had been expecting the demon. It had loomed so large in her mind, that she had not realized that she would first face Paul in all his beautiful flesh.

He tipped his eyebrows and waggled his shoulders, keeping his hands in his pockets. He wanted an answer.

Kate pointed to the window. “Um ... I ... ah...”

He stared through eyes gone to ice. He spoke in a tone meant to cut. “Very romantic, Kate, but it’s not going to work. I know you don’t know everything...”

“I talked to Laurie and Vern.”

The words hit him like a slap to the face. He actually flinched “Okay, I guess you *do* know everything.” He wouldn’t meet her eyes. “So you know why you shouldn’t be here. Why you can’t be here.”

“No.” Kate glanced up at the sky. “This is exactly where I want to be.”

Paul looked up. Something bitter clouded his eyes. She couldn’t quite tell, in the failing light, if it was tears. “I don’t want you to see.”

“I love you.” She meant to say it clear and loud, a firm declarative. But it came out as a whisper instead.

Paul’s jaw twitched. “It doesn’t matter.” He moaned suddenly, squeezing his eyes shut.

Alarmed, Kate took a step towards him, put her hand on his arm. “Are you alright?”

His eyes came open, blazing with rage. She pulled away, but he took her by the shoulders and propelled her back, fast, her feet skipping over stones and mulch, her body crashing between two bushes, until she hit the side of the house and her breath went out in a sudden puff.

“I am not alright.” His voice pressed against her ear. The stubble on his chin rubbed against her neck. “Of course I am not alright.”

Kate tried to move her head to look at him, but he held her still, trapped against the bricks. Cold sweat snaked down her spine. She tried to breathe herself into calmness. “But you love me, right?”

His body shifted, covering hers. His mouth came down on hers, hard. She answered, her teeth grabbing at his lips, trying to convince him without words that she wasn’t afraid. That she wasn’t too afraid. Then she felt his muscles tense. He groaned into her mouth, and she tasted blood. He jerked away from her, stumbling back. She heard him fall, heard him groan again, a grinding sound of agony.

Instinct moved her to go to him, to soothe the pain. But when she cleared the obstruction of the bushes, she saw him on the ground, writhing and arching. Blood streamed from his nose and ears, eyes and mouth.

No one had told her that it hurt him. She’d been expecting some magical wavering of the air, maybe some sparkles and glitter, for Paul to be gone and the demon thing to be

there. No one had prepared her for this.

Paul arched, his fists beating the ground. She saw the demon's dark form flow out of his stretched wide mouth, his staring eyes: blackness glistening with his blood. It burst from his chest, rending the shirt. She fell to her knees, her legs unable to support what her eyes saw.

For an instant, it seemed Paul was turned inside out. She saw white jagged shards that could only be bones, glimpsed darker, wet masses that had to be organs. And then the demon's blackness enveloped his broken body completely, swallowing him. The blackness began to form a shape: two legs, two arms, a head. Two yellow eyes sprang open, and stared directly at her.

She screamed. Terror flooded through her. The thing had crushed Paul, torn him apart and digested him. Instinct took over. Before she realized it she was on her feet running, her heart in her throat, her throat gasping for air. She ran down the garden path, thinking only of her car, of escape, of being safe.

She turned the corner and ran straight into Sander Wald.

She bounced off of his body, stumbling back with a cry. She looked over her shoulder, saw the yellow eyes, the flowing black form. She looked back at Sander.

A knowing, cruel smile curled his lips. "That's right. Run."

Kate ran.

* * * *

"She ran away!" In the gathering darkness, Sander Wald chuckled. "What a weak little thing. Good choice, Paul. Good choice."

The demon slunk back, hiding itself in the shadows. Paul had never felt the demon like this: cold, flat, lifeless. The usual high-voltage hum of rage that sang through it had shorted out. The thick blackness of its form seemed so empty it echoed.

"A weak little thing," Sander repeated, step by slow step winding down the garden path. "Not like you, Paul. You're strong."

Both the demon and Paul heard the possessiveness in Sander's voice. But when he spoke again, his voice dropped into self-reflection. One moment reaching out and trying to break Paul, the next moment he acted as if Paul didn't even exist.

"Maybe that was my error all along. Choosing the weak ones."

Now Paul felt a quiver of anger in the demon, as Sander paced sedately by. Through the demon's eyes, he saw the crisp seam of Sander's slacks, the perfect break of the hem over his shined shoes.

"Yes, perhaps that was it. It's not having power over the weak ones; it's having power over the strong."

He lifted his voice again. "Like you, Paul."

Inside his prison, staring bodiless out into a colorless world, Paul did not feel strong. He wasn't at all surprised when Kate ran. She moved through a world where there were no demons, let alone demons that took over the space in the universe assigned to a man she loved.

She does love me.

"She doesn't love you, Paul. You realize that now, don't you?"

A bitter fury pulsed through the demon like lightning in a cloud.

"She doesn't love the whole truth of what you are. She is afraid of you. She loathes

what you are.”

What you made me.

“But I don’t.” Sander stopped moving. Through the demon’s yellow eyes, Paul could see him from the knees down, standing a few feet away, facing away from him. “I think that you are the most glorious thing, Paul, under the sun and under the moon.”

Paul’s heart faltered for a moment. He remembered the lunches, the break from the loneliness with someone who knew what he was and didn’t despise him. Someone who knew all the same things, remembered all the same people and places. Someone he didn’t have to hide from.

“Come with me, Paul.”

If he went with Sander, Kate would be safe.

“Come with me,” Sander said, weaving the words into a seduction. “Make things right.”

Rage ignited through the demon. Paul felt some of it directed at himself. It exploded from under the hydrangeas, whirling through the air. It shot up into the sky, stretching itself thin, reaching for the fat, nearly full moon.

Gravity refused.

With an internal wail, the demon fell back to earth, scrabbling at the clouds, as if it could hold onto the air and pull itself up and away from Sander Wald.

It dropped onto the garden path, flattened and exhausted.

Sander Wald laughed softly, a sound that chilled Paul even without a body to feel cold.

The demon gathered itself up and launched into the sky. Again. And again.

* * * *

Kate could only drive because driving was the fastest way to escape. Her hands guided the wheel, her foot alternated brakes and accelerator with robotic precision. Her nerves, her muscles, and her senses worked together with one purpose: Run. Get away. Run.

Waves and waves of cold shame threatened to overwhelm her. She’d failed Paul, Laurie, Vern, herself. *I’m nothing but a coward.*

With her nerves already in shock from Ellie’s death, she’d had no room to feel overwhelming fear. But to see that thing break Paul open, crawl out of him, and then suck Paul inside ... it was too much.

She pulled in behind Gwen’s house, stumbled up the gentle slope of the yard. She crossed the threshold, closed the door, and still felt no sense of safety. She ratcheted the chain lock, turned, knocked over the broom and mop resting innocently by the door. The clatter caused her to jump and scream.

Vanessa appeared in the hallway. “Kate? Oh my God, Kate!”

Vanessa approached, arms out. Kate shied away.

Vanessa stopped, the hurt and confusion clear on her face. She kept her eyes on Kate, but lifted her voice. “Gwen? Gwen!”

Kate pushed past her, ran down the hallway, up the stairs. She heard the clack of Vanessa’s heels following.

She ran. Like a coward, she ran. Shame whipped her.

“Kate!”

“Kate?” Gwen called after her now. Both of them chased her. She ran into her bathroom, turned on the shower. She put herself under the scalding spray, clothes, shoes, shame, and all. She sank down into a tight, protective ball, the hot stream pounding on her head.

“Oh, dear Jesus,” she heard Gwen whisper.

Sobs broke loose in Kate’s chest, shook her, an earthquake of emotions. She lifted her head into the hot spray, tasting it as she cried out. The water suddenly stopped; Vanessa had turned off the faucets.

“Kate!” She took Kate’s head between her palms. “Look at me!”

Kate did, and saw her friend’s eyes go round with horror. “What the hell is wrong?”

“I ran.” Kate gurgled the words out between sobs and gasps. “Oh, God, I ran!”

Vanessa climbed into the bathtub and gathered her close. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, sweetheart. I don’t understand.”

It doesn’t matter. Her internal voice was as cold and distant as Paul’s had been. Kate let her head fall to Vanessa’s shoulder, let herself cry. For Ellie and Alina. For Laurie and Vern. For Paul. For herself.

* * * *

They coaxed her out of the bathtub, replaced the wet clothes with a warm, dry flannel nightgown. Kate felt them moving her arms up, sliding the soft fabric over her body. She could feel externally. Internally, she had shut down.

Vanessa and Gwen led her to a quiet little room Gwen used for contemplation, sat her down in a comfortable chair. Gwen went for tea. Vanessa, wielding a comb, set to untangling the wet mess of Kate’s hair.

“Your office called. We know what happened.”

Kate felt a sharp tug as the comb challenged a knot in her hair.

“We’ve been frantic. I called your cell phone a dozen times.”

“I’m sorry.” The response was autonomic, like moving her hand from a hot stove. “I should have called.”

Gwen came through the door with a steaming mug. “Hey, it speaks!” Her tone was falsely chipper. “Here, drink this. It will help.”

Kate smelled the sweet chamomile, and something bitter underneath. She raised her eyes questioningly at Gwen.

“There’s some valerian in there. It’s good for you.”

Which meant it would make her sleep. Kate did not want to sleep. She couldn’t face that thing in her nightmares. She shuddered.

“Are you cold?” Gwen asked immediately. Before Kate could say no, she turned to the little hearth. “I’ll start a fire. That’ll be cozy.”

Vanessa worked her hair into a silky mess. Gwen started a fire. Kate searched for something she could say without sounding like an escaped mental patient.

“I’m quitting my job.”

“Good.”

“Thank God.”

Kate felt the words soften her inside just a little bit, easing the pressure of the stone her heart had become. These were her friends, two people who loved her. She wanted to have them put their arms around her while she told them everything, the truth, but she

couldn't. And she didn't have time. Tomorrow night was the ritual.

The thought, the urgency behind it, surprised her. She was afraid of the demon, afraid of the magic, but she still loved Paul. She remembered Vern's warning: It's normal to feel revulsion and terror.

Gwen finished with the fire and turned back to Kate. Sitting on the floor, she rubbed Kate's feet. "Don't worry about anything, Kate. We'll be here to pull you through if things get rough for a while."

"Thank you," Kate whispered.

"You'd do it for us," Vanessa said, still working the comb in a soothing sweep.

The fire crackled happily, not caring that Kate's world was coming apart and re-knitting. Its cheerful indifference bolstered her. The fire would burn no matter what. The birds would sing. Babies would be born, people would fall in love. No matter what.

Strengthened by that strange understanding, warmed by the words and touches of her friends, Kate's heart began to thaw.

"I'm not sure what I want to do," she said, unable yet to lift her voice above a raspy whisper.

She saw Gwen open her mouth to reply, but then she paused, glancing above Kate's head to exchange glances with Vanessa. Kate couldn't see Vanessa's face, but she could read the concern in Gwen's. They knew she was talking about something much bigger than her career. Gwen, being Gwen, had picked up on the subtext of Kate's question.

"What do you want?" Vanessa asked in a carefully neutral voice.

Kate rode the soothing sensations of Gwen's rubbing and Vanessa's combing, and confronted the question honestly. *What do I want?* The answer rose above doubt and confusion and fear, a far-off trumpet call. *Love.*

But love with Paul? She had love, right here. Out of love, her friends kept her head above water when without them she would drown. If she wanted love, shouldn't she knock some sense into her heart and find someone suitable? Someone not cursed by a demon? Someone she had a reasonable expectation of sharing her life with? The world was full of eligible men with good jobs, steady hearts, unchanging physical forms. Well, not full, but at least there were some. There had to be.

The reasoning did not ring true. Kate looked up at Gwen, who watched her with compassion overflowing from her eyes.

"You got married for the wrong reasons," Kate said.

Vanessa interjected, "She got married to the wrong man."

Gwen shook her head. "No, he wasn't wrong, our reasons weren't wrong." She paused, clearly searching for the right way to express her thought. "I didn't know myself. I was trying not to be an artist."

Vanessa snorted.

Kate silently agreed. Gwen was an artist. She breathed beauty and symmetry. She communicated in color and light.

"I can't blame him for being angry and leaving. He thought he was signing up for life with a whole different person. How can I blame him, when I was the one lying? To him and to myself."

An electric charge zipped through Kate. She felt her spine straighten. Paul had not lied to her. He had let fear get in the way of showing her who he was, but he hadn't lied to her. After tonight, who was she to blame him for letting his fear overwhelm him?

Somewhere in the house, a cell phone rang. The sound triggered a memory.

Throw the damn thing out the window. But he hadn't. *I haven't kissed anyone in about a hundred years.* Kate thought it had been just a romantic exaggeration. But it was the absolute truth. She had been without a lover for a year, and she'd been willing to open her heart and her body to Paul no matter what secrets he was keeping. But Paul had been alone, frighteningly, absolutely alone, for a century, and yet, when he was offered her heart and her flesh, he had thought about the consequences to her. And pulled away.

He could have been inside her, without Kate knowing the truth. But he chose not to. She could find no steadier heart in a man, not in a hundred years.

She wanted to have a favorite flavor of ice cream. She wanted to have a favorite color. Paul suffered under a curse, yet he lived more than Kate. What courage did it take, she wondered, to cling to humanity under conditions like that?

What courage did it take for him to love her?

Was she brave enough to love him back?

She was brave enough to stand up to murderers and rapists, brave enough to wade through the aftermath of violence and throw a life preserver to women about to drown.

A vision of the demon clawing its way out of Paul's rent flesh flashed in front her eyes, and involuntarily her body shuddered and her stomach clenched.

She felt Vanessa pause in her combing, Gwen pause in her foot rubbing.

Was she so much the coward, after all?

Kate tilted her head to look at Vanessa: brash, worldly, take-life-ripe-and-bite-it Vanessa. Then she looked to Gwen, with her earth mother strength and grace.

"What are you guys most afraid of?"

"Failing," Vanessa said immediately.

"Not finding love," Gwen said, after a moment.

Vanessa laughed. "God, you are the most honest woman on the planet."

Kate took Vanessa's arm and drew her down so that she knelt by Gwen and Kate could speak to them both, face-to-face. "If you found love..."

"I'd take it," said Vanessa, her eyes fixed on Kate's.

Kate shook her head. "But..."

"Why are you still sitting here?" Gwen asked.

A warmth spread out from Kate's heart. She was still afraid; she was still terrified. But she was no longer unsure.

"There are some things you can help me with." She glanced at the clock. It was already after midnight. "And we have to hurry."

* * * *

At 3:00 am, they were almost finished shopping. In the harsh glare of the fluorescent lights, the demon, the curse, Sander Wald, all of it, seemed so hard to believe. Then Gwen turned the corner of the aisle, pushing a cart full of candles of all different shapes and sizes. "Romantic lighting." She grinned. "Check."

"How did they manage in 1905," Kate wondered allowed, "without all-night superstores?" She added a pair of black sweat pants and a gray t-shirt to the cart.

"Legions of servants," Vanessa said, her voice wistful and yearning. "One for your hair, two just to dress you, one to fetch your coffee in the morning..." She held up two choices of men's underwear: shimmering black silk boxers and tight red bikinis. "You

pick, Kate.”

Gwen giggled.

Kate reached around Vanessa to choose instead a simple bag of tightie whities.

“There’s romantic, and then there’s cheesy.”

Vanessa looked again at her options, and put down the red bikinis. “Alright, maybe those were a bit much.” She tossed the black silk boxers into the cart. “But give the man a choice.”

A bag of white athletic socks followed the rest of the ensemble into the cart, and they moved on to shoes.

Kate faced the racks of cheap white tennis shoes. “I don’t know his size.”

Vanessa barely covered a giggle.

“You’re shameless,” Gwen whispered, jostling her with an elbow.

Kate threw them both a stern look that dissolved into a grin.

“I doubt you’ll know his shoe size after tomorrow, either,” Vanessa said practically, and tossed a pair of size 8’s, 9’s and 10’s into the cart. “It’s a good thing men aren’t particular about their shoes.”

Gwen tossed in a pair of 11’s. “For good luck.”

Giggling like teenagers, they left the men’s wear aisles and headed for the grocery section. Kate thought about the delicious hand-made pastries Paul had bought her. She considered his demanding standards for coffee. “I don’t know if we can pull off the food thing here.”

“After midnight, what choice do we have?” Vanessa said. “No all-night gourmet takeout services here in Bonaventure.”

Gwen patted Kate’s shoulder. “You’ll be fine. There are universal food choices that satisfy even the most educated palate after sex. Trust me.”

Kate did, and wound up with a cart full of the crustiest bread available, olive oil, Oreo cookies, a can of mixed nuts and two frozen pizzas. Kate added a dozen quart containers of gourmet ice cream, exotic and complex in their ingredients.

“That should do it.” She glanced at her watch. “Just enough time to make me beautiful before dawn.”

Gwen squeezed her hand. “You’re beautiful now.”

With a cart full of fix-it-yourself romance, Kate did feel beautiful. But beautiful enough to make Paul believe that their love was worth risking her life?

Chapter Sixteen

What the hell am I doing?

Kate pulled up to the curb in front of Paul's house. No lights shone in the windows or on the porch. No sign of Sander. No sign of the ... *I can't even think the word, and I'm planning to take it home with me.*

According to the Weather Channel, the sun would rise at 6:41 a.m. The clock on Kate's dashboard glowed 6:01. She sat there, wrangling with fear, until the clock read 6:11. *Am I more afraid, or am I more in love?* The digital numbers morphed from 6:11 to 6:12. She forced herself out of the car and into the chilly remains of the night.

Cold fingers of air groped under her tan trench coat, up the line of her legs. Under the trench, Kate wore one of Gwen's ethereal white cotton dresses. Inappropriate for the weather, but Vanessa had insisted, saying it was only appropriate for a declaration of love.

Yesterday's clouds had dwindled to a few gray strands wound among the last of the pulsing stars. One gray wisp floated across the face of the almost full moon as she pushed open the wrought iron gate. The world seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for dawn. No birds chattered, no breeze rattled fallen leaves. The gate squeaked as she pulled it shut behind her.

"Hello?" she called softly. "Paul?" Her plan hinged on finding the demon in the garden, because she assumed that somewhere inside the house was Sander Wald. Sleeping, hopefully, and not watching from the window through a rifle scope or something.

When calling for Paul got no response, she crept down the garden path. "Demon?" No shadow lifted from the ground to greet her. She was both relieved and disappointed. When she thought the demon was just Paul in another form, it seemed less horrible. The idea that it was its own creature, with its own desires... She tried to concentrate on how it pushed her in the closet to hide her from Sander, but it didn't help. The thing was totally alien, and it caused Paul so much pain. She feared it. But did she hate it?

Kate moved around the porch, following the garden path towards the place she'd seen the demon emerge and Paul vanish. "Hello? Paul? Black thing?"

Something tapped against the top of her head. With a little shriek, she looked up. Yellow eyes stared back at her from just above the rim of the gutters. The thing was on the roof.

Dizziness spiraled through Kate and she looked down. There at her feet she saw what had hit her: one of the little stones she had gathered to throw at Paul's window. The sight of it made her laugh. One of them had a sense of humor. Was it Paul, the demon, or both?

When she looked back up again, the demon pulled back out of sight.

"Wait," she whispered. She didn't want it to spook it into running, and she didn't want to bring Sander Wald's attention down on them. "Wait!"

After a moment, a ridge of inky blackness stretched into view, and the yellow eyes popped up above the gutter again.

It was so hard to see it and not want to run away. Fear congealed in her throat. She forced words out around it. "Listen, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I ran away." She spoke to both

of them, Paul and the demon. She hoped both heard. "I know you know where I live. I know you followed me that night. I saw the picture in the studio."

The demon's yellow eyes never blinked. She realized that it had no eyelids, and suppressed a shudder.

"Come back with me to my house. I can't do this with him here." She felt confident both the demon and Paul would understand she meant Sander. "Will you come with me?"

For a long time, the demon didn't move. Kate stood in the garden under the fading stars, shivering as the frosty air swept up her legs. She wondered if it was Paul who was hesitating, or the demon. Or both.

Finally the black shape loomed up and poured itself to the ground. Kate couldn't help but stutter back a few steps, horrified by the sight. It moved like an internal organ lifted from a chest cavity and somehow brought to life. By the time the thing had coalesced into vaguely human form—two arms, two legs, a head with yellow eyes—Kate fought an ancient instinct that screamed for her to run Run ... RUN!

But she stood her ground. Once the demon form stabilized, she took a deep breath and felt sure she could take a step without bolting. "Thank you," she said.

The thing pulsed in response. Kate's revulsion faded just a little. Whatever it was, it kept trying to communicate. That made it less scary. "Great. Um, come on. Let's get going before ... you know."

Streaks of light glimmered under the demon's black skin, and it followed Kate down the path.

Maybe this wouldn't be as hard as she'd feared. She would take the demon back to Gwen's house, into her room, and be there when it went away and Paul came back. And after that...

"I didn't expect to see you ever again."

Kate's muscles turned to lead and ice.

Sander Wald stood on the porch. His elegant features sneered at her. A pistol glinted in his hand.

Why hadn't she brought her own gun? Then she remembered the spell. She couldn't kill him with it. She couldn't kill him at all.

"You are a persistent little thing." Sander looked as cool and polished and pressed as before, even minutes before dawn. He languidly raised the pistol. "Most times persistence is a virtue I admire. Most times."

Running was out. Hiding in the garden would just prolong the torture of the hunt. Besides Kate didn't want to do either. She wanted to climb the porch stairs, take the gun from his hand, take his hand from his arm, his eyes from their sockets, his tongue from his mouth.

"You can't just shoot me on a small town street and get away with it," Kate said.

Sander smirked. "I can do anything I want."

With a sinking feeling, Kate realized he was probably right.

Something oily and black rose up to shield her. She stumbled, but an arm shot back, stretching and thinning, to pull her right up against its elongated body. All she could see was the depthless black stuff of the demon. All she could feel was the instinct to jump away, to run Run ... RUN! But in her mind Laurie's voice echoed: only vulnerable to each other.

It was protecting her. Again. Suddenly, the demon wasn't scary at all.

“Let’s get to my car and get out of here,” she whispered. Deep inside the thing’s depths, she saw a flash of light, like an electric current inside congealed blood.

She moved as quickly as she dared, half crouching behind the demon’s form. It moved with her, keeping itself between Kate and Sander’s line of sight. Kate pulled the keys from her pocket, opened the driver’s door. The demon flowed inside, closing its fingers on Kate’s hand and pulling her in with it.

Its flesh was slick and oily. Kate fell behind the wheel, jamming the key into the ignition. The demon released her, and oddly, where it had touched her, her skin was cold and dry.

The engine sputtered—oh not now, not now!—and turned over. She jerked down the gearshift, stomped on the gas, and squealed away. She risked a glance in the rear view mirror: Sander standing on the sidewalk, the gun still in his hand. Until she turned the corner, she expected the back window to explode in a shower of glass, expected a bullet to drill into her head. But she made the corner, and knew she was safe.

The demon crouched like a chimpanzee in the passenger’s seat. The yellow eyes swam through the inky flesh until they stared at her.

It might have stepped between her and Sander’s bullet, but it was still the weirdest thing she’d ever seen, tripping all her animal instincts to flee. She focused on the road, how very short of a drive it was, from Paul’s house to hers.

“Um ... great job back there. You saved my life. Thanks.”

Her only acknowledgement was another flash of internal light. Kate wondered if Paul controlled the flashes. She wondered if Paul could hear her. She wondered how angry he was that she’d put herself in danger.

When she pulled into the space behind the old Victorian, the dashboard clock glowed 6:32. The stars and the moon were fading, and her skin was covered in a sheen of cold sweat. She turned off the motor.

“I have a safe place.” She gestured towards the house. “My roommates are gone. They won’t be back all day. You’ll be safe.” She risked a glance at the yellow eyes. “We’ll all three be safe. Okay?”

A shimmer of light danced just below the inky skin.

“I’ll take that for a yes.” Kate got out of the car, held open the door. After a moment, the demon slowly emerged, flowing like diesel oil and molasses. It formed its legs a little longer, so that they stood eye to eye.

“Come on.” She turned towards the house. The demon strode with her, side by side. They’d made it. Kate began to think that everything might work out according to her plan. For once.

But then the demon’s smooth, flowing progress stumbled.

Kate paused, looking back.

A ripple passed through the demon’s form, like a contraction across a pregnant stomach. The thing hunched in an obvious gesture of self-protection.

Kate glanced up at the sky. A ridge of light glowed on the horizon behind the trees.

The ripple turned into a wave, rocking the demon’s surface, dropping it to the ground.

Before she could think about it, Kate went to her knees beside it. She had seen the pain Paul suffered at dusk. She hadn’t realized that sunrise would hurt the demon, too.

The yellow eyes flared and then faded. Its body bowed, straining.

Kate lifted her hand, tentatively reached out to touch it. She felt the convulsions wracking the thing. It had no facial features but the yellow eyes. Without a mouth it couldn't groan or scream. Light flashed deep inside the darkness of it, and any pretense of human form it had melted away. It ran together, creating a vortex of blood and oil. The yellow eyes came loose from their anchor in the black liquid flesh, drained away into the swirl.

Kate knelt, unable to move. A breeze kicked through the trees, and she felt tears dry on her cheeks. She hadn't even realized she was crying.

From the swirling black vortex of the demon, a hand thrust out into the air.

Kate fell back, scrambling crablike away, as another hand, two arms, shoulders, and then Paul's face broke through the inky surface. He gasped as if he'd been underwater for far too long. Paul pulled himself out of the demon, and he flopped onto his side, his cheek pressed against the grass. What was left of the demon—a black, oily substance—pooled on his chest and drained into his pores, until finally, when the first real shaft of sunlight touched the grass, Paul lay alone, covered in nothing but sweat.

For a moment, Kate could do nothing but stare. Stare, and try to recapture her galloping heart and erratic breath. Simultaneously, Paul moaned softly and somewhere in the neighborhood, a door slammed, startling Kate into action. She shrugged off her jacket, fell to her knees, and laid it, inadequately small as it was, around Paul's shoulders as he sat up.

He looked at her, his eyes dark with a mix of resentment and resignation, then looked away. "Why did you do this?"

The question surprised her and angered her. "Why did you come along?"

"I didn't. It did."

She had to swallow a laugh. At least the demon had some sense. "Come into the house. It's safe and warm." Surely he was cold, the sweat drying in the frosty October dawn.

"I should go." He didn't meet her eyes.

Kate got to her feet. "You should give up the noble suffering act," she said. She walked towards the house. She didn't look back. *Please God, let him come along. Don't let him leave.* Her feet hit the first stair. But she didn't look back.

* * * *

Paul watched her go, fully intending to walk the other way. But shafts of sunlight glinted through the trees, catching her in motion. The white dress she wore went translucent, revealing golden curves.

He closed his eyes. "We could go for coffee."

"You don't have any clothes." Her voice was a sweet, teasing lilt from the porch.

He opened his eyes. She was going through the door, her hair floating around her like a halo.

He'd lied, of course. It wasn't just the demon who'd agreed to follow her home. It was just easier to believe that she could know the truth about him and still want him when he was imprisoned in the demon. Now he was flesh again, and she was flesh, and he wasn't sure he could get up from the grass.

Kate put her head out the door and snapped, "Don't make me come get you."

She was impossible to deny. The demon sent a wash of agreement through his

nerves. The demon—it had stepped between Kate and Sander’s gun. How long had he misunderstood and underestimated it? Probably for as long as they’d shared the same space in the universe.

He got to his feet. The trench coat she’d been wearing fit him like a cape. He tied it around his waist instead, strategically arranging the drapes and folds, before trotting up the little grassy hill, onto the porch and across the threshold.

He found himself in a little utility room, jackets on hooks, boots and shoes kicked under a sturdy bench. Kate waited for him, framed by the doorway into the main house.

“My roommates are gone for the day.”

Two roommates, gone at dawn. She’d engineered this. He felt a flicker of gratitude, a wave of anticipation, and a chill of fear. He winced internally: Paul Dumond, artist of seduction, bringer of joy to unhappy ladies, afraid of being alone in a house with a woman.

“I don’t know ... what you do ... after...” She shrugged helplessly, her eyes asking him for direction.

“A shower,” he said, then paused to clear his throat. “A shower would be good.”

Kate nodded, businesslike and efficient. “Follow me.”

Paul followed. She led him through the house, an old Victorian with walls beginning to lean out of square. When he had fled Bonaventure in the early 1920’s in his mad attempt to escape Sander and the curse, the house had been a falling down mess. When he’d returned someone had restored it. He’d made inquiries over time—he’d had a lot of time—and found out it had been built the year he’d been born. He and his mother had rented a room in it for a time, during a period of renovations on their estate. Eerie, that Kate would come to live in a house that had ties, however impersonal, to his original life.

Paul realized that he was filling his mind with thoughts about the house to chase out thoughts of Kate’s hips swaying up the stairs in front of him. Because when he focused on the shadow of her skin inside the white cotton fabric, he started to get hard.

She took him upstairs to the third floor, motioned to the right once she reached the top of the stairs. “Everything’s in there.”

The door to the bathroom was partially ajar. Paul could see the vanity mirror, the row of small lights above it. There was only one other door, and it was closed. Surely it led to her bedroom. A tremor ran through him, but it wasn’t fear this time.

I don’t know if I can do this. He wasn’t sure if he remembered how to love a woman properly. He wasn’t sure if he could wait long enough to take a shower.

He ducked into the bathroom, muttering a quick thanks, and closed the door behind him.

* * * *

Kate stood at the top of the stairs, eyes on the closed door. *This isn’t going how I imagined.*

In her fantasies, Paul arose from his transformation, newly minted sunshine beaming down on his shoulders as he swept her and her white dress into his arms, carried her upstairs, kicked in the door, and threw her on the bed.

She heard the shower pipes rattle, heard water hit fiberglass. With a sigh, she folded up on the top step. Maybe now just wasn’t the time for romance. In the space of the dawn just past and the next dawn to come, Paul’s life—and Kate’s—might be altered forever.

Paul might be free of the curse the next time the sun came up. Or Kate could be dead.

Once he came out of the bathroom, cleansed of whatever the change did to him, freshened with the new toothbrush she had thoughtfully purchased, armored against her in clothing, he would insist that they go to the coffee shop and return the relationship to breakfast only. Kate felt certain of it. Just her luck. Now that she had made the decision to enter his weird, cursed life, he would make his decision to keep her out of it.

She scrunched her fingers through her hair, feeling the curls Gwen had carefully smoothed spring loose and frizz out. *If it's not my stocking, it's my hair. If it's not my hair, it's the car breaking down. If it's not the car breaking down, it's a giant meteor...*

She should really be glad. In point of fact, she should feel wildly relieved. Paul was the sensible one. He knew the score. Kate didn't belong in his shadowy world. She hadn't been born in 1868. She didn't have a favorite flavor of anything, didn't have a favorite color. Red, green, blue—what did it matter, really? She should be glad that this absurd little fantasy had been slapped in the face by the light of morning. She probably didn't even really love him. It was all just a hormonal Molotov cocktail set alight by the idea he hadn't been with a woman in a whole century, and, big deal, he just couldn't hold out any longer the moment she was within arm's reach. It was embarrassing, really, to be just a convenience. She was glad it wasn't working out. Glad. Really, really.

Besides, when I tell him that I'm going through with Vern's plan, he might be mad enough to kill me before Sander does.

Which was why she was very carefully not going to mention it, until they'd made love at least twice.

Kate dropped her head into her hands. *What the hell am I doing?*

* * * *

What the hell am I doing? Paul dropped his head, let the warm water pound against the back of his neck. *I can't do this to her. It's wrong.*

The demon radiated a wave of disapproval that cramped his stomach and brought the taste of bile to the back of his throat. It wanted to make love with Kate as much as he did.

He had the distinct feeling that the thought made the demon laugh.

Clearly, Kate had brought him here to make love. It would be their last chance before the ritual. She wanted to have all of him, and give him all of herself. He'd forbidden her to try Vern's all-too-dangerous plan, so this would be the ultimate goodbye.

If he was a better man, he would find a way to sever himself from her heart and her life, hurt her if he had to, but free her from loving him. She had a natural life to look forward to, while he only had misery and impossible choices. He should just find a way to set her free. But he was not that good of a man. He wanted her, and he'd denied himself so much for too long.

He could never live with himself if Kate died like Gloria. He couldn't face an eternal half-life buried under the guilt. But he couldn't face an eternal life without her, as Sander's slave. He wasn't strong enough to let her go.

Paul saw only one alternative, and it terrified him. *She won't like my plan, but it is the only way. She'll see that. She'll understand.*

The demon sent another wave of nausea and vehement disagreement through him.

"Cut it out," he muttered. "How am I supposed to make love with her if you are trying to make me puke?"

Immediately the swirl of discomfort subsided. For whatever reason, the demon wanted this as much as he did. Of course, when it ended, the demon would have everything.

He turned off the water, dried himself with the towel she had so thoughtfully provided. She'd thought of everything: toothbrush, clothes, shoes in four different sizes, though all of them too small.

The sensation of the towel rubbing over his chest and thighs was only making him harder. His skin was that eager. His nerve endings screamed like baby birds in a nest.

I'll tell her my plan before we do anything else. If she can't go through with it, then I'll leave.

He didn't bother with the clothes yet, just wrapped the towel around his waist. He wiped the steam from the mirror with his palm, smoothed back his damp hair, checked his teeth.

I'll tell her my plan, and then she can choose if she wants to make love or not.

He put his hand on the doorknob.

What the hell am I doing?

He dropped the towel, and opened the door.

Chapter Seventeen

The bathroom door opened. Kate came to her feet.

Paul was not wearing the gray t-shirt or the sweat pants. Or the tightie whities. Or anything at all, except for whorls of still-damp hair on his chest and stomach and thighs.

"Wow." Her tongue stuck to the roof of her suddenly dry mouth.

He tilted an eyebrow.

"I mean, I'm so glad to see everything is the right size... I mean just your style."

His other eyebrow lifted.

"You look great. You look..." He was fully erect. "...great."

Oh God, I am the biggest, dumbest geek on the planet. She had to stop talking, or he would get dressed and leave.

"Kate."

He was naked and saying her name in a low tone that made her think of wood smoke and red wine and distant summer thunderstorms. Her pulse doubled, and she seemed to grow extra hearts: one in her throat, one at the tip of each finger, and one between her thighs.

He moved out of the bathroom doorway and she moved away from the staircase, until some invisible force stopped them an arm's length apart.

"Kate," he said again, and she saw it in his eyes. Some question, some condition, that was going to ruin this. "There's something..."

"No."

"Kate..."

"There's nothing that matters right now except this." She lifted her right hand, which she couldn't stop from quivering, to the first pearl button of her bodice.

His eyes followed the movement and he sucked in a deep breath. "Kate, I have to..."

"No, you don't." Fumbling only a little, she popped the first button, the second, the third.

A tremor ran the length of Paul's body, from shoulders to hips. "Kate..."

He was going to insist on something stupid like her promising not to try Vern's plan, or rationalizing why she should just let him go and forget him. Then, instead of making love, they would spend the morning fighting, and she was not going to let that happen.

"Kate, I have to tell you..."

She leaned forward and brushed the tips of her fingers across the tip of his erection.

Paul jerked like she'd sent an electric current bucking through his nerves. He came at her so quickly, the sight of his open mouth and wide eyes filled up her field of vision. He pushed her back, his hands digging into her shoulders, back, back, back, until she slammed into her closed bedroom door. Her breath came out in a sudden burst against his neck. He gathered a handful of curls and pulled her head back, closed his other hand around her exposed throat. He bared his teeth and went at her mouth, sucking and biting, forcing her lips wide and reaching for the back of her throat with his tongue. His hips jerked and rammed against her body, bouncing her against the wooden door. His hand released her throat and plunged down between their bodies. His fingers convulsed. Kate heard fabric tear. Little pearl buttons hit the floor, and Paul suddenly leaned away.

“Oh God, Kate.” His face was still flushed with excitement, but his eyes were cold with shame. “I’m sorry.”

Feeling dazed, Kate looked down the length of her body. He’d torn her dress at the stomach. The pucker of her belly button and the waistband of her panties peeked up at her.

“I’m sorry...” he whispered again.

Kate lifted her eyes to him. “For what?”

“I ripped your dress.”

She laughed. “It’s Gwen’s, who cares?”

His erection bobbed eagerly in response to her laughter, but it was with deliberate tenderness that he lifted his hand, traced her cheek with careful tenderness. “I don’t want to rip you, too.”

“You won’t,” she assured him, groping behind her for the doorknob. She twisted it. Golden light spilled out around her feet. “Come on.”

Warily, Paul followed her inside. Then his eyes lit with wonder.

With her roomies’ help, Kate had blocked the sunlight with heavy drapes on the window. The only light was the glow of the dozen candles they’d bought, turning her bedroom into a hazy, secret place for just the two of them.

“It’s our own private night.” Kate said. Would he like it? Would he think, after a hundred sexless years, that romance should be damned?

Paul kept his back to her. She couldn’t see his expression when he whispered, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

Too many heartbeats went by in silence. Kate’s spirits began to sink. *Oh my God he’s going to thank me, leave, and go find some skank who wants it rough and...*

“Thank you,” Paul said again, breaking her thought. “For three hundred and fifty nine breakfasts. For coming back when I chased you away.” He turned. His eyes gleamed brightly in the candlelight. “For still wanting me, even when you found out...” He reached for her with a shaking hand. “For being alive.”

His fingers found the fourth button of her white dress.

Kate felt herself go profoundly still, barely able to breathe. She wanted to close her eyes, but she couldn’t lose the sight of him naked and candlelit, tense and gentle. He undid the next button. His eyes flickered from her face to the skin he was revealing. The next button popped loose. The next.

Paul raised his eyebrows. Kate glanced down her body, to see what he saw. He’d revealed her bra. His fingers caressed the front closure.

“Thank you, that was a very thoughtful choice.” His other hand lifted towards her, and he unfastened the hooks.

Kate drew in a sudden, shaky breath. “You’re welcome.”

He chuckled, a low, intimate sound that released her from the stillness and set her trembling. He kept on unbuttoning, hardly touching her. When he reached the place he’d torn the fabric, though, he brushed his fingers over the skin he’d exposed. Shivers cascaded through her.

He ran out of buttons. The dress clung precariously to her shoulders. He closed his fists over both the dress and the straps of her opened bra, and gently pulled them down her arms. He paused for a moment with the sleeves halfway down, her arms trapped. He

knelt down in front of her.

It surprised her. She pulled back just a little, but he held her steady. His tongue tickled the line of her ribs. The sensation sparkled through her, raising the hairs along the nape of her neck.

“Hey, that’s not fair.” She shook her trapped arms, to make the point.

He looked up the length of her body and tilted his eyebrows. “Do you want fair or pleasure?”

“Both. Maybe.”

He wiggled his tongue in the crevice of her belly button. The tickly jolt made her jump.

“See, you should be sure about these things.” His slow grin exposed the edges of his teeth. “I don’t want to be fair. I just want pleasure.”

Still holding her arms, he slowly stretched up on his knees toward her left breast. He was so beautiful, kneeling before her.

Paul’s parted lips hovered just above the ridge of her nipple, but he refused to close the distance. Kate watched her own flesh harden and reach towards the touch that she wanted so badly.

“This is payback, isn’t it?” she whispered. “For touching you in the hallway.”

She felt the warmth of his chuckle on her straining nerve endings. His grin showed his teeth again, and he scraped them ever so gently down the length of her nipple. Her spine bowed with the flow of his caress. When his teeth ran out of flesh to tease, his tongue flicked against her nipple and Kate gasped at the shock of it.

“I think,” her words were breathless, “I liked it better when you couldn’t control yourself.”

Paul laughed, candlelight reflecting in the depths of his eyes. He tugged on the sleeves until her arms were freed. The dress drifted into a puddle of cool cotton around her feet.

Kate ran her fingers through his hair, marveling at the way he looked at her. She felt like she was glowing inside, like she had swallowed the stars and her heart was shot through with silver light. She closed her eyes and floated on that feeling.

Paul put his open mouth against her belly and slowly glided her panties down, his hands molding her legs. It was as if he breathed light into the center of her, and it glowed up her spine, warmed her breasts, softened her mouth, and exploded in shimmers from her hair. She laughed and hugged him to her. She couldn’t help it. It all felt so wonderful, her skin and her heart wanting the very same thing.

He came to his feet, circling her in his arms. “Made you laugh. I win.”

She put her arms around his neck and lifted her face to him. He kissed her, and Kate knew that she could never be separate from him again.

His hands opened against the small of her back, closing any space there was between them, bringing them skin to skin. His mouth worked against hers, deepening the kiss. Sensations rushed her like waves at her back, pushing her closer and closer to him with every heartbeat. The barrier of skin didn’t seem to stop her. She was falling out of herself and into his kiss.

He lifted her suddenly and she lost all sense of balance. Her feet left the floor. The world tilted. She floated in candlelight, glowing inside and out. Then the bed caught her. Her breath left her in a delighted laugh. She felt Paul straddle her, his knees on either side

of her hips, and she opened her eyes.

Paul stared down at her, at her body. Something he saw made him smile, just a slight quirk of his lips. Both his hands reached out, gathered her breasts and slid over them until only the tips of his fingers touched her nipples. She took a deep breath, brushing skin to skin. The slight touch danced down her nerves. Paul closed his fingers, and lightning flashed through her.

“You look,” he murmured, “wildly beautiful like that.”

“Like what?” She hardly recognized her own voice.

“Excited.” She couldn’t help but recognize the smug, self-satisfaction in his.

She moved her hips. “Am I excited?”

He tilted up an eyebrow, trailed one hand over her stomach and gently pressed a finger between her legs. A hot melting rush rolled up over her body, closing her eyes and filling her lungs. When she opened her eyes, he touched his finger to his lips.

“I think you are.”

Kate ran her hands up over his thighs, the soft hair there. She drew all ten fingers down the length of him. Every one of his muscles moved under his skin. His head tipped back, his spine arched. A long, humming sigh escaped from his chest. Kate circled the very tip of him with the very tip of her fingers and he came down, his hands landing on either side of her head, his body looming over her.

He searched her eyes for a moment, no other contact between them. Then he bent his arms and carefully lowered himself for a kiss. His lips nudged hers. She licked out with her tongue, and, for an instant, their lips hovered, not touching, the only point of contact the tip of her tongue to his, until he pulled back.

“I can’t wait any more.” His whisper kissed her cheek.

“Me neither.”

For a moment her words danced on the candlelight, and then Paul fell on her. His mouth closed on hers, his body crushed her into the bed, kissing her so hard their teeth scraped. An avalanche of buried passion washed over Kate—his desire denied for a hundred years, hers repressed for a lifetime. She wound her thighs around his waist, surprised herself by sinking her teeth into his shoulder. He braced his upper body on stiff-locked arms. She felt his erection fit into the groove of her labia. He slid inside her, all the way, in one smooth rock of his hips.

Everything stopped. Her breathing. His breathing. The turning of the earth. Everything.

Above her, Paul’s eyes went wide. He blinked over and over and over. “A hundred years,” he whispered.

Kate reached up and stroked his cheek. The unexpected touch made him jump. He moved inside her. The world began spinning again and she gasped for air.

He laughed in joy and defiance and awe. He dropped down on his elbows, putting them heart to heart, thigh to thigh. Kate locked her ankles behind his back, flattened her hands over the muscles over his shoulders. He found a rhythm; she matched it. In six strokes she felt the first flutter of an orgasm start deep inside.

“Don’t, not yet, or I’ll...” His hips froze in mid-thrust.

Kate scrambled not to fall with the sudden slipping avalanche of sensation.

“Shhh, shhh.” Paul’s voice was in her ear. “Not yet, not yet.”

She hummed out a groan of frustration. He chuckled and shifted his weight so that he

could look into her eyes.

“Just stay with me,” he whispered.

His eyes held her. He picked up a rhythm, slower this time. Sensation brimmed in her, but she anchored herself in the dark depths of his eyes. She braced her hands on his shoulders, lifted her hips, and matched him, movement for movement. Sweat-damp, black waves fell across his forehead. She felt his breaths on her face, each exhalation a whispering kiss. A part of her longed to arch her spine, let her head fall back, close her eyes, and let it all peak inside her.

“Stay with me.”

The words held her, even as he thrust faster and harder. She fell up into his eyes, scrambling to keep from going over the edge. Pleasure shimmered through her, light dancing just under her skin. Faster. Harder. She clung to the edge. She could feel herself slipping.

“Kate.”

She fell, pulling him over the edge with her. She felt him ram himself home, heard his hoarse shout. The force of it shattered her into a thousand shimmering shards reflecting pleasure through her body, echoing and echoing and echoing, until finally she fell back, whole again, against the pillow.

Chapter Eighteen

“That was worth waiting a hundred years for.”

The mattress beside Kate sank in as Paul flopped onto his back. She wiggled over to give him more room.

“No, no.” He tugged on her insistently, until she dragged her tingling body up to straddle his hips. “Just keep touching me. Keep touching me.”

Kate looked down into his face, his expression of absolute peace. His eyes were closed, his mouth gently turned up in a wisp of a smile.

Her stomach fluttered and her heart skipped. She couldn’t help glancing at the clock beside on bed: 9:35. She had to be back at the witches’ house before two.

She looked back to Paul, and met his lifted eyebrow. “Clock watching already?”

Kate put her palms flat on his chest. “This sucks,” she said irreverently, immaturely.

Paul drew her down for a kiss. “I can’t say; we haven’t gotten that far yet.”

She let his raunchy tone tease away her worries, at least for the moment. She braced herself with a hand on either side of his head and let her hair tumble around them, a messy golden curtain. “I guess it’s just like riding a bike, isn’t it?”

“Mmmmmmm.” He ran both hands down her sides, coming to rest at her hips.

“At least you didn’t fall off.”

He pressed her hips against his. “In a minute or two, we’ll see if you fall off.”

His sensual joy amazed her, his dedication to the moment, as if what lay outside the heavy drapes couldn’t penetrate their candlelit haven. Sander Wald, the ritual that would start at sundown—she felt the thorns of them in her mind with every breath.

Maybe if I had waited a hundred years... But she had waited all her life.

He lifted her chin with one finger. “I can see what you’re thinking.”

She tried to work up a sexy look, to throw him off track, but he moved the finger against her lips.

“You know I wouldn’t have let this happen,” he wriggled his hips, making her giggle, “unless I had a plan.”

He had a plan? “I thought we already had a plan.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Vern has a plan. One we will have nothing to do with.”

Kate felt her outrage rise at the same time she felt his cock rise to press against the inside of her thigh. What was the sense of fighting about it? She wouldn’t let him stop her, and she wanted him. Again. And again. And again.

She shifted, giving him room to grow. “You’re not the boss of me,” she couldn’t resist saying.

Paul rolled his eyes. “That one was old in the nineteenth century.”

Kate laced her hands with Paul’s, and then slowly raised them above his head. She leaned on his wrists, and said through the cascade of her hair, “Maybe I should be the boss of you. Switch things around this time.”

His eyes never left hers. “Bad plan.”

With his wrists trapped under her palms and his body stretched out under her, Kate thought it might be a very good plan, indeed. “What’s a better plan?”

“A better plan...” He lifted his hips, probing between her thighs. “A better plan is for

me to lose myself in the body of the woman I love..."

"The woman who loves you," Kate corrected. She leaned back on her heels, keeping his wrists in check, and lowered her head to his chest. She took his left nipple between her teeth. She heard a low growling start deep down in his throat. She switched to his right nipple, found it already hard. She swirled her tongue around it, then blew lightly across it. She felt his stomach muscles quiver.

A very good plan, indeed.

Still teasing his nipple, she took one hand from his wrists and trailed her fingernails down his left arm, over the silky hair in his armpit, down the bumps of his ribs. When she scratched across his waist, she felt the muscles contract again, his hard-on thrust toward her. He gasped and laughed at the same time.

"Made you laugh," Kate whispered against his chest.

Effortlessly, he broke her hold on his wrists, circled her waist, and switched their positions, turning Kate onto her back and looming over her so quickly that she let out a little squeal.

"Ha ha," he said.

"That's not fair!"

"Aha, we're back to what's fair again." He dropped a kiss on her nose. "What a slow learner you are, Kate."

She pretended to pout. "You were telling me your better plan."

"Yes, my better plan." He leaned back on his heels and reached for her hands.

Defiantly, Kate moved them before he could catch them, and folded them under her head as if she were relaxing on the beach. "Your plan?"

His smirk acknowledged her cleverness, and her eagerness for his touch. He cupped her breasts. "These are so pretty."

He was distracting her. Whatever plan he had, she wasn't going to like it. She tilted her eyebrows and tapped her foot impatiently against the bedspread.

"My better plan." He rubbed his thumbs over her nipples. "As I said, is to lose myself in the body of the woman I love, and what a lovely place to lose myself, if I may say..."

A little distraction couldn't hurt. "You may..."

"You're too kind." His hands followed the line of her ribs, across a tremendously sensitive spot on her abdomen, making her giggle breathlessly.

"You make the silliest sounds when you're naked." He stretched full length beside her. His hand slid between her legs. The feeling ran under her skin like a hot wave, and she moaned.

"Such silly sounds," he murmured against the swell of her breast, moving downwards. He put his lips firmly over her belly button and blew a raspberry. She couldn't stop her deep, happy laughter. "It was always so easy to make you laugh."

"Hey!" She rose up on one elbow, ready to defend her record at the laughing game. He pulled her up into a sitting position at the bed's edge, while he settled himself on the floor in front of her. Suddenly, she wasn't laughing. He eased her thighs apart and spread her with his fingers. Kate saw him close his eyes, dip his head towards her. Her body tensed in anticipation, but instead of the hot liquid feeling she expected, she felt his breath blow across her. She lifted her hips, heard herself make a high, keening sound of frustrated desire.

“You are a virtual repertoire of silly sounds.” His tone was smug.

She looked down the length of her tingling body. Already his hands were sliding up her ribs towards her breasts. “Again, I must protest.” Her voice quivered. “This is not fair.”

“Perhaps not at the moment.” His hands circled her breasts, his fingers circled her nipples. “But in a little while I’ll let you even the score.”

“Let me?”

He mock-pushed at her shoulders, and she obliged him by falling back against the mattress again.

He lifted her left leg, holding it straight and taut. She felt his tongue at her ankle, moving slowly towards the back of her knee, and her outrage melted away. Floating in a cloud of passion, she felt his open mouth slide up the inside of her thigh. She braced herself for another tease, but without a pause his mouth covered her and his tongue reached deep inside.

Kate arched towards the delightful, hot waves, her body focused on that intimate kiss, finding herself quivering suddenly on the edge again. His mouth moved up, his tongue trailing over her teasingly, until he licked a ticklish spot on her abdomen, at the same moment his fingers closed on her nipples.

“That’s a new sound.” Paul stood straight, his fingers rimming her aureoles.

How could his not touching her nipples make her wilder than touching them?

“Please...”

“Shhh. Let me have my fun.”

“Let me have my...” He slid his palms over the tips of her breasts, and her body spasmed, a heart pounding between her thighs. She felt him nudge her, slip in just enough to tease. Her hips rode up, chasing after more. He pulled back, eyes glittering.

Kate dropped her head against the mattress. “You should come with a warning label.”

“Whatever, just as long as I get to come.”

Kate lifted herself on her elbows. “Then why don’t you lie down here and let me have my way with you?”

He gazed down at her, his eyes serious. “Because I’m not sure that I could handle it. Yet.”

Now it was Kate’s turn to show her teeth. “I promise to be gentle.”

“What if I’d rather have you rough?”

Her heart kicked into a higher gear. She eased herself to the edge of the bed, and patted the blankets. “Come on.”

Paul stared at her for a moment, and then slowly lay down on his back. He folded his arms behind his head, just like she did.

Kate considered fetching a belt or two and tying him to the bedposts. That way when she told him she was going through with Vern’s plan, he wouldn’t be able to throttle her. She glanced at the bedside clock. Not enough time. She looked from Paul’s glittering eyes down the lean line of his body, and wished there was enough time.

She settled for laying the tip of her index finger against the head of his erect cock.

Paul groaned, his spine arching. “You don’t take prisoners, do you?”

“I don’t take orders well, either.”

“Kate.” Paul’s hand closed on her wrist. “Don’t even...”

"I won't lose you." She refused to meet his gaze, even though she could feel it pressing against her skin.

"And I won't lose you. Kate, look at me." He took his hand from her wrist and cupped her chin, tilted her face towards his. "I have a better..."

Kate circled the crown of his hard-on and stroked down.

Paul's hips snapped off the bed, a harsh sound ripping free from his chest.

"If it's such a better plan," she said, "why haven't you told me the details?"

"I tried." He lifted himself on an elbow. "In the hallway, before all this. But you did..."

"This?" She feathered her fingernails over the very tip of him again.

"Kate!" Paul lunged, grabbed her wrist, pulled her hand away. "Kate, please." He struggled for breath. "We have to talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about." Kate straddled him.

"Kate, stop."

She did stop, when the tip of his erection parted her outer lips. She knelt over him, offering everything. He stared up at her, his eyes wide, breath whistling through his clenched teeth. It took all her self control not to take him all the way inside her.

"Just make love to me again," she whispered.

Paul set his jaw. "My plan is..."

She slid down on him, all the way to the root.

"God!" His body bowed so violently that he lifted her with him. Before she could catch her balance or her breath, his hands gripped her thighs and he began grinding into her, hard and fast.

"My plan..." he gritted it through his teeth "—is to stay with you until the last minute."

Kate held on to his shoulders as he drove deeper and deeper into her.

"Then I'm going to let Sander finish the ritual." He pushed her thighs further apart. "One last time. Then," he rocked her, holding her tightly against him, "I'm going to kill him."

The words hit her like a lightning bolt, numbing every physical sensation. If he killed Sander after the ritual... She twisted away from him, wrenching herself free from his thrusts. "You can't!" If he killed Sander after the ritual, he'd have one year before the demon took him. "You can't do that!" She scrambled off the bed to stand with her back against the wall, gasping for breath.

Paul came to his knees. His erection bobbed, searching for her. His eyes were dazed with arousal. "There is no other way, Kate."

"Of course there is another way!"

"No!" He slashed his arm in denial. Weaving like a drunk, he climbed to his feet. "I won't allow it!"

She wanted to go to him, take him into her again and again until the sun set. But... "A year isn't long enough, Paul."

"It's all I have!"

His shout reverberated through the bones in her chest.

He lunged, trapping her between the wall and his body. "Don't you get it? I couldn't survive it if you died for me."

Kate couldn't help herself. She wound her arms around his neck. "You can't die

unless Sander kills you.”

He leaned into her, his forehead resting against hers. She could feel the sweat cooling on his arms, legs, and back. “There are worse things than dying.”

She felt her heart break, a palpable crack somewhere deep inside.

“Please, Kate. Promise me you won’t.”

I can’t make that promise.

She pressed her mouth against his, climbed his body until she locked her ankles at the small of his back. He slipped so easily inside her, as if she had been made to take him in. He thrust once. Twice. Then he groaned and she felt the orgasm shake him. She unwound her legs. The moment she was stable on her feet again, he slid down her body to his knees.

“Thank you,” he whispered against the skin of her stomach.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered back, and carefully stepped out his embrace.

“I’m sorry, too.” He stayed on his knees, kept his head bowed. “I wish I could give you more, Kate. I wish...”

Moving quickly and quietly, she pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, not bothering with underwear.

“I wish I’d had the courage to keep you out of this mess altogether,” Paul said.

Kate slipped her feet into a pair of old leather loafers. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

Paul laughed softly. “You are the most courageous person I’ve ever known, Kate Scott, but...” He finally turned, and saw her dressed. “What are you doing?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Vern said he needs most of the afternoon to get me ready.”

Paul stared at her blankly. “What?”

“I’m going to do it, Paul. I’m going to save you.”

His jaw came open. “But, you promised.”

“I finished making love to you. I didn’t promise anything.”

She opened the door and slipped into the hallway.

“Kate!”

She took the stairs at a run.

“Kate!” His footfalls thundered behind her.

In the kitchen his hand caught the hem of her sweatshirt, but she twisted and danced away.

“Kate!”

She burst through the back door and ran down the little hill to her Chevy. She threw herself behind the wheel and turned the key. The motor turned over smoothly.

“Kate!”

Paul stood in the doorway, not willing to chase her down while he was naked.

“If you think I’m going to lose you,” Kate whispered to him, “you’re crazy.”

She backed out of her parking place and spun out of the alley.

Chapter Nineteen

Paul jammed his feet into the largest pair of shoes Kate had bought. His toes crunched together as he tied the laces as loosely as he dared. At least the t-shirt and sweats fit. He stutter-stepped down the stairs, leaped from Kate's porch, and started running toward Lincoln Avenue.

If she thinks I'll let her throw her life away, she's out of her mind.

He repeated the mantra as he ran through the rain, sinking in the grass as he dodged around swing-sets and back-yard pools. When he got to Minniver Lane, the sidewalk buckled into a moonscape, and the road was littered with debris from the half-built house. His crushed toes couldn't take the uneven jolts. Damn shoes. He limped as fast as he could, trying to ignore the rain, keeping himself from screaming and shouting in sheer frustration.

How could she do this to him? How could she abandon him? Sander would kill her, torture her, use her agony to break the last thinning cords of Paul's will. She thought she was saving him, but she was really damning him as completely and thoroughly as he deserved.

He stumbled on a root jutting out of the crumbled concrete. Toe bones ground together inside the cruelly narrow shoes. Pain flashed up his left ankle. Rain shook in a curtain from his bangs and cascaded onto his nose, sending him into a flurry of sneezes. He scrubbed his hand across his face and limped on.

He'd never been so afraid in all his life. Not since the black shadow of the demon lifted out of Alina's corpse. Not since the first time it burst out of him at sundown. At the thought of Kate dying for him, every cell in his body pulsed with soul-deep terror.

Finally, finally, he turned the corner onto Lincoln and smooth pavement. He tugged off the shoes, threw them in the ditch and started running. His toes felt so happy to be free from constriction that his nerves barely registered the cold of the cement and the puddles he splashed through.

He was right, and that was that. He was going to stop her, no matter what he had to do. He wouldn't let her die. And he wasn't going to Europe with Sander. His way was the only way. He was sure of it.

Except that at heart level—and he could feel it while he ran, his breath deep and fast—something pulsed and twitched. Like Kate's body, just before...

What if she can do it?

The irrational hope trickled down past his heart into the prison. He felt the demon lift its head and taste it. With an internal wail, it rattled the bones of his ribs with an unspoken challenge. *What if Kate could do it?*

Paul caught himself on the wrought iron garden gate, the spikes poking into his ribs. Rain pelted him as he lifted his face. The first and second floor windows of his house were dark and still in the morning light. Lights flickered in the basement window wells. Sander was down there, laying the magic circle that would hold Paul once the sun went down, marking out the pentagram that would imprison the demon once he extracted it from Paul's body.

What if she can't? What if she dies? Paul leaned on the gate as he sent the message

down through his cells, wishing the iron spikes could reach inside and pierce the demon's irrational hope. What if she dies?

He had to get to Laurie's house and stop Kate. He remembered all too well the look on Gloria's face when she died. He remembered her eyes, wide and white. She'd broken through Sander's protective wards, but she'd come through unhinged, insane. He remembered her shriek, the trickle of creamy white foam from the side of her mouth. She'd strangled to death on whatever had been in those wards. She'd died slowly as Sander worked the spell, her heels drumming a counterpoint rhythm to Sander's chanting. She'd died with horror permanently etched on her face.

Paul pulled himself away from the gate, still breathing hard. He threw himself behind the Mercedes' wheel, turned the key. The engine ignited, eager to serve him.

If she thinks I'll let her throw her life away, she's out of her mind.

Paul knew he'd do anything to stop her, to save her. Anything.

* * * *

If he thinks I'm just going to lie back and accept this, he's not cursed, he's crazy.

Kate silently recited the mantra as she pushed the little blue Chevy as fast as it could go around the rural road's tight corners. Relentless rain sheeted against her windshield. She almost missed the half-hidden turnoff into the trees, had to slam on the brakes. Her tires spun in the wet leaves lining the wagon tracks leading to the witches' house. The car slid to a stop near the porch.

How could he ever imagine that a year would be enough? She imagined that year, every happy moment soured by the relentless ticking countdown toward the October full moon. She imagined how it would feel, watching the demon's form swallow Paul for the last time. Horror like old copper pennies rose on her tongue.

She hadn't been able to save Ellie. He hadn't been able to save Alina.

I'm going to save him.

She darted from the car through the rain, took the porch steps two at a time. She pounded on the door, both fists against the wood. "Laurie! Vern!"

The door opened mid-pound. Vern took a step back. Kate stopped her fist before it came down on his face.

"He's not cursed, he's crazy," she blurted into Vern's shocked face. She pushed her way into the house. "I'm here. I'm ready. Let's go."

"Hold up." Vern closed the door and faced Kate with his hands on his hips. "You can't go into this all wound up and crazy."

"I'm not crazy. He's the one who's crazy." Kate was already halfway to the kitchen. "Did he tell you his big one-year plan?"

Vern trailed behind. "What are you talking about. Kate?"

Kate jerked to a stop at the edge in Vern's tone. "What?"

"Stop moving." Vern caught up with her and put a firm hand on each of her shoulders. "Just stop moving and breathe."

Kate took a deep breath. Her skin crawled with adrenaline bugs. "I might be a little wound up, but I'm not crazy."

Vern nodded, but Kate saw lingering doubt in his eyes. "That's a little better. I'll make you some tea." He released her, turned towards the stove.

"I don't want tea," Kate protested. "I want to get going. I want to kick some sorcerer

ass.” She certainly didn't want to think too hard about what she was about to do. She just wanted to get it done.

Without turning his head, Vern pointed to a chair. “Sit.”

Kate bristled at the presumptive tone. “I don't take orders too well. Ask Paul.”

“You're going to have to take our orders, if you want to live through this.”

Kate jerked her head towards the kitchen door. Laurie stood there, leaning heavily on her cane.

“You shouldn't be out of bed.” Vern rushed to her side and helped her into the nearest chair. “I can handle this.”

“No, you can't.” Laurie squeezed Vern's arm to take the sting out her words. “I'll be fine.”

With her ash-colored skin and the deep, sunken circles around her eyes, Kate doubted it. But if it had been Kate who'd worked for fifty years to free Paul, she would stare death down and not let anyone stop her. Laurie and Vern were as committed as she was. She had no choice but to trust them. She eased herself into a chair and sat on the very edge, her knees bouncing a nervous rhythm.

“I'm ready.” Kate said. “I'm ready to do whatever it takes to break the curse.”

Laurie settled her head against the back of her chair and sighed, loudly. “My dear girl...”

Kate hackles went up.

“...it isn't a question of doing whatever it takes. Whatever you're capable of doing will have to suffice.”

“Rah, rah, go team.” Kate slicked the words with sarcasm to cover the fear curling up her spine. She hadn't been able to save Ellie, not from her husband, not from her terror. What made her think she would be capable of saving Paul from a hundred-year-old sorcerer?

Doubt must have sat plainly on her face. Both Laurie and Vern fell silent, watching her, waiting for some kind of decisive action.

What did she know about spells and curses? All she knew was how to beat her head up against the wall of her problems until one of them broke. Usually her head.

“Kate.” Laurie's tone drew Kate's eyes out of her internal dialog. “Can you do it?”

She didn't have any other choice. Not if she wanted a life with Paul. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

Laurie nodded, apparently satisfied. Vern took over, as Laurie looked worn out just from speaking.

“We're going to use Sander's own magic against him, by turning you into a great big magical battery for him to charge.”

Kate's imagination filled with visions of jumper cables and alligator clips in all the wrong places. “How bad is it going to hurt, this charging thing?”

“I don't know,” Vern said, brutally and honestly. Kate saw anger and frustration in his eyes, and understood how much he wished he could take her place in this fight.

“How do I *use* the magic once I get it?”

Vern stared at her for a moment, then turned to Laurie. “This is never going to work. I was wrong. It has to be me that goes.”

“No.” Laurie and Kate spoke simultaneously.

Kate nodded. She didn't know how she knew it, but Laurie was right. She had to be

the one. Paul hadn't saved Alina. She hadn't saved Ellie. There was a pattern here that only Kate and Paul and Sander could complete.

"We go into this," Laurie said, speaking to Vern but clearly intending Kate to get the message, too, "assuming that the Goddess is on our side, and Kate will not be completely without guidance."

The Goddess. Kate's civil service-obsessed family had been strictly secular. Religion had been shunned. She'd never attended church or temple unless it was for a wedding or funeral. She had no sense of the spiritual, no connection to anything she considered divine. Now, she was expected to take orders from some goddess?

Kate dropped her head into her hands and scrunched her fingers in the curls. "Maybe Vern is right. Maybe this isn't going to work."

"As within so without, Kate," Laurie said, an edge of real fear in her tone. "If you don't believe, it will never be."

Kate forced herself to focus on the stakes: her life, Paul's life, even the demon's life. The demon had shielded her from Sander. She owed it. She had to do her best. She sat up straight, filled her lungs with a deep, cleansing breath.

Okay.

She stood, spine tall, and affirmed in a clear, strong voice: "I am going to allow a pair of witches with boring names turn me into a big magical fuel cell, suck the energy out of some hundred year old sorcerer, and listen to guidance from a deity I've never met so that I can free my boyfriend from a demon."

The words fell onto the kitchen floor like wet noodles and banana peels. Laurie and Vern stared at her.

"Let's do it." Hysterical laughter bubbled in Kate's chest. She gave them a double thumbs-up. "I'm ready."

Vern dropped into a chair and cradled his head in his hands.

Laurie, however, pulled herself to her feet. "Let's do it."

"You can't be serious," Vern said, not bothering to lift his head.

"I don't have any other choice," Laurie said, and the pain in her voice was sharp enough to make Kate bleed inside for her. She was this woman's last, best hope, scary as that sounded.

"We'll begin with a ritual bath," Laurie said to Kate. "The process is simple. First we cleanse you. Make you a blank slate. Then we enchant you, so that when Sander touches you or you touch Sander, power will jump from him to you."

"He has to touch me or I have to touch him?" Kate shivered at the idea of getting that close to Sander. "If he touches me, he's likely to be trying to strangle me."

Laurie shrugged. "Whatever gets you close enough."

Kate should have felt a chill at those words, but instead a strange sense of warmth tingled through her nerves. She turned an instant before the front door slammed, before heavy footfalls raced up the hallway, and Paul burst into the kitchen.

"Kate!"

Rainwater dripped from his hair, his chin, the bushy ridge of his eyebrows. He wore the sweats and t-shirt she'd bought him, but they were splotchy and drenched. No shoes, yet somehow he managed to look beautiful and noble.

"Sander will kill you. Don't you understand?"

Underneath the words, Kate heard the unspoken. If Sander killed her, Paul would be

left in a hell worse than trapped forever in the demon.

"He will, you know," Vern added. "Kill you."

Kate whirled on him. "I have had about enough of your gloom and doom, buster."

Laurie stood leaning on her cane. She stared at Paul with so much regret and frustration, hate, and desire that Kate had to turn away. When she did, she found that Paul had come close, so close that she could smell his skin through the rain water. She could smell her own musk on him, too. Her pulse jumped and began to beat in places other than her heart.

"Kate." Paul's hands closed on her shoulders.

"I can do this, Paul."

"Listen to me, please."

How could she ignore him? Her skin shivered to feel his touch even through her blouse. The dark blue stars of his eyes caught her and held her as strongly as his arms.

"You'll be right in the center of his power."

"They have a plan." Kate could sense Vern and Laurie behind her. "He touches me or I touch him, and I'll have part of his power."

Paul shook his head. Raindrops splattered against Kate's face. "It's not that easy. The curse drives us both. You'll be fighting against all of that, and your own fear."

"I'm not afraid." The lie came out thin and quavering.

Paul cupped her face in both his hands. "But *I* am."

"Kate." Laurie's voice sounded like nails on a blackboard. "We don't have much time."

Paul rested his forehead against Kate's. He pulled her up against his body, and she felt the dampness of his shirt seeping into her own. "I didn't tell you everything ... before."

Fear turned Kate rigid. What else could there be?

"Sander wants me to join him." Paul breathed the words into her ear. "He expects me to go back with him to Europe after the ritual and be his," his voice stumbled, "his immortal companion."

The implications rolled through Kate like sour milk. Her hands slid up his arms and anchored into his biceps. "You have to let me do this, Paul."

"I'm afraid," he whispered. "I can't."

Kate pulled back from his embrace and found that the fear in his voice sat naked and unashamed on his face. "I can't let him have you, Paul. Not without a fight."

Paul's fear ignited into anger. "Don't you get it?" he shouted into her face. "If you die, I have nothing! I'll be nothing! I can't risk it!"

"You can't not risk it," Laurie said.

Paul aimed a look of pure hatred at her. "You have no say in this."

"Paul!" Kate took back his attention. "Now you listen to me. If I fail, then you run. You fight. You do whatever, but don't give in to him."

Paul ran a hand through his wet hair, his eyes rolling back. "There is no fighting him, Kate."

"Then run."

"He finds me."

Kate had heard the same excuses over and over from her clients. "You have to fight him, Paul."

“How?” Paul’s eyes flared with a wild light. He began pacing back and forth across the kitchen tiles. “That house I live in? Owned by Sander. He has a web of corporations and holding companies. Untraceable. He pays the taxes, he answers the assessments, and no one in this little town notices that the same man,” he jabbed fingers into his chest, “has been living there, unchanged, for all these years. The money I live on comes from Sander. It’s very difficult nowadays to get a job without a social security number, which I don’t have, since I was born about fifty years before there was a Social Security Administration!”

“I have dozens of people I could call, Paul. You could get a fake...”

“Don’t you think I’ve tried!”

Kate flinched from the frustration in his shout.

“I have tried to get false documents, I have tried to get jobs. But he finds me, eventually, and ruins them. Do you realize how much money and power and influence a man like Sander Wald can accumulate in a hundred years?”

He stopped pacing, grabbed her shoulders, and put his face into hers. “I spent seven months in Paris in 1964, seven months before he found me. That’s the longest I was ever truly free of him. Seven months in a hundred years.” He laughed, a bitter sound. More raindrops spattered from his hair onto her face. “There was an old excommunicant in Paris, older than I should have been, a veteran of Rome. For seven months, we tried to find a way to break the curse. When Sander finally found me, he had the old man burned like a heretic.” He shook Kate’s shoulders in time with his words. “In front of me.”

The unspoken practically screamed through the suddenly silent kitchen. What would Sander do, if he got his hands on Kate? Even for the second it took to transfer magical energy?

Paul pressed his mouth against her temple. His breath snagged roughly in her ear. His body was hot and wet, almost steaming. She felt surrounded by him. “Please, Kate. Let me do this my way.”

He’d have a year of love with Kate. And he’d never be Sander’s slave.

She felt her heart crack, for him and for herself.

“Please, Kate.”

She could let him kill Sander. She could avoid facing death. Paul and Vern were right. She had a good chance of dying. And if she ended up dead, Paul would be left alone and worse than dead.

Paul’s lips moved down to her ear. “After Sander is gone, we can take as much money as we need to live that year where we want, do what we want. And after that, you’ll have the rest for when...”

Temptation tugged her. A year of paradise.

“Please, Kate. If you love me...” His fingers clenched in her curls. His mouth groped for hers, and he kissed her through the words. “I can’t risk you. I can’t risk ... that.”

Kate teetered on the edge of giving him the promises he wanted. Her lips caught his and clung. She took in his breath, and he took in hers.

“Kate...” He closed his mouth over hers, forcing his tongue inside her as if he could put obedience into her mouth with a kiss.

An image grew in her head, coming into focus like an old Polaroid: next November, the first snow, her own figure standing among the skeletonized trees, alone.

She rejected it physically, a wave of chills washing down over her. She put her hands

on his shoulders and pushed him away. Paul stumbled back a step. He watched her, panting for breath, fear in his eyes.

"I love you, Paul."

Hope broke across his face.

Kate closed her eyes on it. "But you are mistaken," she said stiffly, "if you think I am going to lie in your bed and watch you give up your life."

When she opened her eyes again, his back was turned. She saw his shoulders rise and fall, heard him laugh—an ugly sound.

"Fine." His voice was rusted iron. "You weren't all that great in my bed anyway."

She felt the slap of the words, the flush rising over her face, the tears rising in her eyes.

Paul whirled. "You are not going to do this!" His voice held the absolute, chauvinist command of a man who'd been born and nurtured in the nineteenth century.

Kate's hackles prickled straight up. *Get a calendar, buddy, it's been a while since women had the vote.*

"Fine." Her tone sifted sugar and drizzled honey over the word. "Fine. You do what you want. Kill Sander after the ritual. It really won't matter, because I will have broken the curse by then."

She saw her words hit back. Emotions swirled across his face, a spiraling vortex of shock and fear and anger and bitter, bitter betrayal. She wanted to cry. He wanted to cry, she could see it. But she clenched her heart, forced back the tears. She saw the emotions on his face freeze into iron and ice.

"I won't let you die," he said.

"You can't stop me."

"Oh yeah?" Paul flicked a glance at Laurie and Vern. "You do your little magic tricks. But it won't matter." He looked back at Kate. "I'll go kill Sander now."

He turned on his heel, stalked out of the kitchen. The front door slam reverberated through Kate's heart.

If he killed Sander before the ritual, the demon would overwhelm him at dawn. Forever.

Kate stared down the hallway. They all three stared, silently, for many deep breaths.

"He won't really," whispered Vern.

Outside, the Mercedes engine roared to life.

"Will he?"

"No." Kate believed it, because she had to believe it. "He won't." She turned back to Laurie, even though every instinct in her body urged her to run after Paul. "He won't. So now ... tell me what I have to do."

Chapter Twenty

Silence squirmed in the kitchen as neither witch would meet Kate's eyes.

"Laurie?"

Laurie stared past Kate, fixed on some point in the distance where Paul might be. Kate turned her attention to Vern, but he sat with his head cradled in his hands. He was muttering softly to himself. Kate couldn't make out the words, but she recognized the tone of despair.

"Come on, people," she said in her best professional tone, "there's work to be done."

Laurie flicked her a glance, then lowered herself back into her chair. "He may do it. I've never seen him like that."

"He's not going to do it," Kate said and meant it. She'd worked with a lot of people who alchemized fear into negative action. Paul had had a lifetime to kill Sander. He wouldn't do it now. She had to believe that. As within, so without.

Vern rolled his head from side to side, and she sensed it wasn't in agreement. "Does it matter what Paul does? The key here is that you can't pull this off."

The flat denial stilled Kate for a moment, and then ignited her instinctive rebellious response. "Yes, I most certainly can pull this off. Laurie?"

Laurie looked down.

"What happened to *as within, so without*?"

Vern came out of his chair. "Kate." He took off his glasses, and gave her a tight, sad smile. "We appreciate how brave you are. But..."

But nothing. She was going to defeat Sander. She was going to save Paul. The expression of their doubts made it impossible for Kate to feel hers.

"Sander Wald is very nearly a force of nature." Vern's eyes were kind, but his tone patronized. "He's had a century to develop his skills."

He's lecturing me. Kate felt all the stress of the last two days drill into a very focused point, right behind her breastbone. *My life, Paul's life, the demon's life is at stake, and this little nerd is lecturing me.*

"If we can't deal with him, someone like you..."

"Someone like me?" The laser-sharp point of emotion inside her began to bloom outwards and upwards, like a mushroom cloud. "Someone like me?"

Vern squared his shoulders. "Yes, someone like you. You have no training, you hardly believe—Kate, even your best will just not be enough."

Vern's eyes popped open wide. That's how Kate knew she was moving. She felt nothing but a white burn of rage so hot that it seemed to disassociate her mind from her body. She watched, filled with fury and satisfaction and dark amusement, as her hands took Vern's right arm and jerked it behind his back. Face-first into the wall went Vern. The impact startled her awareness back into her body. She felt the delicious sensation of his squirming against her, trying to free himself. She felt back in control again, and only reasonably afraid.

Kate put her chin on his shoulder. "Are you ready to help now?"

"Get off me! Are you crazy!?"

Kate grabbed his hair with her other hand, jerked his head back.

“Enough, children, enough!” Laurie came to her feet. She was laughing. “Vern, please note Kate’s point.”

Kate released him and took a step back. She didn’t know she had a point.

Vern put his back against the wall and rubbed his shoulder. “She’s crazy, that’s her point.”

Kate crossed her arms and glared. “I’ll give you crazy.”

Laurie banged her cane against the floor for their attention. “Vern! Don’t you see? You have, I have, worked so long only with magic that we forget there are other forces in the world.” Laurie captured Kate’s gaze. “No doubt Sander has the same weakness.”

Vern edged past Kate, still rubbing his shoulder. “Well, the only force that will beat Sander Wald is magic.”

“Magic will get her in the door,” Laurie said, her voice taking on a far-away softness that raised the hair on Kate’s arms. “But it isn’t magic that will win the day. Not this time.”

Kate sensed Vern go very still, almost reverent. He whispered, almost so soft Kate couldn’t hear the words.

“So mote it be.”

After a moment, Vern nodded decisively. “Tell me what to do,” he said, the whining and despair scoured from his voice.

Laurie tilted her head towards the stairs. “Prepare the bath.”

Obediently and instantly, Vern moved.

Astonished, Kate watched him go. “How did you do that?”

“Discipline is a big part of being a witch.”

“Ah.” Kate looked at Laurie, who stared back with a mix of challenge and respect in her eyes. “Whips and chains and stuff like that.”

Laurie showed her teeth in a grin that pulled her skin tight over her skull. “You are an amazing woman. I wish I’d gotten hold of you ten years ago.”

The idea sent a tickle of a chill down Kate’s spine.

“Let’s get started,” Laurie said, and started upstairs.

Kate followed. “What do I do?”

“What you’re told. Pay attention. Learn as much as you can. When I say you can ask questions, ask. When I tell you to be quiet, stay quiet.”

Staying quiet had never been her strong suit. But she did, as Laurie led her upstairs.

“Like I told you before, this is the process,” Laurie said. “First we make you a blank slate.”

Laurie opened a door at the end of the hallway. A rush of steam, scented with lemon and rosemary, billowed against Kate’s face.

“We do that with a ritual bath.”

The room was not a conventional bathroom, Kate saw. The tiles on the floor, ceiling, and walls gleamed a clean, crisp white. The tub would have made Vanessa weep: more of a pool, really. Low white candles ringed the steaming water. On the other side of the room, Vern was lighting a line of tall green pillar candles.

Laurie hobbled to the tub and checked the progress of the water. “Okay, off with the clothes.”

Kate shot a glance at Vern. “What about him?”

Vern lit the last candle and glared back, obviously still fuming over being beaten up

by a girl.

“Vern needs to cleanse himself as well,” Laurie said, arching him a significant glance which made him look at the floor.

Kate inspected the tub. It probably could hold two. “He’s not...?” She looked at Laurie, then back at the tub. “He’s not.”

Laurie shook his head, as obviously amused as Vern was outraged. “He can purify himself without the benefit of the water. You, on the other hand, need all the sympathetic help you can get.”

Sympathetic? “Does that mean I’m deserving of pity?”

Vern walked past her, snickering, to a yoga mat on the floor near the door. He pulled his shirt over his head, and Kate looked quickly away.

“You are not deserving of pity,” Laurie said. “Sympathetic magic harnesses the natural power inherent in everything.” She sniffed, her nostrils flaring delicately. “Rosemary and lemon purify. Water purifies. That is what we need to do to you.”

Laurie gestured impatiently. With one last glance at Vern, who was completely nude and sitting cross-legged on the mat, Kate pulled her own shirt over her head.

“We must purify you. For the magic.”

Nude herself, Kate slipped into the water. The tub was deep. When she reclined, only the tops of her shoulders broke the scented surface.

“Good.” Laurie took a seat on a chair near the bank of flickering green candles.

“Now close your eyes.”

Kate couldn’t help glancing over at Vern again. His eyes were already closed.

“Kate.”

Obediently, she closed her eyes.

“Imagine white light. The brightest, whitest light you can imagine. Keep imagining it, and listen. Don’t speak unless I ask a question you can answer. Imagine the light. Listen.”

The sharp scent of the lemon and rosemary filled Kate's lungs as she breathed deeply. Her memory offered a childhood image: a sparkler lit on the Fourth of July, shimmering against a summer night sky.

“Sander Wald uses ritual magic, not sympathetic magic.”

At the mention of his name, the sparkler image faded. Kate saw the dark hair, the sharp nose of her enemy.

“The light, Kate,” Laurie chided gently.

Kate called the memory back and focused on it.

“That means Sander has learned to develop and use his own personal energy, instead of using the energy around him. He’s very good at it. He’s been doing it for over a hundred years.”

Bright white light.

“It will be up to you, once he starts the ritual, to distract him, to disturb his own personal flow of energy. There are ways.”

Kate breathed in the lemon and rosemary. The water held her, warm and gentle. The light she imagined stopped being a representation of the memory of a sparkler. It widened, filling her mind’s eye completely.

“He won’t be expecting physical violence, like Vern didn’t expect it. Do you own a gun, Kate?”

The light flickered. "Yes."

"Remember. He can't die if shot, but you can. So be careful with it."

Kate took in a deep lungful of scented steam.

"And then there's wild magic, Kate: sex and blood. When you bring sex and magic together, the energy from the sex is very powerful. It's energy that Sander can't access. And an unexpected blood-letting during a spell is always disruptive. Always."

Sex, violence, and blood. Kate focused on the white light. It had grown out of her imagination into something real. It filled her up, making itself a part of her.

"But we aren't going to rely on wild magic. What Vern is going to do is turn you into an uncharged battery. You touch Sander or Sander touches you, and you will absorb some of his energy. For a time you'll be able to use that power for yourself. It should be enough to get through the wards."

What were wards? She didn't have time to ask.

"Open your eyes," Laurie ordered.

Kate did, to find a naked Vern at the edge of the tub holding out a thick, white towel. His expression was serious, all traces of condescension and doubt gone. Kate stood up, stepped out of the water, let Vern wrap her in the soft terrycloth.

Laurie pulled herself up and stood straight. The scented steam seemed to have lent her strength. "Remember, Kate. There are only two forces in this world: fear and love. Sander uses fear. You use love." She took a deep breath, exchanged a quick look at Vern. "No more talking. If it seems an answer is called for, speak from the heart. We only have one chance at this, before sunset."

Kate dried herself. Vern took away the towel. He caught her eye, and Kate saw an unspoken apology and a spark of honest friendship. Then he caught her hand and led her downstairs.

The thick rain clouds outside allowed little light to penetrate the windows. Gloom darkened the hallway. Kate could see the soft gleam of candlelight spilling from the ritual room. The thud of Laurie's cane created an uneven rhythm behind her.

Vern took her to the center of the chalked circle, beside a low table draped in white cloth. On the table burned a simple white candle. Beside it, Kate saw an artist's paintbrush and a small silver dish of clear liquid. "Stay here," he whispered. "Keep your eyes open. Don't close them again until the circle's broken."

Kate nodded.

Vern hesitated, then took her hand again. "I do believe you can do it. I just wish it could be me."

Kate squeezed his fingers, kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

Vern squared his feet under his hips, then raised his arms. He held that position for a moment, then crossed his arms across his chest. After taking a deep breath, he dropped his arms to his sides again. Moving to stand near the yellow candle, he turned to his right and, with measured steps, walked the inner perimeter of the chalked circle clockwise three turns.

"In perfect love and perfect trust, from all we see and that's unseen, from this world and that, we are between."

Taking the lit white candle from the altar, Vern returned to light the yellow taper.

"The East I call, the wind of thought, bring us clarity in what we've taught."

He moved clockwise to the next candle: a red one. "The South I call, the power of

fire, aid us now in our desire.”

He moved around the circle one more quarter turn. He lit the blue candle. “The West I call, the rain of love, quench our fear from hearts above.”

He lit the last candle, a green one. “The North I call, the strength of earth, grow our courage, nurture our worth.”

With all the candles lit, Vern came back to the circle’s center. He put the white candle back onto the altar and faced Kate. He gently guided her arms up, as if she were cradling the sky.

“Maiden, Mother, Crone, is she.”

He crossed his arms on his chest. “Lover, Son, Sacrifice, is he.”

Kate met his eyes, and saw something more than Vern in them. Something that made her think of Paul. The hair stood up on the back of her neck.

Vern brought her arms back to her sides again. When he spoke, his voice was husky, intimate. “The God in me invokes the Goddess in you, Kate Scott.”

Without warning, he leaned in and put his lips against hers. Kate drew in a startled breath, forced herself not to pull back. She was suddenly, painfully aware of how naked they both were.

Gracefully, Vern dropped to one knee. She felt him kiss her right hip. Just as gracefully he stood up again, and put his lips respectfully to her left breast. He kissed her right breast the same way, then sank down again to kiss her left hip. Through the flush of embarrassment, Kate’s mind put together the pattern. Vern was kissing a pentagram onto her body.

He came back to his feet and gently kissed her mouth again. He lingered for a moment, and Kate kissed him back gently, another thank you.

“So mote it be,” he murmured.

“Amen,” Kate whispered back.

She got a lopsided grin in return.

Vern picked up the small artist’s brush in his right hand, balanced the cup of liquid in his left. “Like a serpent coiled under her skin,” he said, “let these symbols lay within.” He dipped the brush into the liquid. Kate jumped a bit when it touched her skin. Whatever the liquid was, it was cold, and the brush tickled. “When power greater than mine does loom, let these magic symbols bloom.”

The brush tickled its way down Kate’s shoulder, across her chest and belly, as Vern painted on intricate swirls. The liquid left no visible mark on her skin, just a lingering minty coolness. Vern painted over her hips and down the front of her legs. He painted up the back of her legs and traced intricate designs on either side of her spine. Kate imagined them as the curves and spots of cool, blue butterfly wings. Her entire body felt like iced-over snow in the sun.

Experimentally, Kate visualized bright, white light. The candles flickered, and the designs on her skin pulsed.

Vern at her wonderingly. “You’re a natural,” he whispered.

Kate looked over his shoulder. Laurie had come to her feet, leaning on the cane. The sharp angles and planes of her face glowed with a lifetime of yearning to break Paul’s curse. Kate saw her lips move, read the words there. *So mote it be*.

Kate returned her eyes to Vern.

“The curse is broken, the spell is lifted,” Vern said, clearly and loudly, “the balance

of the universe has now shifted. In service to Goddess and love and light, release the soul of Paul tonight.”

Chapter Twenty-One

In the drive from Laurie's cottage into Bonaventure's ghost of a business district, Paul's heart hardened into crystal. A hailstorm of recriminations threatened to shatter him: *If I had never bought that second cup of coffee... if I had never let her love me... If I'd only saved Alina...* He escaped into a frozen sort of disassociation, watching himself through a window covered with frost.

The plan had walked out of his head, complete in every detail, before he slammed the door on Laurie, Vern, and Kate. His subconscious must have been anticipating the end of rational options, that he would need something desperate.

The demon whimpered from underneath his heart as he parked in front of an old brick building. The letters B-V-H-S-G were painted in fading gothic sternness above the door, as if the owner couldn't be bothered to pay for the name, Bonaventure Hardware and Sporting Goods, to be painted in its entirety. The town always had been full of kooks. But what was the point, driving over the bypass to do business at the big home improvement superstore? Saving a few bucks didn't matter now, and local businesses were so hungry they would be less likely to toss him out for being bare-footed.

Inside, Paul went to the sporting goods section, found the hunting department, and finally reached his destination: a glass display case littered with knives.

"Lookin' for something?" The man behind the counter was grizzled and etched by time.

Paul saw his own reflection in the mirrored display: eternally forty, no deep lines or gray hairs to testify to what he'd lived through. "A knife."

"For what?"

Paul didn't answer that. Instead, he pointed at a military model, black and sleek and uncompromising. "Can I see that one?"

The old man unlocked the case, reached in to grope around until his fingers touched the grip. "This one?"

"Yes."

It hit the counter with a satisfying thunk. Paul pulled the blade free from its sheath: ten inches of serrated stainless. The romantic side of him would have preferred the style of a Kris blade and Damascus steel. But this one would do the job.

"Thanks, I'll take it."

He gave the old man a thin stack of twenties. The old man put the knife in a box, and then in a brown paper sack. "Do you need your receipt?"

"No, thank you. Have a nice day."

"You, too."

Highly doubtful.

Paul tossed the knife on the passenger seat of the Mercedes, locked it again, then went across the street to the pharmacy. A bell tinkled as he pushed open the door.

"Good morning," said the clerk behind the counter. Paul glanced up at her. The eyebrow ring clashed with the neatness of her smock and her chipper tone. "Can I help you find something?"

Paul scanned the signs hanging above the aisles. "No thanks, I see it."

He faced the bank of painkiller options, wishing that he could take something more effective, like morphine. But he'd need a clear head. He decided on a box that promised extra-strength fast relief.

"Come back again soon," the clerk said as she handed him the flimsy plastic bag.

Again, highly doubtful.

With the knife and the painkillers, he got back behind the wheel. He meant to head up the mountain road immediately, but he found himself parked outside Café Foy. He turned off the motor. The key ring jingled softly against the steering column. Paul stared out the windshield at the "For Sale" sign that, in his memory, was never absent from the building for longer than a year. He remembered when it had been built. In its first incarnation it had held an attorney's office on the second floor and a saloon on the first. He could remember being a young man, barely out of his teens, accompanying his mother there for brandy with her merry band of European expatriates and American artists and writers, before the century turned. He'd watched the millennium turn here with the previous owner. He'd been a bit of a flake, that guy, certain that the electricity in the entire world would wink off at midnight. Never could get the coffee right, either.

A vision flicked through his imagination. He saw himself taking the last cup of good coffee from Dee's friendly hands. Maybe she still had some Café Noisette. He imagined the delightfully bitter taste bursting into his mouth, one last time. He imagined leaning over the counter to give Dee a kiss, to thank her for everything. He could give the breakfast sofa one last long, lingering look, say goodbye with the style and grace that had once defined him, before the curse.

Instead, he popped open the bottle of painkillers, shook out a handful. He cupped his palm and tossed them all into his mouth at once. He chewed them up, wincing at the stale bitter flavor, and swallowed them dry. It was as much style and grace as he had left.

From the coffee shop he drove slowly past his house, one last time. *It's not really my house. It's my prison.* Still, he'd managed to find friends, even love. With a century's worth of days and nights, Sander had found neither.

Sander was in the basement, preparing for the ritual. If Paul thought that he could force himself down those stairs of his own accord, he might be able to take care of this now. But he wasn't absolutely sure. It never paid to underestimate Sander. In the heart of his power, maybe Paul wouldn't be able to kill him. Better to stick to the plan.

He brought the Mercedes to a halt beside the garden. He tapped a button and the window rolled down smoothly. Misty coolness washed across Paul's face. The old red maple his mother planted on his third birthday waved the remainder of its leaves at him. He felt a little less lonely, knowing that the tree had felt the same sun, heard the same birds as he had, all these years. He let his eyes and mind relax. The ugly house shimmered in his imagination, faded into the fog. His mind rebuilt the folly, its stained glass, the lacy fronds of bronze fennel swaying in the night air. The maple had been so much younger, its autumn color stronger, back then.

That tree was his witness. As a sapling it overheard his mother's ridiculous claim that he would conceive her a grandchild under the bright red leaves. Grown strong and tall, it watched Alina's suicide, Sander's curse, and Paul's shame.

How strange it felt, knowing that he'd never again see that tree in color.

He tapped the button, putting a barrier of tinted glass between him and the past. He pulled away, leaving it all behind. He didn't slow as he passed the rutted drive back to

Laurie's house, tried not to think of what was going on inside. Pressing relentlessly on the accelerator, he climbed up towards the mountains.

Through the rain clouds he could sense the position of the sun. Today of all days, his awareness of time ran highest. A look on the Mercedes' dashboard confirmed that it was not yet noon. More than enough time to make this work.

At his first opportunity, he traded the two-lane rural road for a narrow gravel lane without an identifying sign. He drove slowly through the pounding rain, searching both sides of the road. During the seventies he'd indulged in a few years of rally racing. What the hell, he'd thought. It wasn't as if he could ever die if the car crashed. And crashed he did. A lot. He'd only given it up when Sander threatened to cut off his cash flow. Too many wondering questions about how he'd survived.

There.

Paul stopped the Mercedes, stepped out into the rain. The gravel pricked at the soles of his bare feet as he carefully made his way to the edge of the road.

Drop off not too steep. Enough trees to catch me.

The balance he sought was a delicate one. He had to end up hurt enough to trigger the strange bond that linked Sander to him. But he didn't want to hurt himself so badly that he couldn't react when Sander showed up. Today of all days, Sander wouldn't be able to put off the demand of coming to Paul's side, if he sensed Paul was injured. Today of all days, it was a sure bet that Sander would be here within an hour of Paul's first burst of pain.

Paul returned to the car, shaking cold rain from his hair. He looked from the edge of the road to the knife on the seat beside him. The plan was irrevocably simple. Sander would show up within the hour, desperate to pull Paul out of the wreckage and get him back home before dusk came and the ritual had to be performed. Thinking Paul lost to impotent, suicidal depression, Sander would never see the knife strike that killed him. Sometime later in the week the police would find the Mercedes over the bank, together with Sander's murdered body. Only Laurie, Vern, and Kate would ever know why the murderer was never caught. He pulled his safety belt across his chest and snapped it closed.

Beneath his heart, the demon vibrated with anger at his choice.

You should be thrilled. You'll end up with everything.

The pulse of its rage turned his stomach into a nauseous knot. What would the demon do when it had possession of its life both day and night? Would it be free to go back to whatever place demons lived? It had developed an attachment to Kate. Would it stay around her? Paul imagined what it would be like, trapped inside the demon, watching Kate grieve and then go on, and then grow old, through the demon's colorless sight. It was still a better option than letting her die for him.

He unsheathed the knife and plunged it into the passenger seat as if he was trying to murder the leather.

If Kate died because of him, the prison inside the demon would be summer camp compared to the prison of guilt he'd create for himself. If Kate died, cursing him not only with a half-life but with the loss of the only woman he'd ever loved, Paul knew he would break. And Sander would gladly pick up the pieces. It was better this way.

Putting the Mercedes in reverse, he eased back from his chosen place until he estimated that he'd have the perfect length of road to achieve the necessary speed: not too

fast, or the damage would be too great.

The sky opened up in earnest. Rain sheeted against the windshield. Paul turned the wipers up on high. He didn't want to miss the target.

He stamped on the accelerator. The tires spun in wet gravel, grabbed, and the Mercedes leaped forward. The trees came up in a blur. The car slid in the mud on the road's edge. The world tilted. Branches slapped against the windshield. The hood caught on a tree trunk. The car jacked sideways, throwing Paul against the door. His head hit the window. Both bone and glass cracked. The airbag popped and whooshed. The car whirled, too far, too fast. Steel crumpled and Paul jerked the other way, the safety belt clawing towards his heart. The passenger door bowed. Glass exploded inward as a thick branch reached inside, peppering Paul's cheek with sudden hot pain. The car thudded to a sudden stop.

Paul hung from the safety belt, trying to breathe. Blood bubbled through with the air. *Not good.*

He could see nothing but airbag and tree branch. He turned his head. His brain sloshed in his skull. The knife was still buried in the leather of the passenger's seat. He groped across the console, grasped the hilt. His fingers were slick with blood.

Really not good at all.

He jerked the knife free, and used it to cut away the safety belt. Without its support he sagged dangerously towards the tree branch. His ribs scratched and rubbed in an unnatural and painful way.

Extra strength fast relief, my ass.

Using the steering wheel as leverage, he pulled himself upright. His head blossomed into stars and danced in orbit around them. He breathed through the pain, waiting for his vision to clear. The Mercedes was wrapped broadside around a tree trunk. The passenger door was warped, crumpled and impaled by a sapling growing in the larger tree's shadow.

A tickling twinge ran the length of one of Paul's damaged ribs. Already the curse was working to put him back together again. He looked at the driver's door, and saw through doubled vision the star fanning out through the glass, the blood spattering across the cracks. That's what went wrong. He'd been anticipating a frontal crash and the airbag saving him from a head injury.

Shit.

Losing consciousness meant losing it all.

He pushed at the door. It jarred against the wet ground of the slope and wouldn't open all the way. He used the knife pommel to break the cracked window glass. The sound made him dizzy. He stopped for a dozen deep breaths. Once he got clear of the car he could lay in the rain and let the magic heal his bruised brain, but he had to get clear of the car first. He had to be ready when Sander found him. He'd only have one chance to strike.

Paul tossed the knife through the broken window. It landed flat against the sopping wet leaves close by the place he hoped to end up himself. He released the steering column, pushing the wheel up and away, trying to find enough room to maneuver. He curled one hand through the glassless window frame and tried to pull himself farther up on the seat. His body flopped like a dead fish.

He subsided against the car seat, panting after breath and clenching his jaw against

the need to vomit. The sound of the rain against the car roof plinked against his brain, each sound a flare of pain, a ticking countdown. Sander was coming, and he was trapped in the Mercedes. Even through the pain, he could appreciate the irony of that.

Paul grabbed on to the severed remains of the seatbelt hanging above the seat. He tried to brace himself against the car floor, but his ankle exploded in agony.

How the hell did I break my ankle?

This wasn't going according to plan.

Shit, shit, shit.

He had to get out of the car.

Pulling himself up with the seatbelt, Paul swung himself inch by inch, his vision swimming, until he could put his good foot outside the car. He fell back against the seat, gasping. The tree branch poking through the passenger window scratched at the back of his head. He picked up his other thigh in his hands and lifted it until the broken ankle hung uselessly beside the good one. He slithered on his back until his good foot touched mud. Using the seatbelt, he hauled himself forward. The broken ankle gave way, and he fell forward. His knees hit the door and his face fell through the open space where the window glass used to be. A shard still clinging to the frame caught the top of his head. Liquid pain ran across his skull. The world blinked like a camera shutter, open-closed-open-closed. His good foot lost its grip in the mud. Sliding helplessly, his upper body hit the side of the door, bounced, and then with a muscle-straining flop, he met the mud full-body.

I'm out.

That one thought kept him on the edge of consciousness. He slid toward oblivion, breathing mud and blood. The rain splattered the back of his skull. Each drop was a little teardrop blade trying to push him into the abyss of unconsciousness. The demon reached out of the looming internal darkness to buoy him. Paul came to full awareness lying on his stomach, his fingers scrabbling in the wet leaves and mud, lying halfway under the mangled Mercedes.

Out of choices, Paul lay in the rain as the magic started re-knitting his body. It passed through his ankle first, and he felt the pain subside.

The magic apparently planned to work through him feet first, leaving his brain last on the list of parts to be healed. He couldn't catch a break. And he couldn't focus his eyes enough to try to find the sun behind the clouds. Even his special senses were too rattled to use. He didn't know how much time he'd spent crawling free from the wreckage. He didn't know how much time he had left before the sun set.

A cool shock closed over his ribcage. He felt fractures pulling back together, one rib at a time. He took a deep breath without pain and blood.

Come on, come on.

He felt his left shoulder pop back into joint. He reached forward, digging his fingers into the soggy ground, trying to pull himself forward. He touched the knife blade, closed his fist around the hilt.

Over the pounding of the rain, he heard tires crunch on gravel.

Shit, shit, shit!

He felt the tingle creep up the base of his skull, soothing and calming the swelling.

"Paul!" Sander's voice. "Paul!"

Paul couldn't yet lift his head. He heard feet slipping and sliding down the bank. He

saw Sander's Italianate loafers, enjoyed the smears of mud across the leather.

"You idiot."

He felt Sander's hands on his shoulders. His body lurched forward as Sander pulled. His brain quivered and the tingling faded.

Sander flipped him onto his back. Paul's brain somersaulted in his skull. His eyes refused to process light and shape with any logic and order. He recognized only the motion of the rain. He stabbed into the rain. The knife stopped suddenly. For an instant he thought he'd managed to sink it into some part of Sander. Then he registered the feeling of fingers around his wrist. Sander pried the knife away. He heard it hit the wet leaves so far away.

"Idiot."

Sander heaved him upright, and Paul fell straight down into blackness.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dark layers of unconscious bliss peeled away one by one. Paul floated to the surface of his awareness. Some eternally vigilant part of his brain registered the impending sunset. He opened his eyes to familiar shadows and familiar shapes that didn't waiver or double in his vision. He was home, in his own bed, alone with his failure.

Experimentally, he pushed himself up on one elbow. The curse had worked its magic. His bones were whole, his muscles re-knitted, his brain undamaged. Under the blanket he realized he was naked. Blood rushed to his face as he realized how he must have become so. Not only had he failed to kill Sander, but he'd left himself vulnerable to whatever revenge Sander might have in mind.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and levered himself into a sitting position. It had all gone wrong. All of it. The demon sent a wave of anger and resentment through his blood.

What, should I just lie back and wait for Kate to save me?

The rush of its non-verbal YES spun Paul's head and left him bent in half, gasping for breath.

I couldn't save Alina. Why do I deserve to be saved by Kate?

The demon's bitter rejection of the self-pity left an old-penny tang in Paul's mouth. He was the one supposedly in love with Kate, but the demon had more faith in her than he did. But no one could win against Sander. Not even Kate.

The demon rattled his ribcage with a ferocious internal howl.

Paul scrubbed a hand over his face, hopelessness closing over him like a cold rising tide. The curse had healed the damage to his body, but it had left him weak. He wanted to sink back down onto the pillow and give himself up to oblivion. What was the point of fighting? The battle couldn't be won.

Kate's voice lashed out from his memory, accompanied by the demon's own fierce rage. *You fight. You do whatever, but you don't give in to him.*

Paul exploded out of bed, covered himself in jeans and a t-shirt. Kate had said fight. Paul was going to fight. So hard that either he killed Sander or Sander would kill him.

If she thinks I'll let her die for me, she's crazy.

The demon threw itself against his ribcage, screaming its frustration and fury. Clearly it didn't agree with his reasons for fighting. But it was a demon. What did it care about Kate's life? It only wanted to be free. Paul ignored its internal ravings and went downstairs. There were knives in the kitchen. More than enough from which to choose. Wide-bladed chef knives. Wicked little de-boning knives. Serrated bread knives that would take forever to cut through to Sander's blood-rich veins.

His bare feet pattered a quick rhythm as he took the stairs at a run. The pale, watery light trickling through the front door window hummed at him, promising sunset soon, too soon. He had to kill Sander before Kate got here and Sander killed her. He turned the corner into the kitchen.

Sander sat at the table, head down, in a chair facing the doorway. On the table's surface was a bottle, an empty glass streaked with the legs of good wine, and Paul's military knife stuck point down in the scarred wood.

Fear radiated through Paul's nerves, his own and the demon's. He shuddered to a stop just beyond the doorway, unable to force his legs to take another step.

I am so tired of being afraid of this man.

But he couldn't move forward another inch. His hands clenched, imagining the sensation of Sander's larynx popping under his palms. Hot coppery flavor gushed into his mouth as if he'd already reached Sander's carotid artery with his teeth and nails. But he couldn't move. His fear overshadowed his desire to murder.

Sander lifted his head. His usually perfect hair stood up on end, still damp from the rain. Sticky tear tracks marred his thin face. "Paul."

The sight froze both Paul and the demon. In a hundred years, Sander had shown no weakness. Not ever. Paul couldn't move. He couldn't look away. It was like looking through his own eyes at the moon. Sander crying? Impossible.

"You were really going to kill me." Sander sounded heartbroken. Fresh tears shimmered in his eyes. "You were really going to do it."

"I'm still going to do it." Paul's voice came out hoarse, and he still couldn't move. He expected Sander to mock him, to laugh. Instead, a new tear pooled on his eyelashes and dripped down his cheek.

"You would rather be eternally damned than be mine."

"Yes." Inside, the demon wailed. For the first time Paul wondered if the demon feared living night and day as much as Paul did. The world under his feet seemed to be shaking apart. He didn't know where it was safe to stand or what was safe to believe anymore.

Sander inspected him through his shining eyes. "I don't understand."

"I'm not going to explain it to you." He should be moving now, while Sander was vulnerable. He should tilt the table out of the way and put his foot on Sander's throat and crush the breath out of him. But he didn't. Instead he whispered, "I love her."

Sander winced. "For how long?"

"A year," Paul told him, to show that he had been fighting.

"Really?" Sander's lips edged up slightly. "So I almost had you." He lowered his head to the table again, his cheek resting on folded hands. "It shouldn't have been like this."

"No," Paul whispered. His throat was too tight to speak at a normal volume. A part of his brain screamed *kill him now, now, now!* The demon sent a rush of blood through his head to block it out.

"It should have been perfect," Sander said, his voice hollow. "It should have satisfied me."

Paul knew how Sander lived. Wealth, power. Any woman he wanted. Any man he wanted. Freedom to be anywhere he chose. Never dying. He thought of Sander as a man who would be filled to the brim by such an everlasting life.

"It's never been enough." Sander sounded like he was crying again. "It's never, ever been enough."

He feels as trapped as I do. A shadow of that thought had never fallen over Paul's mind. Never once. A bitter sense of compassion welled up inside him, even though Sander had condemned them both. The demon's presence rippled ominously through him. Condemned them, all three.

The world rippled and tilted under Paul's feet. He sat down at the table across from

Sander before he fell down. Hope seemed to glow from the cracks in the world, admitting a new reality Paul had never dreamed possible. "End it now."

Sander spoke in a choked voice, as if Paul wasn't even there. "I've been chasing it all my life. This life and the first life."

The words seemed to trip a projector in Paul's head. Silent visions flickered: swallowtail coats, feathered hats, jewels winking under the stars. No Mercedes turbos. No supermarket ice cream sections. No Kate.

"I'd thought," Sander went on, his tone dropping lower and lower into regret, "that I'd find it. With her."

Both Paul and the demon went deadly still.

"I should have found it with you." Sander raised his head and studied Paul intensely through bright gray eyes. "I don't understand how I could have failed so ... spectacularly. After a hundred years, you should be mine. Completely. Totally. But you and her. Both would rather die..."

"Sander." The gray eyes stopped their empirical study of Paul. They stared dazedly, as if Sander had finally noticed that Paul had been sitting across the table through his entire soliloquy. "End it now."

Sander's jaw contorted. A tear slid down his cheek and he brushed it roughly away. "I can't. Not now." A light flared in his eyes, different from the brightness of the tears. "But I will in a year."

A year. The same span of time he had given Kate. Paul felt like the electrons and protons and neutrons in the table under his hands and the floor under his feet were rippling. The world was changing in a completely unpredicted way. Again.

"What do you mean?" He had to scrape the words out of his suddenly tight throat. The demon quivered in its prison. Paul could feel waves of hope and fear emanating from it.

"I mean give me a year of yourself. Totally. Everything. Then I'll free you from the curse, and you can be with your Kate."

Paul stared. The demon stayed silent as the grave.

"I won't settle for nothing, Paul. I want a taste. I want to know if it would have been enough to fill up this hole inside me." Sander tapped his chest. "I need to know if it would have made it right. Do you understand?"

Paul did understand. It was the reason he waited for Kate that morning with two mugs of decent coffee. It was the reason he met her every morning for breakfasts that could never be anything else. He had to know if she would fill the empty burning hole inside him.

"It isn't fair." The mad light in Sander's eyes flared. "If it wasn't for you, I might have found out with her. And if it wasn't for Kate, I might have found out with you."

No sense in denying it. If Kate hadn't filled up his heart, Paul would have closed up the inner void with Sander's bouquet of white flowers.

"It isn't right that both of you get what you want and I get nothing," Sander said, his tone reasonable even though his eyes still glowed and tears still traced down his cheeks. "You'll have the rest of your lives to be together. I'm only asking for a year."

A year. Paul couldn't remember how to breathe. Inside his chest, the demon hummed excitedly. A year and it could be over. Forever. Kate wouldn't be in danger. And, after that, a normal life, together.

“Give me a year. Give yourself to me for one single year. Then I’ll release you from the curse.”

What was a year? He’d already lived over a hundred of them. How hard could it be to survive one year? Three hundred sixty five days, with the rest of his life as the prize at the end. With Kate as the prize at the end, never in danger, waiting to take him into her arms and heal whatever damage Sander could inflict. The demon would help him survive. Together, they could survive one more year and win their respective freedoms.

Paul took a deep breath. The room rushed in on him. He smelled the phantom perfume of the crushed white flowers. “A year?”

“You can’t be broken, Paul, I can see that now. I admit failure. I admit you have won.” Sander opened his hand on the table’s surface. The wine glass and the knife framed the smooth pink flesh and the maze of lines across the meat of his palm. “Give me this little thing, and then we’ll be done with each other, forever.”

Paul’s heart thudded. Escape. A way out. Kate *safe*.

“This would be the last ritual. I swear. Next year, I’ll undo the spell. But give me one year.”

He could survive it, for Kate. For the first time in his life, he felt hope for a future. He stared at Sander’s open hand. The fingers flexed nervously as he waited.

“Just one year, Paul.”

“And after, you’ll undo the curse?”

Sander nodded. He stared into Paul’s face, looking as hungry for resolution as Paul felt.

Paul inched his hand across the table. His index finger touched Sander’s.

Sander’s hand snapped over Paul’s, quick and vicious as a snake strike. Paul jerked back, but Sander’s fingers closed too tightly over his wrist. He couldn’t pull away. “One year,” Sander said in a gloating voice.

The demon flooded Paul with bitter dismay just as cold, wet air gusted into the kitchen.

“You idiot.”

The voice was Kate’s. Sander’s head snapped up, and Paul jerked his head around. She stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Can’t you see he’s lying to you?”

Lying? The word dripped down through Paul’s mind, clean rain through the smoke of Sander’s words. The demon vibrated with budding anger, like a second heart beating in his chest. “Lying?”

“Lying.”

Kate’s arms were up, stiffly held out from her body.

“It’s all he knows how to do,” she said.

It registered with Paul finally: she’s holding a gun. Why the hell would she be holding a gun?

“He’d never give you up once he had you.”

Sander came out of his chair. Paul scrambled back. His chair hit the floor with a slap of wood on wood. His back hit the door’s frame. His head bumped something cold and hard: the barrel of Kate’s gun.

“Get the hell out of the way.” Kate pushed his shoulder with her shoulder, advancing into the room. “How could you believe him?”

Because it was the only way I could save you from dying.

"I'm not lying!" Sander slammed his fists onto the table. His eyes turned to Paul and tried to hook into his flesh. "I'm not lying. I'm not lying, and," he banged his fists with every word, "we made a deal!"

"Shut up." Kate's voice snapped with a tone of command that made Sander's nostrils flare and his eyes widen.

"She just wouldn't want what was left of you," Sander sneered, "after I was done with you."

"Shut up!"

Her tone made Sander jerk his eyes away from Paul. "What'll you do? Shoot me?" Kate fired.

* * * *

The shot slammed into Kate's ears. The flash lit up the kitchen. The bullet took Sander in the upper right quadrant of his chest, spinning him around.

A year. What is it with these guys and a year?

Her finger tightened on the trigger again. Another report slapped through her. Sander's spine bowed and he toppled to his knees. Kate flicked open the barrel, shook out the remaining bullets. She turned on her heel and pitched the bullets out the door in one direction, the empty gun in another. She threw them hard and far. Sander would have no chance to shoot her back. At least not with her own gun.

Paul grabbed her by the arms. "What the hell are you doing? Are you crazy? That was our best chance!"

Kate closed her fists in Paul's shirt and dragged him down into a fierce kiss. Their teeth scraped; Kate tasted blood. "Shut up and let me save you," she gasped when they broke apart.

"I won't let you..."

She stopped him with another kiss. She felt his hand tangle in her hair before he pushed her away.

The kitchen table scraped against the floor. Kate opened her eyes. Sander pulled himself to his feet. The gray silk of his shirt was puckered and burned, spotted with an initial spray of blood but nothing else. Even though she expected it intellectually, the sight of it made the hairs on her arms quiver straight up.

She hooked her hand on Paul's arm and pulled. "Come on. We have to get downstairs before he puts up the wards."

Paul set his heels, and Kate found herself trying to pull along a pile of iron and ice. "I won't let you..." Suddenly, his jaw clenched. Pain rippled across his face. Kate realized that the sun must be setting, and she was running out of time. "He'll kill you."

"Yes I will!"

Kate heard Paul whisper, "Oh, God," just as she saw the gray blur coming at her. She pushed Paul away and spun in the other direction. Sander missed her completely. Laurie had been right. Like Vern, Sander was too used to magical solutions. And, like Vern, he thought Kate was too weak to win. Kate took three skipping steps back, put her body between Sander and the basement door.

Sander stumbled, caught himself after a few steps. But then Paul loomed behind him. He jerked Sander's arms behind his back and locked his arm around Sander's throat.

Kate froze. This was definitely not in her plan.

Sander went still as well, his eyes wide and his nostrils flaring. "Paul..."

Paul tightened his grip.

"Paul, no!" With one twist of his arm, Paul could ruin everything. He could damn both of them forever. They would have enough time for one last kiss. Maybe. Panic electrified Kate's nerves. "Don't you even think about killing him, Paul." If she still had that gun, she would have put it to her own head, to stop him.

"I can't let him win," Paul whispered.

"I won't let him win." The scent of rosemary drifted past Kate's nostrils, and a bright light filled her mind. "Trust me, Paul."

She saw the struggle on his face. He'd been tortured too long to hope. Like Ellie, he was about to pull the trigger.

"Trust me, Paul. Trust love."

Kate took a step forward. Paul twisted his arm, and Sander gasped, choking. His hands pawed at Paul's forearm, his eyes rolling up in his head.

"Don't do this, Paul." Kate captured Paul's gaze, pulled him in. For that moment, everything else ceased to exist. There was only Paul. "If you do this, you'll kill my heart. If I have to die, let me go down swinging."

Pain rippled across Paul's face—emotional from her plea, or physical from the curse? Kate couldn't be sure. His grip relaxed just a bit. Sander lunged, and Kate dared to hope. Then Paul jerked him back. The muscles in Paul's forearm flexed, and Kate gasped a breath to scream, NO.

"Quick." Paul bowed Sander's spine, forcing his head onto his shoulder. "Touch him. I can't hold him much longer."

Yes! Kate surged forward, ripped open Sander's gray shirt. Buttons skittled across the floor. "I love you."

"Just win."

Kate put her palms flat against Sander's smooth chest. An icy shock flared through her nerves. Sizzling blue light flared over her hands. The symbols Vern had painted on her skin ignited with sudden white flame.

Sander's eyes popped open wide. His mouth dropped open and his nostrils flared.

Paul screamed. He shuddered as if he were about to break apart. Sander broke free as Paul fell to his knees. He grabbed Kate and threw her against the wall.

Kate hit with a thud. Stars exploded in her head.

Paul screamed again, going to all fours. Blood dripped from his nose.

"Not yet!" screamed Sander. He pulled Paul to his feet. "Not yet!" He dragged him toward the basement door.

Kate shook her head to clear it. The symbols on her body pulsed urgently. Somehow she knew she couldn't let Sander shut that door and leave her behind, or she would fail. She kicked off against the wall. Sander saw her coming and pulled the door open. He pushed Paul through and followed, pulling the door shut behind him. Kate got her foot in it before he could. Her instep exploded with pain. The symbols on her skin exploded with blue-white power. Kate felt the force jam into the narrow space.

Kate wrenched the door open all the way. Sander was already on the landing, making the turn, heading down. Paul stumbled along behind, the demands of the curse driving him. He threw one last lingering look at Kate.

Kate saw hope in his eyes. An answering flare ignited in her heart, and the force from the symbols drove her further down the stairs. She made it down four steps when the air froze into something cold and solid against her.

A protective ward. Sander had placed them. She had to break the defensive magic before she could reach Paul. The marks on her skin throbbed like miniature hearts, pumping a sheen of sparkling power over her. She found her own heart, opened it. She focused on Paul, on her love. She sent her mind back to his first kiss, the raw, shocking force of his lips on hers. Sensation lifted from her skin like steam, mixing with the sparks from the symbols on her skin. She felt the flow of love move through her, thick and hot as blood, and took a step into the coldness. For an instant it pushed back, iron-rigid and ice-cold. The power she'd raised flared. The ward softened. Kate took another step and felt the cold close over her, sucking her inside.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Paul saw Kate push her way through the thick magic of Sander's wards, glowing with stolen power, and, for the first time in a century, he didn't feel utterly, hopelessly alone. He couldn't stop his legs from moving him down into the basement, couldn't make his arms reach up and throttle Sander. The curse controlled him now, the mindless magic hungry to complete the yearly cycle. But for once, he wasn't completely alone.

A cramp twisted him, but his curse-ridden muscles refused to react to the pain. In all the previous years, Sander had had him safely bound by now. Maybe there was a chance. The hope hurt almost as badly as the coming change.

His body followed Sander off the final step and onto the smooth black cement floor. Candles were already lit, marking off the wide circle that protected Sander and the smaller circles meant to control him and the demon. In the center of his circle, the hated cuffs dangled from a chain in the ceiling. On the floor in the demon's circle, Sander had inscribed a pentagram in red powder.

Paul's curse-ridden body walked without coercion into his circle. His arms lifted complacently. Sander buckled the cuffs, one on each of his wrists. Paul demanded his legs kick out, take Sander in the gut. But his muscles weren't his to command. They wouldn't be again until the demon left his body.

Sander pulled a knife from his belt, the long-handled ritual blade Paul had seen so many times. A Kris blade. Damascus steel.

"I'll have you forever." Sander put the blade against the neck of Paul's t-shirt. With the other hand, he reached under the shirt, running his hand up Paul's stomach and chest, pushing the cotton out until it stretched vulnerably. Then he wrenched the blade down through the fabric. It split with a tearing scream.

Sander ripped away the remains of the shirt. Pain ripped at Paul. His muscles crawled under his skin, trying to escape it. What if Sander didn't get the spell ready in time? What would happen to him? What would happen to all of them?

Paul looked towards the stairway. No sign of Kate. He hoped whatever magic Laurie had blessed Kate with could get her through the wards.

Sander raised his index finger to his lips, slid it into his mouth to suck it.

Paul clenched his jaw. How he hated this part. More than anything else, he hated this part.

Sander put his wet finger in the hollow of Paul's throat and lightly stroked down. The tickling feeling skittered along Paul's nerves, and he felt a heat rise where Sander's finger went. He looked down, saw his flesh redden and pucker in a line following Sander's touch.

The curse held him steady. He couldn't even jerk against the cuffs at his wrists. He stood, stretched taut, unable even to squirm, as Sander used his finger to draw the signs of magic on his skin.

"She's clever, your Kate." Sander ground the words out between clenched teeth. "I never would have guessed."

The tickling finger went around his navel in concentric orbits, then flew off along the line of his lowest rib. Sander circled behind him, drawing on the small of his back. Paul

felt his skin burn.

"She loves me," Paul whispered. "I love her."

"You don't know what love is." Sander's touch traced his spine in overlapping figure eights. "You don't know what it is to hold a person's soul in your hands, to see their heart beating through their skin. You don't know what it is to be able to take everything."

"Neither do you."

Back around his other lowest rib, Sander's finger skated up over his heart, drawing an intricate series of arabesques. The hair on his chest stood on end from the sensation of the hated flesh on his. The abrasions swelled red, covering the skin above his heart.

"I will."

Paul threw a desperate glance towards the stairs. They were dark. No Kate.

"She won't make it through the wards."

"She will." She had to.

The demon shrieked, long and high. Paul felt his ribs crack and tasted blood.

* * * *

The darkness took on a silver cast, as if Kate had stepped inside a frozen moonbeam. She exhaled, and her breath swirled into shimmering arabesques.

Very, very weird. The hair on the back of her neck stiffened, and, in response, the symbols on her skin faded. She heard Laurie's words. *There are two forces in the world, Kate: fear and love. Sander will use fear. You use love.*

Kate closed her eyes and let her heart expand, setting free like doves in the darkness thoughts of everyone she had ever loved, and who had ever loved her. Her mind chanted the names like a mantra: Paul, Vanessa, Gwen, Mom, Dad...

Suddenly her eyelids snapped open. She couldn't stop them. Her breaths came faster and faster, building a wall of lacy frost in the air before her.

"You quit your job?"

Her silvery exhalations etched her parents' faces on the field of darkness.

"Oh, Katie, how could you?"

"People need you, they depend on you!"

"You let that poor girl die, while you were out making love!"

Shame scalded Kate. The electric pulse of the symbols on her body dimmed. It was exactly what she'd feared her parents would say, if they had been alive.

"Katie, you know the right thing to do." Her mother's voice was gentle.

Her father's voice was stern. "You turn right around and march back to your office, and you forget about this man. A life without service is not worth living."

Kate felt tears fall down her cheeks, hot tears against the pressing cold. Her heels hit the stair, and her balance wavered. She threw her arms out to catch herself. Her hands burst through the icy likenesses of her mother and father.

Paul needs me. The thought lifted out of her heart. *Paul is depending on me.* Gwen's voice and Vanessa's voice rose together like an opera duet: *Don't you see that you are entitled to take a little something for yourself, too? You deserve it, honey!*

Kate felt the flare of power from the symbols again. The cold rippled and cracked. She took another step down, two. She reached the landing before the cold closed over her again.

* * * *

It was always the worst, this night. Because of the cuffs Paul couldn't curl protectively around the pain in his core, and the demon refused to dig its way out. So his body expelled it, pushing, tearing. He felt muscles give way in his chest, choked on the sudden burst of blood in his throat. It was a birth with no joy. His skin stretched, stretched, thinned, and then suddenly ripped. The black shape of the demon poured out with a gush of blood. Before it was completely out of him, it lunged, making for the sky it knew was above.

Sander shouted harsh words. The candles in the demon's circle flared. Paul felt the air suck towards the circle, snatching breath from his lungs. The demon was caught in the sudden gust, ripped the rest of the way from Paul's body and trapped in the circle. Immediately, the pentagram ignited. Red flame danced on the black cement floor.

Paul felt his bones reknit, his skin grow back together—a new, itching, burning kind of pain. The sour-penny taste of blood in his mouth remained.

The demon coalesced into its vaguely human form. Lightning flickered wildly just under its skin, silver light in opposition to the hot red flames licking around its thighs. Its glittering eyes went immediately to the stairs, and it keened, high and shrill.

“She'll make it,” Paul said, the first time he had ever spoken to it when they were separate and face to face.

The metallic eyes swam through the black flesh and fixed on his face. Paul shared its emotions even from a distance: panic and desperate hope.

“She'll make it,” Paul said again. “I'm sorry I was such a jerk. If I hadn't fought her, she might be here already.” For the first time, he felt kinship with the thing. He didn't hate it. It didn't want to destroy him. It only wanted to be free, just like he did. “She'll make it. She loves us.”

The black flesh of the demon lit suddenly from within. Its form strengthened, became more human.

“She will not make it.” Sander turned from them both, and strode to the edges of the larger circle of candles.

The demon keened after him, high and shrill. Paul felt tears fall onto his cheeks. *She'll make it. She must.*

He filled his healed lungs with air, and shouted, “Kate!”

* * * *

This time, the cold sunk its teeth into her. The symbols flared once and almost went out. Kate gave a sudden squeal, alone in the ghostly glow.

Vern's voice rapped against her brain. *What makes you think you can do this? You haven't been trained, you don't know what you're doing. This is just a pathetic attempt to be a big hero, which you can never be.*

God, she disliked that little nerd. His words rang sour inside her. But she just didn't believe him. The symbols glowed a little stronger.

The silver tangles of her breath smoothed into a mirror. In the frosted moonlight, she saw her own face staring back at her. She saw the frizzled mess of her hair, the smudges of sleeplessness under her eyes.

“This is just a pathetic attempt to be a big hero, which you can never be.”

It was her own voice, and it made her heart skip and falter.

“You can never live up to what Mom and Dad were. They died because they couldn’t live with the disappointment that you are.”

Kate stared into her reflection. Was she always this ugly? Her complexion was blotched with sweat, her forehead and chin gleaming with an oily residue of fear. Her eyes were watery, her lashes pale and thin. A healed acne scar stained her cheek where everyone else had a beauty mark. *I’m hideous. How can he love me?*

“He doesn’t.” Her reflection smirked. “Don’t be a fool. You don’t even have a favorite flavor of ice cream. You get him out of this curse, you’ll be lucky if he stops to thank you before he goes running off to live his life.”

She knew it was true. She’d always known, a nagging little shadow she couldn’t get rid of.

“He seduced the flower of high society, gorgeous, gracious women in elegant gowns. He’s been in the best beds in history. How can you even face him, after he spent a night in yours?”

It was great. He loves me.

“Yeah, yeah, you were the first bit of ass he had in a hundred years. He wouldn’t have cared if you were hairy and drooping, in fact he didn’t care, did he, as long as he got in your pants?”

Kate closed her eyes on her reflection, but the internal vision was worse. She saw herself under Paul, thrashing gracelessly. She saw Paul, dark eyes wild and beautiful, his body arched, strong and sure, over her clumsy struggling, her barred teeth and her matted hair.

“He can’t love you.”

She opened her eyes and saw not the reflection but herself: blotched face, red nose, streaming eyes. She felt the power of the symbols on her skin flicker, and begin to go out.

“Kate!”

Paul’s voice. It penetrated the cold prison, echoed in the cold like light through a prism.

He needs me.

The sigils on her skin pulsed to hot, powerful life.

He loves me.

The silver mirror melted away. The cold melted away. Kate pushed, and it yielded like mush. She turned the corner, went down the stairs, first one, then another, faster, faster, faster. Heat and love swelled from her heart out, steaming away the clinging cold tendrils of Sander’s magic. Her feet left the last step and hit the hard cement basement floor.

I did it. I’m in.

Kate faced three circles of candles. One started just a few steps away and ringed two smaller circles in the center of it. In one of those circles Paul hung from his wrists, manacled by cuffs anchored in the ceiling. In the other stood the demon, imprisoned by red flames.

Sander Wald stopped halfway through the large circle, staring at her, fury and fear in his eyes.

For a moment no one moved. Kate stared at Sander, and he back at her. Paul hung motionless from his cuffs. Even the demon’s liquid form froze.

“I made it through your wards,” Kate said. She needed to say it, so she could believe it herself. “I made it through.”

She stepped up to the ring of candles.

Paul strained to the edge of his tether. “Kate, he has a knife!”

Sander’s mouth curled up, and he held it up to show it to her.

Would he spill blood in his magic circle and risk unleashing wild magic? He needed to keep control.

The demon shrieked, high and piercing.

Sander winced at the sound. Kate saw his eyes glaze over with a hate so deep that, for a moment, she forgot to breathe. Then Sander whirled on his heel and strode back to Paul and the demon.

Kate lifted her right hand. She felt the symbol drawn on her palm pulse as she touched the invisible magic encasing Sander’s circle. She pushed against the magic until it wouldn’t give anymore, then she jerked her hand along the invisible surface, counterclockwise. She felt the fabric of the spell tear just enough for her to slide inside. She felt the circle close up behind her. She was trapped until, one way or another, it ended.

Kate’s lungs labored to draw in enough air. It was unnaturally thick, and it tasted like stale ashes. Cold fear prickled against her, probing, trying to find a way in. She looked at Paul. He stared at her, his eyes willing her forward. He jerked at the cuffs on his wrists, making his body sway.

Sander raised the knife. For a moment, Kate feared he would throw it, bury it in Paul’s chest. But instead he sketched shapes into the heavy air. Kate saw the trail left by the knife point, a glowing tracery. The symbols drawn on her body tingled in a sympathetic response to the spell.

He was laying down the magic to rebind Paul and the demon. Casting around in her mind for some clue as to how to stop him, Kate ordered her legs to move. Muscles strained against the thick air, but she moved. One step, another. Another. The candles marking the greater circle flickered, as her steps disturbed the heavy air and set the flames to dancing.

Another step, another. She plowed through the mush of magic, straining like a sled dog. But she made it to the circle imprisoning Paul.

Sander increased the tempo of the knife slicing through the air.

Kate put her hand out, felt for the circle’s magic. She found it whirling fast, right above the line of candles. She traced it up and down, an invisible whirlwind stretching as far as she could reach. She put both hands against the pulsing force, and began moving against the clock. She didn’t know what, if anything, she would accomplish, beyond freeing Paul. But that was enough.

Halfway around the circle, she felt its magic tear loose and float away, a spider web caught on the wind. The candles marking the circle hissed and went out. She stepped over the smoking stubs of wax. They flared to life again with flames reaching unnaturally high.

Sander lunged after her, but was stopped against an invisible wall. His mouth formed curses, but Kate couldn’t hear them.

“Kate.” Paul’s urgent tone caught her attention. “The marks. They’re part of the spell.”

Kate stared at the pattern of welts on Paul's flesh. Vern hadn't said anything about this. Tentatively, she put her hand against Paul's stomach. The magical sign on her palm flared. She smoothed her palm across his skin, and the red marks healed. Kate looked up, saw Paul watching with wide eyes. She went up on tiptoe, reaching around his shoulders, stroking down his spine, letting the symbols on her palms guide her. She leaned in and put her lips to the intricate welts Sander had inscribed over Paul's heart.

"I love you," she whispered against his skin.

When she drew back, the marks were gone, all gone. A vibrant sense of wonder filled her, warming her and making the symbols on her skin glow misty and pink-gold. She lifted her eyes to Paul's face. He was looking past her left shoulder.

"Watch out!"

He kicked with his feet, slicing her legs out from under her. She fell. Sander Wald tangled on her prone body as he lunged, knife in hand. Kate scrambled back. Sander caught himself and whirled. Kate got her feet under her and dove, but not fast enough. She saw Sander coming at her, saw the knife point. She felt a hot slash along her arm.

"Kate!"

Something hard and cold caught her. She lost her balance, but the hard thing kept her on her feet. The symbols on her body flared. She raised her head, expecting to have enough time to see the blur of the blade before it plunged into her. But Sander had not chased her any further. He stood beside Paul. The knife fell from his hand, and he put his fingers to Paul's flesh, retracing the marks of the spell.

Kate heard the soft whine of the demon, realized that the hard cold something was the magic circle imprisoning it. Its metallic eyes gleamed at her and it whined again, a desperate, pleading sound.

If she released it, would it take its own, personal revenge against Sander?

Kate put both hands against the magic of the circle. With one sharp jerk she pulled it down and hurled it away. The candles went out, but the red flames marking the pentagram inside the circle flared. She probed that magic with her palms, but it didn't give way.

"The blood!" Paul called to her.

Blood ... blood and sex: wild magic.

Sander made a sound like a cornered animal.

Kate slid her palm down the wound on her right arm from elbow to wrist, cupping a handful of her own blood. She threw it into the flames and then pushed against the imprisoning force. On the other side of the magic, the demon's hands pressed, mirroring Kate's force. Kate felt the magic crack, splitting and shattering like broken glass. The red fire rolled upwards in a burst, knocking her back. She hit the cement floor hard, the breath expelling from her lungs. The flames hit the ceiling, fanned, and went out.

Kate lifted her head. Sander stood with his back to Paul, his jaw unhinged. Paul stared, too, blinking fast. Kate followed the direction of their eyes, saw the demon step tentatively outside the boundary of the extinguished candles. Its metallic eyes swam through the liquid black flesh until they met Kate's.

The black flesh flowed towards her, fast. Kate jerked back, but forced herself not to run. This creature had saved her once before. She didn't need to fear it.

Lightning played across the surface of the thing. Kate saw the flashes like veins under its skin. The metallic eyes did not blink as they stared, as if they wanted to crawl

down Kate's own eyes and lodge inside.

"Tell me your name," Kate whispered.

Instead, Paul shouted, "Kate!"

The demon's eyes swam through its black flesh. Kate saw a blur, a raised hand. The demon flinched away, turning its face and wailing pitifully. Kate took the full force of the blow on her cheek.

She spun back, pain exploding through her sinuses, her jaw. Her head sang with echoes of the slap and the demon's scream. Her body hit the concrete and she raised her head, her mind fighting the pain, because there was something, something ... something about the demon.

Sander lunged at the thing, and it flinched again, raising its hands to shield itself.

Defensive posture. The thought jolted hot and wet through Kate.

Sander's hand penetrated the black flesh as if it were nothing but oil, grabbed onto something solid once he was in up to his wrist, and dragged the thing around towards Paul.

The new symbols on Paul's chest flared black as heart-blood.

"You. Get." Sander lifted the thing. "In. There!"

Paul cried out as if his heart were breaking.

And suddenly Kate knew. *Oh God, why didn't I see it before?*

Snatching enough air into her bruised lungs, she called out the demon's name.

"Alina!"

Chapter Twenty-Four

The name left Kate's throat like a hawk and buried its talons in Paul's heart. *Alina?* Sander screamed as if he was coming apart. He wrenched his hand out of the demon's oily black form and stumbled back. His gasping breaths echoed in the magic circle.

Lightning flared inside the demon's shell, branching out just under the skin like incandescent arteries.

Sander fell to his knees. His jaw hung slack. Paul had never seen such agony on a human face before.

The light inside the demon pulsed brighter. The metallic eyes swam through the thick, oily surface to focus on Sander.

"No." It was a plea, almost a whimper.

The metal eyes melted like mercury. Light burned in its core. The air thickened. Oily steam rose from the demon. The black stuff curled up like smoke, revealing apple-blossom flesh: a patch of upper arm, a milky thigh, a slender foot. The internal lightning pulsed and the darkness steamed away, until Paul could see the tall, strong female form he had drawn, over and over and over again. Rivulets of blackness ran down her face, her breasts, her legs, pooling at her feet. She blinked, and rubbed the last smudges away from her eyes.

"Alina," Paul whispered. A hundred years of regrets, of sadness, of aching loneliness, swept through him. His chest rose and fell as he hung there, helpless, feeling the real depth of Sander's curse break his heart.

How...?

His memory showed him the details of that first ritual all those years ago. Alina marked with magical symbols. The demon rising from Alina's body. Had she been dead yet, or had the magic taken her life as well as her soul?

You have her in the day, and I'll have her at night. Paul closed his eyes against the sheer perversity that had trapped them, all three, for a century.

When he opened them again, Alina stood whole and unsmudged by the darkness that had bound her. The force of her beauty stole his breath. She glowed as if she'd swallowed the sun, and Paul didn't know how much longer he could bear to keep his eyes on her.

Her eyes—so impossibly green, he'd forgotten in his black and white drawings—lifted to his. Paul wanted to crawl away and hide. He wanted to throw himself at her feet and beg forgiveness.

"I'm so sorry." He moved his lips, but he could barely hear the words himself. "I didn't know."

Alina smiled and shrugged slightly. "How could you?" Her lilting voice carried echoes, as if she were talking from far away. She moved towards him, the smile still on her lips.

Sander reached out to grab her, to stop her, to control her. But his hands passed right through her luminous flesh and closed into empty fists. Paul saw a deep flush spread from his neck, turning his face the shade of bruises.

Alina ignored him. She went to Paul and stood for a long time, staring into his eyes.

Paul forced himself to find the courage not to look away. "I failed you. All this time."

She laughed. The sound of it cut through Paul. Sander ground out a low, hoarse cry. "Does this feel like failure?"

She took a deep breath and blew across Paul's skin. Tingling goose bumps rose as chills chased down his spine. The symbols Sander had etched into his flesh faded away. She reached up and tapped the cuffs. They sprang open and Paul sagged onto his feet, his shoulder muscles screaming in protest. For a moment he leaned against Alina's body, and it was like leaning into a spring wind, playful and cool. He caught his balance and jerked back.

She smiled again, that same edged smile he remembered. Beside her, he felt so mortal: sweat and clay against her light and glow.

"Goodbye, Paul."

The words slapped him like cold water. It was over, finally over. He opened his mouth but couldn't speak. Every word he might have said stuck in his throat.

Alina rolled her eyes. "There is no blame between us, Paul Dumond. Let it be over, truly and forever, and thank God for it."

A hot rush of tears flooded his eyes, making her glow even more brightly.

She turned and headed for Kate.

Sander got to his feet. "You are still my wife!"

If she heard him, she made no show of it.

Paul watched as Kate, cradling her injured arm, straightened her spine. Her eyes darted nervously from Alina to Paul, and back again.

"How did you know, at the end? How did you know it was me?" Alina asked her.

Paul saw Kate shrug and swallow hard. "You flinched when he raised his hand. You knew how hard he hit." She touched the red mark on her cheek. "You were afraid of him."

Paul glanced at Sander, saw his mouth draw back in a satisfied snarl.

Alina rippled out a laugh, a sound so green and gold that Paul felt himself smile in response. "So it was fear that saved me?"

Kate's brows shot up. "I guess so."

Still laughing, Alina turned from Kate and finally looked at Sander Wald. "Well. I'm not afraid anymore."

Sander closed his eyes. Alina walked past him. He tried, one last time, to hold onto her. His fist closed, again, on nothing.

Behind Sander's bowed back, Alina stopped. She looked one last time over her shoulder at Paul, a long, lingering look, and then at Kate.

"I envy you a bit, Kate Scott," she said. And then the air tore in half. A jagged rupture of white-gold flame flared to life. Paul threw his hand up to shield his eyes against the brilliance. He smelled roses and snow, heard the pounding of surf. Alina leaned towards the shining and it drank her in. The rent in the air sealed back up, but not before a whip of golden light snapped against Sander's back. He screamed as if burned, falling forward and scrambling away.

Kate screamed, too. Paul whirled towards her, suddenly terrified. *Don't take Kate from me*, he begged whatever force might live in that light. *Don't you dare take Kate from me now!*

* * * *

The supernatural brilliance faded, taking the sheen of magic from Kate's flesh. She felt it go, as if someone had given her a surprise full body wax. She lifted her palms, pulled aside the shoulder of her blouse. The symbols were gone. So was the oppressive humidity of power. All of the candles had gone out, the room lit now only by the dimmed, electric sconces on the walls.

Whatever that light had been, welcoming Alina home, it had stolen *all* of Sander's magic. Including the magic she'd stolen from him.

She looked around a little wildly. She saw Sander down on all fours, gasping for breath. She saw Paul, standing free, looking as dazed as she felt.

So it was fear that saved me? Kate would never forget that question, or the lilting voice and the shining body who asked it. And she would never, ever understand. If fear had been their enemy and love their only weapon, it had been fear, not love that gave Kate the means to break the curse. Laurie would say it had something to do with the turning of wheels, with alphas and omegas, but to Kate it was like a shimmering pattern of dew: too light and insubstantial to grasp without destroying it. *I'll ask Laurie about it, when I see her. Maybe she'll...*

And then it hit her like a cement wall of adrenaline. *We won.* Her legs turned to quivering jelly. Her eyes focused, really focused. The candles were all out. The air was clear of magic. Paul stood staring at her, the confusion on his face beginning to clear into joy, Sander still crouched on all fours on the floor between them.

It offended her sense of justice that Sander remained alive. He'd fashioned a curse that hurt in a dizzying array of facets. The demon had been a shell imprisoning Alina. Alina had been imprisoned inside Paul during the day, Paul inside Alina at night, a tangled knot of prisons. And it still hadn't been enough. He'd wanted to break Paul, possess both Paul and Alina. If Paul had broken down into Sander's emotional and physical slave with Alina secretly locked inside him, would that have been enough to give Sander revenge? It was too much. Too much.

Kate looked around until she found the knife. It wasn't far, just a few steps to the right, as if it had been waiting for her. She bent down, closed her palm around the hilt. When she raised her head, she saw that Sander had raised his, finally, too. He stared at Kate, his lips curling in a sneer.

He thinks I can't do it. In her mind, she saw Ellie just before she'd squeezed the trigger. She remembered the faces of all the abused women she'd ever helped, and lifted the knife.

"Kate, no."

Paul took a step towards her, held out his hand. "The slate's been wiped clean. Don't smudge it now."

"He deserves to die." How could he deny it?

Paul held out his other hand, calling her to him. "You don't deserve to be a murderer."

Kate stared into Sander's eyes, the challenge in them. She was afraid of him, with magic or without magic. She feared him, and she wanted to kill him. A ripple of laughter stirred inside her—mostly hers, but she thought she heard a gentle lilt that wasn't hers at all. Fear was only your ally for a moment.

Giving Sander's prone body a wide berth, she walked over to Paul, put the knife in

his right hand, and her own hand in his left. The contact jolted her, body and heart.

Paul smiled. It made him so joyously handsome it took away her breath.

"Come on." He squeezed her hand. "The sun's not up yet. I want to see the night again."

He had his life back, his entire life, day and night, darkness and light. *We won!*

She answered his smile, reached up on tiptoe to kiss him. She heard the scuffle behind her, the growl, felt Sander's hand tangle in her hair.

Paul jerked her away, and she spun wildly. Her world tilted. She saw Sander lunge, saw Paul's arm come up. She fell, landing heavily against the cement. The breath went out of her and her vision blurred. Blinking fast, she pushed herself to one knee.

But the action was over. Paul and Sander stood close as lovers, eyes for nothing but each other. Then Paul stepped back, and Kate saw the hilt of the knife in Sander's throat.

* * * *

I killed him.

Paul couldn't breathe, couldn't think, except for those three words.

Blood cascaded down Sander's chest, darkened his lips. He crashed onto his knees, then pitched forward. Paul stumbled out of the way. Blood spread across the black cement floor.

I killed him.

Something touched Paul's arm. He jumped, looked down into Kate's grimly satisfied face. "Now," she said, "the slate is clean."

From the floor came a strangled, rattling noise, and then silence. Inside Paul, the final crack in his heart sealed and he felt whole.

"Come on." Kate tugged at his hand.

Paul turned to go, but a sudden shimmer above Sander's body stopped him. Sparks danced in the air, a golden light. He smelled roses and snow, heard the distant pounding of surf. And then, in an instant, it was gone—so fast he thought he imagined it. He looked down at Kate.

She stared at the blank air above Sander's body, where the bright light had flashed. "I don't get that."

Paul put his arm around her shoulders, and eased her away. "Laurie would say it's the turning of the wheel." He tilted Kate's face towards his. "Let's go tell her."

Kate grinned, plastered a kiss onto his mouth.

I'm free!

He grabbed Kate's wrist and ran for the stairs, dragging her along.

"Slowly! I'm all banged up here!"

He couldn't possibly slow down. Bursting through the cellar door, he said, "I want to burn this place to the ground. Is that okay?"

"Whatever you want."

He led her down the hallway, still running. "I want to fill the basement with water, put in koi and lilies, make this whole place a park."

Kate laughed.

Paul threw open the front door, leaped down the porch stairs. And froze.

He stared. The moon hung low in the sky; dawn would break in a few hours, he guessed. He had to guess, because he no longer felt the tug of time in his bones.

“Look,” he whispered to Kate, turning in a slow circle. “Look at all the color.”

The sky glowed blue streaked on blue, the clouds gray and silver, the moon greenish and warm. The stars blinked amber and blue and red. He could see the leaves in the grass, yellow and orange and red and nutty oak brown. The hairs on his arm were not flat black under the moon. His flesh was a living color again.

He looked at Kate, his pencil drawing come to life. Her hair, her glorious mess of hair, gleamed in spots, polished by the moonlight. Even the mark Sander had left on her face had color: an angry pink. The blood on her arm was red, not black.

“Your arm! How bad?”

She twisted at the shoulder, looking down the torn flesh. “No stitches. Maybe a scar, though. It’s not even bleeding...”

Paul scooped her into his arms, off her feet, and whirled her under the moonlight. She laughed until she lost her breath. Paul set her back down and pulled her close. Her eyes glowed spring green. He kept his eyes open as he kissed her, even after she closed hers, so he could see her skin flush.

“You are so beautiful in the dark,” he murmured when they broke apart.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Thanks, I think.”

He laughed, lifting her again in his arms and carrying her to the huge maple tree. He set her down on her feet with her back against the bark. He put a hand against it, felt the roughness, the tingling, crystal surface of the night’s frost. “My mother and I planted this tree when I was ten.” He worked loose the button and fly on Kate’s jeans. “When I was sixteen, she told me the most ridiculous thing.”

“What did she say?” Kate’s voice was breathless as she unzipped his fly.

Paul kicked off his pants and pulled away Kate’s. He lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. Her hair glowed against the maple’s frosty trunk. “She said that someday I would conceive her a grandchild, right under this tree.”

He plunged inside her, all the way. Kate wrapped her arms around his neck, her body arching and shuddering as she accepted him.

“Crazy advice from a mother,” his voice had lowered to a growl, “don’t you think?”

Kate opened her eyes, looked deeply into his. She connected them with their eyes as he had joined them below, and he saw nothing but Kate, felt nothing but Kate, knew nothing but love. Absolute joy rose in his chest as an orgasm built below.

A light twinkled in Kate’s eyes. “Don’t laugh, or I’ll win.”

Joy barreled through Paul, exploding out. His hips rocked. Kate cried out. He threw back his head and laughed, just as the first rays of the dawning sun cut through the clouds.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kate pushed open the liquor shop door, sending the string of sleigh bells fastened to the handle into a spasm of jingling. “Be careful.” She held the door open wide. “Don’t drop it.”

“I’m not going to drop it.” The case of champagne balanced neatly in his arms, Paul followed.

“It was so expensive,” Kate said for the tenth time in twenty minutes.

“It’s time you tasted good champagne,” Paul said, completing the refrain.

“Kate?” The voice intruded on the intimacy of their exchange. “Kate Scott?”

Kate turned. There, framed in the twinkling red and green lights rimming the store window, in all her bony glory, stood ADA Louisa Frischler.

Kate let out a breath that turned the air silver with frost. “Louisa! What a complete surprise.”

Paul tilted his head, questioning.

“The ADA.”

Paul lifted his brow, then shifted his eyes to Louisa. “I’ve heard so much.”

Louisa smirked and shrugged. The designer bag on her shoulder slid down her arm.

“Sorry to hear you didn’t have the guts to fight the war, kid,” she said to Kate.

Kate looked at Paul, and Paul at Kate. They burst out laughing.

Louisa blushed and changed the subject, fast. “That’s a lot of champagne. What’s the celebration?”

“We’re getting married tonight!” Kate knew she was grinning like a fool, but couldn’t stop and didn’t care.

Louisa pulled a face. “That’s sudden.”

Still laughing, Paul said, “My mother was always insufferably right about everything.” He nudged Kate with his shoulder.

“It was really nice to see you again,” Kate said, her tone missing sincere by just a fraction, “but we have so much to do.”

They left Louisa, alone and chic, framed by the twinkling lights.

Paul put the champagne in the trunk of a sensible blue Corolla—Kate’s choice to replace the totaled Mercedes. They drove out of the shopping center as the sun threw long shadows on the snow that had fallen last night. Paul parked outside of Café Foy, right in front of the blank wall where the “For Sale” sign had once hung.

They looked at each other, grinning.

Five weeks after Halloween, as they had stood over the still smoking remains of Paul’s house, a long dark sedan pulled up to the curb. A man in an Armani suit stepped out of the back seat. He carried a black envelope.

“Paul Dumond?”

Paul stared wordlessly. Kate took the envelope. The man turned on his heel and retreated to his waiting car.

“Burn it,” Paul whispered. “Throw it in the ashes and burn it.”

Kate ignored him and picked open the flap of the envelope. Inside she found a single typewritten sheet. She held it up for Paul. “It’s an address in the city. Do you recognize

it?”

Paul shook his head. “I don’t care where it is. We aren’t going.”

The next morning they stood outside a polished chrome office building with no name, only a number, on the door.

“I’m not going in there,” Paul said.

“Aren’t you curious?” Kate took his hand. “I’ll protect you.”

“Ha.”

They went inside. A sleek, artfully red-headed receptionist directed them to the top floor. An equally sleek and artfully blonde secretary led them into an office of tinted windows, dark wood and creamy leather. An angular, crisply-creased, white-haired man waited behind a mahogany desk.

“Paul Dumond?”

Paul nodded.

The man explained a few things in a thick European accent. “In the event of his death, Mr. Wald made provisions that all of his assets be transferred to your control, according to your directions.” He tapped a few keys on his laptop, turned the screen around to face them. “We await those directions.”

For a moment the office vibrated with silence as Kate and Paul sorted through the list of accounts, inventory of assets, and all the zeros in the right hand column.

Paul crossed his arms and set his jaw. “I won’t take anything that was his.”

The white-haired man frowned.

Kate broke out laughing. “Baby, he *owed* you.”

Paul had pouted about it until Kate showed him the pregnancy test. Things went quickly after that.

With the champagne carefully cradled in Paul’s arms, they stamped through the snow on the porch and into the coffee shop. Warm smells welcomed them home. No one manned the counter. Dee sat with everyone else: Vanessa, Gwen, Laurie, and Vern. No one sat on the sofa. That space was left open for Kate and Paul.

Vanessa leapt to her feet. “I thought you’d never get back. We have so much to do! Your hair, your nails...”

“She can’t be late to her own wedding,” Vern said.

“She can’t be late to her own wedding,” Vanessa snapped back, “because it can’t start without her.”

“You two,” Dee chuckled, and Kate recognized a familiar light in her eyes. She’s on another matchmaking trip. *Good luck, girlfriend.*

Paul returned from stashing the champagne in the kitchen refrigerator. “What’s up?”

“I’m being whisked away to be made beautiful for my groom,” Kate said as Vanessa and Gwen closed in.

“Hmmm.” His eyes told her that he already found her beautiful, but then he winked and said to Vanessa, “Make sure you do something with the hair.”

Gwen handed him a plain brown shopping bag. “I wanted to give you this before the ceremony,” she said.

Paul eyed the bag. “It’s beautiful. I love it already.”

Kate rolled her eyes.

Paul opened the bag. He went still.

“Paul?” Kate whispered.

Paul put his hand in the bag and pulled out a palette of watercolors: blues, greens, golds, reds. He swallowed.

"From one artist to another," Gwen said.

"Yes." Paul turned the paints over in his hand. "Yes." A smile broke across his face. "Thank you." He lifted the palette towards Kate. "Watercolors," he said.

"Yes." She gave Gwen her own grateful smile. "Thank you."

"Eye shadow is vastly more interesting," Vanessa said. "Can we go?"

Paul dropped a kiss on Kate's nose. "I will see you at moonrise."

"Moonrise," she whispered back.

"With better hair," Vanessa said, and pulled her outside.

Back at Gwen's old Victorian, they soaked Kate in a warm, scented bath, then oiled her body like she was heading for a harem. They spent a full hour huddled like concerned surgeons over her hair.

When they were finished, Kate stood in the dressing room, her image reflected and repeated in the dozens of mirrors. Her dress was simple, long-sleeved, square-necked, no veil. Gwen fastened her wedding gift from Paul around her neck: a delicate braid of gold links, burnished into the deepest, richest color, each link cradling a sparkling point of a diamond. The teardrop topaz centered in the hollow of her throat caught all the lights in her hair.

Kate thought of the image in the cursed mirror she'd seen, trapped in Sander's wards. She looked at the reflection in white staring back at her, stuck out her tongue, and laughed.

They hustled back to Café Foy, where they found the tables and chairs all pushed aside and an aisle of tea lights and red rose petals leading to the sofa and Laurie. Her skin was white and thin as tissue, but her eyes were clear and steady and, for the first time Kate remembered, at peace.

There was no sign of Paul and Dee and Vern.

"They're late?" Vanessa asked, her voice arching high into outrage.

"You're early," Laurie said.

Vanessa tilted her head. "Well that's a lifetime first for me."

Gwen said, "I'll go upstairs and find them."

Laurie smiled at Kate. "You look lovely."

Kate smiled back. "I feel lovely."

"You should." Laurie waved her closer. Careful of the rose petals, Kate complied. "Have you considered what you'll do, after the wedding?"

Kate hadn't. She had no job and, with Sander's assets now their assets, she never really had to get another one. Her hand fell to her stomach. "There's the baby..." she said, but even as she said it, she knew that there would have to be something else. She would never go back to victim advocacy, but she couldn't ignore the call to service bred into her.

When she didn't have an answer, Laurie cocked a brow. "Vern makes a very good teacher," she said, "and you show a very deep, natural talent."

Kate ran her mind over the idea. Kate the witch. She had a boring enough name for it.

"Think about it," Laurie said.

"I will," Kate replied.

Gwen came down the stairs, her long skirt swirling around her ankles. "They're ready." She snagged Kate's arm. "Come on."

She positioned Kate out on the porch in the cold as everyone else took their seats. Through the frosted window, Kate caught a glimpse of Dee, Vern, and then Paul. He stood in the rose petals in front of their breakfast sofa, looking at home in gray tails and gloves.

"I'm proud of you, Kate," Gwen said, handing her a bouquet of red carnations. Paul had insisted there be no white flowers. "I'm not afraid anymore of not finding love," she said, "because you've shown me how to do it."

Kate hugged her and kissed her cheek. "I'm freezing. Let's get this going."

Gwen kissed her back and went inside. Kate stood in the dark by herself. The first silver rays of moonlight lengthened shadows on the snow. She remembered the first time she'd opened the café door. How could she have known what she was stepping into?

Leaving the past, Kate opened the café door one more time. Snow swirled inside with her, blowing across the rose petals. The wind blew the door shut behind her with a slam and a jangle of the bell. Her eyes went right to Paul, and, for a heartbeat, nothing else existed. Then, without escort, she walked down the path of rose petals and snow to stand at his side.

They hadn't rehearsed, hadn't tapped anyone to stand with them. So when she went to take Paul's hand, she gave Laurie the flowers.

"That's not the way it should go," Vern muttered.

"Be quiet," Vanessa whispered.

Laurie, holding the flowers and smiling, said, "There is nothing we can do to better recognize the union between Paul and Kate than the Universe already has. But in front of their friends tonight, they would like to give vows to each other." She looped a white silk ribbon around their clasped hands.

Kate looked at Paul. "You first."

Paul's eyes gathered her in. "To you I vow my heart, because you saved my soul. To you I vow the rest of my life, because it is you who gave it to me."

Tears gathered on Kate's lashes.

"And I also vow that before I am done with you, you will have a favorite flavor of ice cream."

Gwen and Vanessa laughed.

Paul bent his head toward Kate's. "That you will take long vacations. That you will learn how to play. That you will..."

Kate felt the grin spread across her face.

"Don't laugh, or I win."

She pulled his head down to hers.

"They can't kiss now, the ceremony just started," Vern complained. "That's not the way it goes!"

"Shut up!"

The End

About the Author:

Joyce Ellen Armond loves sappy love songs and face-eating monsters with equal enthusiasm. Her personal passion is melding the genres of romance and horror. From her home base in rural Pennsylvania, waiting for the zombie apocalypse, she edits the Speculative Romance Online website and newsletter.

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Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron

Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

The Max Series by JB Skully

Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

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