



SOPHIA
DANU

A movie poster featuring a close-up of a man with long, dark, wavy hair and a light beard, looking intensely at the camera. A woman with dark hair is leaning her head against his chest, her hand resting on his shoulder. The background is dark. In the lower right, there is a semi-transparent, ethereal image of a white horse's head. The title 'KENTUCKY HUNGER' is written in large, stylized red letters with white outlines at the bottom.

KENTUCKY
HUNGER

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BY

SOPHIA DANU

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Kentucky Hunger

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To my large, loving, supportive family, especially my sexy husband, my two precious girls and my inspirational mom. I have to also include 'the girls' – five of the best girlfriends ever. They are a great resource and really good with details. I love you all.

*I am not your rolling wheels, I am the highway
I am not your carpet ride, I am the sky
I am not your roaring wind, I am the lightning
I am not your Autumn Moon, I am the Night...
AudioSlave lyrics 2006*

PROLOGUE

In the year 1427, France

“It’s time, my lord.” A long, scream of agony echoed through the castle, drowning out the raging storm that battered the ramparts and thick stone walls.

“Merci.” He turned and raced up the stairs to the birthing room where his wife was going through hell. He hated this. He burst into the room. Nanny knelt between his wife’s legs, a worried expression on her lined face. Moiria’s face was distorted from terror and anguish. Blood red tears streaked her beautiful face, her hair tousled. Strands clung to her damp face.

He glanced in helpless anger around the room at a loss as to what to do. He felt powerless as he looked around the room, angry because he was unable to do anything for her. Torches blazed in wall sconces, their dancing flames throwing eerie shadows around the room. The drapes were open, the storm had cleared. The dark sky was illuminated by a large red moon—the blood

moon. It was a strange night. He had felt the evil premonition all day and it had proven true. His wife had gone into labor early and suffered horribly.

"Jean..." she whispered, pain evident in her voice.

He turned back to the woman who made his life worth living. He knew he would voluntarily go to the afterlife with her if she didn't make it. She reached out a shaking hand to him and he fell on his knees beside her, rubbing the tears tenderly from her face. Red smears gave her face a macabre mask. He quickly reached for a damp rag and cleaned the streaks from her fine skin. "I'm here. I won't leave you, Moiria."

She raised her hand to his face, "*Je t'aime, Jean.*"

"I love you too, Moiria. Stay with me."

"My lord, I see the head," the nanny whispered, as Moiria erupted into another long wail. He closed his eyes as she squeezed his hand. If only he could take this pain from her. Several long, excruciating minutes later, the boy came into the world.

"Rhys," Moiria whispered. Jean was happy, but barely spared a glance for his son as the nanny turned away to clean him up. His only thought was for his wife.

Her eyes were closed and she panted, deep shuddering breaths that raked her body.

Suddenly, she screamed again, long and piercing. He looked at the nanny who had turned at the sound. She quickly swaddled the baby and laid him in the cradle, turning back to her charge.

"My lord, there is another head. There are two!" She crossed herself. The premonition was true he realized. They were having twins. The mystics believed if one had twins, one would be good, the other one evil. He prayed the mystics were wrong...

CHAPTER ONE

Kentucky, 2007

Alana dropped the dusty, leather bridles on the stable floor with a clank. Once the pile was cleaned and put away, her work day would be over. She brushed a silky tendril of hair behind her ear with a gloved hand and stooped to pick up the first bridle.

Her full name was Alana Marie Cornett, but she was known to her family and friends as Sissy. It was a typical southern name given to a sister or cousin, which then became the nickname of the unfortunate person the rest of her natural life. God help her. She tried to persuade people refer to her as Alana when she was sixteen, but overall, they refused. So she was stuck with a name that she was not too fond of, but what could she do? It seemed she would never outgrow the name.

Part of the problem could be how young she

looked. She was twenty-four years old, but she looked younger unless she was caught off-guard. It was then, if one caught a glimpse of her eyes, that it was evident she was an old soul. At times, her eyes were even a bit haunted.

Her midnight-black hair was long and straight. She liked it that way because it was easy to work with. A quick brush in the morning and then up in a ponytail or braid and she was ready.

Her hair and skin color were evidence of Cherokee descent. Her grandpa had the same dark skin, although his hair was now gray. But it was her eyes that were her most striking feature. They were a deep cobalt blue, but in moments of extreme passion they could flash a hypnotizing silver hue that was unforgettable.

As a young girl, she felt inferior to the fair-skinned blond girls at school. What she didn't know was that her exotic beauty was one that every man noticed and lusted after. The primal reaction that she provoked in men was something that she ignored and sometimes didn't notice since she was so used to shielding herself against those around her.

She worked a very physical job at a horse farm. As a trainer's assistant, her job included everything from exercising the horses to mucking out the stalls. Carrying sixty pound square bales of hay and maneuvering powerful, sleek

thoroughbreds had given her a fit, toned body that was the object of many a stable hand's fantasy.

She loved her job because she spent more time with horses than people, which was perfect for her. Perfect because she was a telepath and being around people was an incredible strain on her mind and emotions.

It sounded bizarre and most people didn't believe in such nonsense; but for her, it was real. The ability to read other's thoughts had been her gift, or curse, for as long as she could remember. Her mother had the same ability. She didn't know that from experience since her mother died of leukemia when she was a baby. She was two years old when it happened; not old enough to remember her. Not even a lingering memory of her perfume, or her smile. Instead, Alana's grandfather told her about her mother; her beauty and grace, her kindness, her intelligence and her gift. A dark gift, her mother's legacy, Alana thought.

Her grandfather claimed that he never knew her father. She imagined that her blue eyes came from him. She and her cousin Bernice used to make up stories about who he was; a member of a royal family who visited Versailles on horse business, a CIA agent, an international spy, a married Senator who couldn't afford the scandal and the list went on. Her mother didn't leave a

note or make any reference to his identity at all. Alana knew because she had searched the house from top to bottom for some clue as to whom he was — nada.

Her home town was pronounced “Ver-sales”; it was in Kentucky, not France. Her grandfather, a horse trainer in his time, raised her. He worked for her grandmother’s wealthy family who owned the Big House — the place they affectionately called home, along with the surrounding farm that was a flourishing horse farm when her grandmother was young. Her grandfather taught her debutante grandmother how to ride.

It was love at first sight, her grandmother used to say with dreamy eyes. Her great- grandparents didn’t approve the relationship, but they loved their daughter and when she eloped, they grudgingly accepted him into their family and gave him entry to their affluent equestrian society. It was many years later, after his wife’s death that he turned his back on that culture and settled down to raise her and Bernice and teach them horses.

Bernice was, by far, more interested in boys than horses, although she was a good rider. She was raised on a horse farm, after all. But while Bernice spent time enclosed in her room on the phone with boys, Alana and her grandfather bonded over horses. It was an easy decision after

high school to get a job at Ramsey's farm rather than go through the torture of going to college and being around hundreds of other students every day.

Bernice pursued other interests. She owned a nail boutique where she worked six days a week. The *Nails of Versailles* carried hair and body essentials. Bernice was constantly asking Alana if she was low on "product". She didn't scoff, however; she worked with horses every day so the feminine side of her did appreciate the benefits of the "products". She didn't want to be a wrinkled, leathery-skinned woman by the time she was fifty.

Her grandfather was seventy-seven and fortunately as spry as a young man. He was cranky most days of the week, but she loved him and he was always there with a hug and practical advice when the girls needed him. Bernice was twenty-six and hadn't yet found the man that she wanted to marry, although that was top on her priority list and she was never without a "date". Bernice reminded her of a cat in heat; Alana snickered at that thought.

Today was Friday. Dusk settled in on the farm where she was almost finished cleaning the bridles. The owner of the farm, Dylan Ramsey, a sixty-something gentleman, hailed from somewhere other than Versailles – up north, she thought. He had owned the farm for probably

forty years or so, but was still considered an outsider by the locals. He was a handsome man with a commanding presence. He reminded her of a younger Tony Bennett, with his silver hair, tanned skin and dark blue eyes. Rumor was that he used to be madly in love with her grandmother. He practically stared holes through Alana when he came to the stable and made a point of watching her work. She didn't understand his interest and thought his penetrating gaze was creepy.

She flaked off another piece of mud stuck on the bridle and eagerly anticipated the long, hot bath she was going to take when she got back to the Big House. Her routine was to take a shower first to remove the grime and then take a long soaker. She loved to light candles, sip a glass of wine and read a book while she vegetated in the tub. She could almost feel the steaming water soothing her tired muscles now.

Bernice was on kitchen duty that evening. They swapped every night. Alana was relieved she didn't have to cook dinner when she got in. It would be waiting. She looked forward to getting home and spending a comfortable weekend in her own surroundings. The Big House had been in her family for many generations. It was a spacious, aging, plantation-style house with large white columns and ivy covering half of the building. It

was beautiful and it was home and she loved it. Tall ceilings, long windows, gleaming hardwood floors, chandeliers and curving staircase lent it an old-world charm that never failed to impress visitors, even if they noticed the scuff marks and chipped paint. It had character and it was her haven, her retreat from the world that caused such a strain on her mind.

Bernice's parents died in a car accident when she was seventeen, killed by a drunk driver. She moved in with Alana and her grandparents at the Big House. They had been as close as sisters ever since. Their grandmother, Mabel, died of a heart attack when she was sixty-two. Alana was ten when she died. It was a very sad day. She still remembered people filling the house, bringing casseroles and pies, wondering how her grandfather would raise two girls.

She sighed, exhausted and then softly cursed when she remembered her promise to go to The Dog with Bernice. The Dog was a smoke-filled, crowded bar — the main hangout in Versailles. Well, Bernice would have to wait for her to take a shower *and* a bath, she thought. Bernice would not care to be seen with her as she was now. She smiled as she pictured Bernice's expression at the thought of going out in her current state — dirty, sweaty and smelling of horses.

A small laugh trickled from her lips and a

husky, male voice spoke from behind her.
"Beautiful," he drawled.

CHAPTER TWO

Spooked, she jumped in the air and whirled around to see a tall man with long dark hair leaning against the wall in the gathering shadows. His eyes flashed in the fading light as he looked at her. It wasn't often that people got the drop on her. She usually heard their thoughts and felt their emotions before they got within sight. This man was different.

Alana's heart raced like a horse in the Derby. Suddenly breathless and feeling vulnerable against the tightly shielded mind in front of her, she backed up against Ryder's snout as he peaked over the top of the stall — the bridle clenched tightly in her hands. Ryder snuffled in her hair and nudged her forward a bit, unbalancing her. She imagined her face flamed with embarrassment since her cheeks felt warm.

"Who are you?" Alana inquired breathlessly, much to her dismay, as she regained her footing.

"Monique's friend," he said as he stepped into

the stable, into the light and she could tell why he was a “friend” of Monique, the twenty-something blond, bimbo wife of the farm’s owner. The man in front of her was absolutely gorgeous. She had never seen another man like him. He was large, and one of the most potently sensual and deadly males that she had ever met. His eyes were blue like hers and his hair, long and silky straight. It was also dark like hers. He wore a pair of black, worn jeans and a black button-down shirt, expensive without appearing so. He wore black leather riding boots and strode forward to stop in front of Cyracco’s stall, the owner’s favorite and mostly unbroken stallion. Cyracco was a beast and didn’t let a soul ride on his back, except for her.

Cyracco was the bane of Mr. Ramsey’s existence, at least according to his last tirade in the stables. She imagined Monique would be a bigger one, but kept those thoughts to herself. David, the senior trainer, hadn’t told Mr. Ramsey that Alana rode Cyracco. He thought it might cause him to blow a mental gasket, and she agreed, so it was their secret.

As far as Mr. Ramsey knew, no one rode him. For that reason, she was surprised when the gorgeous stranger walked up to Cyracco’s stall and grabbed the newly cleaned bridle from its hook. He stared at her from the corner of his eyes as he did so, reminding her of a predator — one

who gives the impression of preoccupation, all the while noting their prey's every move.

Warring with herself about interfering, she finally spoke up — more out of concern for Cyracco than the man. Since her voice came out husky, she had to clear her throat and start again. "I don't think you want to ride that horse. Ryder, here, is a much better choice," she finally managed to spit out, through clenched teeth, upset with herself for sounding hesitant.

He gave her a sly, sexy grin. "This is the one I want," and gazed at her intensely while claiming what he wanted in a low, accented voice. Unfortunately, it made her heart pitter-patter faster. As if he was implying some sort of claim on her. She swallowed and glanced away. Jesus.

The man was fascinatingly erotic. Just looking at him made her hot, and she had never experienced that before, never having met such a man. She was amazed by the fact that she couldn't pick up a thing from his mind. Not even one single thought, which perplexed and aroused her at the same time. She belatedly noticed a strange sort of hum or buzz in the silence that came from him, rather than the overwhelming flashes of thoughts and emotions that she usually picked up from people. Intrigued, she discreetly stared at him as she pretended to work on the bridle in her hands; pondering the oddity.

Power that manipulated everything in his path, rolled off him in waves — a tangible thing that she could almost see. The power filled the stable, flowing around Cyracco and herself, molding around their bodies. Her gift allowed her to see, hear, and feel things that other people couldn't, but she imagined that even normal people could sense the danger about this man.

She knew he was special in some way; not the average human. She hadn't met anyone that was different like her, until now. He was far more powerful than she was; she knew it intrinsically, even though she wasn't aware of the source of his gift or what all he could do.

He looked up from his task and gazed into her eyes; a knowing smile crossed his lips. That smile told her that he knew of her curiosity and her attraction to him. His searing gaze followed the path down her body and she could almost physically feel his touch. Tingles passed down her spine and she knew her nipples hardened into points visible under her tank top. They scraped against her silky bra and she shivered. His eyes met hers.

"What's your name?" he asked as he pet the strangely docile Cyracco's nose, his other hand holding the secured bridle reins loosely. The question released her from her unusual trance and she turned back to her work, suddenly anxious to

finish and go home. The man's presence was having a very strange effect on her and it was time to go. One of the remaining stable hands that lived here could tend to Cyracco upon his return.

He was more than she could deal with, and she imagined, not someone that she should to get involved with in even the slightest way. She didn't answer him, figuring he didn't really care about her name. Plus, she felt the absurd need to challenge him and his power. Cyracco could handle himself, though she made a mental note to call David in the morning and have him come by to check on the stallion.

She froze as she felt a warm breath cross her nape. She mistakenly assumed he would leave if she ignored him. She could practically hear the blood rushing in her veins, so intense was her body's response to his nearness. Her breathing sped up as her chest rose and fell visibly.

"Your name, little one." It was an order. His strong hand reached out to her, touching. He lifted her chin up to face him. How dare he, she thought furiously and knew her eyes flashed silver in anger.

She opened her mouth, prepared to lash out at him and then looked up into his blazing eyes. She could swear there was a red sheen amidst the blue. She froze, mesmerized. For some reason, she wanted to tell him her name, despite her earlier

intentions not to do so. She suddenly felt compelled and that fact snapped her out of the fog. Amazing, she thought. She sensed the compulsion he had laced into the demand. He was definitely strong, but luckily she was not an ordinary human. She had a few gifts of her own.

“None of your business,” Alana said roughly, jerking her chin away from his warm grasp. Friend of the boss’ wife or not, he had no right to touch her or try to sway her mind in any way. She saw his eyes flare with surprise at her defiance. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, studying her with his fiery gaze. She hung up the last bridle on the hook and brushed past him on her way to the stable office to get her belongings. She had to get out of here before the situation escalated further.

She opened the desk drawer and leaned down to get her purse. Suddenly she could feel his hard body pressed against hers. A large hand smoothed over the snug, faded jeans that covered her ass and squeezed. *Oh God.* She hadn’t even heard him follow her. She slammed the drawer and stood abruptly, using her elbow to create space between them. He didn’t move. Her elbow might as well have pushed against a wall. Feeling panicky and trapped; she raised her hand, aiming for his face. Her impulsive decision to bust his nose was met with a quick rebuttal. He grabbed her arm and

swung her around face first into the wall. Her breath whooshed out at the force of the collision. Outraged, she opened her mouth to scream when he let her go and eased back. Her scream halted. She whirled to face him and when he made no move toward her, she quickly turned to leave. He grabbed her. The hairs on her arm raised as heat arced through the left side of her body.

"Let me go," she demanded in an astonished, breathless voice that was supposed to sound angry and firm. It was more of a plea than a demand, but the intent was there. As absurd as it sounded, she was angry but also...titillated. His dominance, power, and strength made him so much more appealing than any other man she knew – a little frightening, but appealing as well. Such assured, confident maleness mixed with an exotic face and sexy body made him too potent, too tempting... All that aside, she *was* angry with his attitude and secretly angry at her own response to him. He turned her around to face him and lifted her chin in his firm grasp. Lightning flashed through her body where his hands touched her. Her toes curled in her boots and her mouth went dry.

"I asked you a simple question. Answer me," he insisted, his eyes staring into hers. She averted her gaze, totally unnerved by the whole encounter. Still, no thoughts from his mind that

alerted her to danger — no thoughts at all and that was the most frightening thing of all. At least she didn't feel the compulsion any more.

She nervously fumbled with the zipper of her purse and decided to bargain with him. "If you'll let me go, then I'll tell you my name." She looked in his eyes. He nodded his head once in agreement. "Alana," she mumbled. "My name is Alana. Now let me go." It went against everything in her to do what he wanted and ask him to release her, but she knew he wasn't going to let her leave unless she did. Her name was a small sacrifice compared to what could have been taken, or given, like a kiss or even more. She looked at his lips.

He dropped his hands. "Thank you, Alana. I'll see you around," he said in a low, assured voice. She glared at him.

Yeah, right. Not if I can help it, she promised silently. He stepped away and walked to the stalls, she watched through the office doorway as he opened Cyracco's and led out the docile stallion. He grabbed a blanket and draped it over his back. Bare back, of course, she thought in bemusement.

He turned at the entrance. The dusk light cast a peculiar shadow over his face and flashing eyes. He warned in his deep voice, "And I will see you again, Alana." As if he had heard her protest. She shivered at the promise in those words; hot,

annoyed and afraid, all at once. No one had the right to be that beautiful and sexy, she thought; his eyes had stars in them. They swirled with color, hypnotizing and mesmerizing. He nodded to her and strode out the stable, Cyracco in tow.

She blinked. Thoughts blazed across her mind; like the fact that he was riding without a saddle on one of the meanest horses around, who was following him around like a lamb; the fact that she had felt compulsion from him pounding at her brain to do his will; and the fact that she wanted him more than anything in her life. Holy crap...

Galvanized, she jogged out to the parking lot and her ancient, black Jeep Cherokee. She saw him galloping through the field on Cyracco as she pulled out. Alana took a deep breath, shrugged her shoulders and twisted her head from side to side; physically trying to ease the tension caused by the bizarre episode. She did one of her mental tricks and wiped all thought from her head. For her, the ability to go on mental auto-pilot was a necessity to deal with the gift. This time however it didn't work as well as usual. The tall, charismatic man refused to leave her thoughts and she suddenly prayed to get home and into a hot, fragrant bath with a glass of wine before anything else out of the ordinary happened.

She made the eight mile trip on small curving roads in five minutes; a feat, even for a heavy foot

like her. She felt better the minute she pulled around the driveway of the lit up house, her refuge. As she entered the front doors she yelled, "I'm home," and ran up the curving stairway to her room. A shower and bath were in order and besides, she still wasn't ready to face anyone until she could gather her composure.

The dark image of Cyracco and the man flying across the field were still a picture in her mind. Why *had* the feisty horse let him ride? She remembered the sensation of the mental compulsion he used to get her name. She physically felt the demand. He had to have used the same power on the stallion. If so, at least Cyracco wouldn't try to hurt him. She was pretty certain he would take care with Cyracco since he was gentle with him in the stable.

She dropped her clothes on the floor and stepped into a steamy shower and stood under the spray, with closed eyes, getting the full blast. She felt better immediately. The shower helped clear her thoughts. Dark emotions sloughed off with the streaming water and she was finally able to let go a little.

After a refreshing removal of the mud, she stepped out of the shower and put on her robe. She turned on the water as hot as it would go in the large, Jacuzzi tub. After she lit candles around the tub and turned on the Red Hot Chili Peppers,

she wandered down to the kitchen for a glass of wine. Grandfather and Bernice were eating dessert that looked deliciously like lemon meringue pie. Bernice went all out tonight. Her stomach growled.

"There's some chicken tetrazzini in the oven, waiting for you," she said, licking meringue from her lips. "I was hoping you would wear the red dress tonight, Sis."

Grandfather snorted. She poured a glass and sighed. Bernice had bought her the red dress. It was beautiful but not really her style. It was a sheath dress and very short. It was gorgeous, but admittedly, she was a little intimidated to wear it. She feared it would indicate availability, which was the last thing she wanted the regulars at The Dog to think. Very, very high, red heels accompanied the dress.

"Isn't that a little formal for the bar?" Alana questioned.

"No, Sissy, it's not." Bernice's southern voice sounded offended. Alana realized she put her foot in her mouth and hurt Bernice's feelings since she typically went to The Dog dressed likewise.

"You're right, I'll wear it," Alana said with a smile. "I don't get much of an opportunity to wear it, do I?" That was true because she certainly wasn't going to wear it to church. "Let me finish my bath and I'll be down for some dinner before

we go.”

“I’ll put a wedge of pie on the counter,” Bernice yelled, as Alana carried her wine back upstairs. Her bath was perfect so she settled in to relax for a few minutes. Man, what a day, she thought. She deliberately did not let her mind go where it so obviously wanted to.

CHAPTER THREE

They arrived at The Dog forty-five minutes later when Alana told Bernice about the stranger.

“Oh my God, that is just what you need!” Bernice had a one track mind. She couldn’t believe Alana didn’t have sex and constantly tried to set her up with guys. Alana wished Bernice would quit trying. She had no intentions of going out with anyone Bernice tried to set her up with.

Alana had been with a boy once. His name was Kyle. Alana was seventeen, and it was the worst experience in her life. The virgin pain issue aside; she knew everything he was thinking. Literally! He was hot for her, at least. She would have been horrified if he was fantasizing about someone else? To keep from coming too early, he mentally recited the Lord’s Prayer. *How weird was that?*

It scarred her for life. After that she couldn’t even fathom being close to someone again. She knew she should get over it and try again, but it wasn’t an enjoyable experience anyway, mind-

reading aside, so she hadn't knocked herself out trying to get back in the game, so to speak.

Personally, she could do without the male population in general; except for Grandpa. She pretty much disdained them all. She knew that wasn't fair, but it was her opinion. It was hard not to think that way when she constantly read their licentious, cheating thoughts, but they were persistent, she would give them that. Some of the guys in town are good guys and they made her laugh, but she was still not hooking up with any of them.

It was very difficult to have her gift. She would love to be able to take people at face value as the rest of the world does — ignorance is bliss, right? But then she couldn't imagine not knowing when people were full of shit. It seemed the rest of the world was vulnerable to predators and evil by not knowing what others were thinking or planning in their mind. Like her sixth grade teacher who fantasized impure thoughts about his young female students, Alana included.

It was the hardest year of her life. She faced him every school day. It was difficult to look into his eyes without betraying knowledge of his thoughts. He never overtly did anything inappropriate, so she never told anyone. How to prove someone else's fantasies? He would have claimed she was crazy or out to get him and no one would have

believed her. It was the only year in school that she got a low grade — a C, because she had to shield her mind as he looked over his young students with nasty thoughts buzzing around his brain. As a result, she didn't soak in the class material.

That was why she tended to avoid humanity as much as possible. She kept to horses and Grandpa and Bernice, good people that loved her. She picked up snatches of feelings from animals, but they weren't like humans. Specific, recognized emotions didn't flow through their minds. When a horse was hungry, it experienced a feeling of need that flowed from its brain. Coupled with body language, she could decipher their desire. With animals, it was about instinct and that was far more palatable than human thoughts. Some humans had very dark thoughts. It was when she brushed against those people that she resented her gift.

"Bernice, I can't 'hear' him," Alana stressed to her cousin.

"But that's great! That's why you won't let people get close to you. Remember Kyle? A guy you can't 'hear' is perfect!"

"No, it's alarming is what it is. There's something strange about him."

"Well, that's the pot calling the kettle black. I mean, really, the only thing strange about him is

that he's Monique's friend and even that isn't strange, I mean, he's a guy," Bernice pointed out, as if that made all the sense in the world.

Monique was her boss' wife. She was a bleached-blond bitch with big boobs that Alana suspected were artificially enhanced. It was obvious why she was with the older, wealthy horse owner. Alana tried to abide by the phrase "judge not, lest ye be judged", but she hated to see people taken advantage of; however, Mr. Ramsey didn't seem to mind, so why should she?

Monique glared at Alana whenever she came to the stables, which thankfully wasn't often. She didn't like for her husband to come to the stables when Alana was working and for some reason, was extremely jealous of Alana. Her jealousy was bewildering to Alana who didn't have a clue why it was focused on her. Monique was a shallow, ridiculous woman and Alana tried to ignore her as much as possible.

Ramsey and Monique had only been married for a year, but Alana saw more gorgeous "studs" in that short year at the horse farm than in all of her time working there and she wasn't referring to horses. She generally tried to keep her attention focused on the stables. Common sense told her that she didn't want to get involved in the goings-on at the Mansion at the top of the hill. But, really, did Ramsey not know Monique was playing him

for a fool? Or did he not care?

Alana shook her head as the image of the voluptuous blond and the stranger's body entwined together bloomed in her mind, vivid and for some reason, disturbing. "It doesn't matter because I'm not going to see him again," she said with determination. "It's not like he'll stay in Versailles and most of the Monique's visitors don't spend much time in the stable," she pointed out as his promise to see her again crossed her mind.

They paid the cover and walked into the smoky atmosphere. They stood in the wings while their eyes adjusted to the dark environment. *Drive by Truckers*, one of Alana's favorite bands, played on the sound system while a band tuned up onstage. The smoke-filled dancing area was isolated but would be thumping when the band played. Tables lined the edges of the large building. A long bar snaked along the right side. Bottles lined the wall behind it. Her cousin loved the bar; she was a regular and Alana knew how much Bernice had looked forward to having her there with her, but it was crowded and hot and suddenly Alana just wanted to be at home. She wasn't mentally up to the next few hours and the emotions she would feel inside.

"Over here." Bernice grabbed her arm and guided them to the only empty table. Within seconds, men were standing around vying for

attention, mostly Bernice's. Alana sipped the beer Bernice had picked up for them at the bar. She licked her lips as she took another drink.

"Alana," a low voice whispered in her ear. Shivering, she glanced quickly behind her — no one. She looked around the bar and gazed at the different faces — trying to determine who had said or thought her name. Strangely it had seemed to come from right behind her, but no one was there. A soft, husky male laugh filled her ears. She felt the hair at her nape stir from a warm breath. Seriously spooked now, her mind strained to determine the source of the voice. It was as if the conversation around the loud bar was muted and her mind had tuned in to the voice that tickled her ear. No one seemed to be paying her any attention. If that wasn't bizarre enough, the husky, rasping voice turned her on. Her nipples hardened and she squeezed her legs together as she felt a small gush of moisture there.

Alana downed her beer, feeling weird and oddly alone in the midst of so many people. Something crazy was happening and she didn't like the feeling....yet then again she did. Her blood hadn't felt this pumped in years. A heavy hand fell on her shoulder and she yelped. Tom T. Langdon, known as Tom T., reached out to get her attention. She realized he had been saying her name repeatedly in vain.

"Are you in there, Sissy?" he inquired sardonically after he waved a hand in front of her face.

If only I wasn't, Alana thought sarcastically, and felt disgusted with her preoccupation and loss of control.

"Do you want another beer?" he asked. "I'm headed that way?"

"Yeah, Tom T. thanks." *Why not? Maybe an alcohol buzz would make the voice go away.* She wasn't much of a drinker, but felt the need for alcohol. It was a pathetic attempt at escape, she knew, but sometimes a girl had to do what a girl had to do, or something like that.

A high heel kicked her shin under the table. Bernice looked at her with a 'what's going on with you?' look. *Ouch.* Alana glared back at her; sure there would be a bruise on her leg from Bernice's pointy shoes. Bernice turned with a cat-like smile back to her men, and Alana rolled her eyes.

Tom T. was back after five minutes and Alana gratefully took the beer. He sank into the booth next to her, forcing Alana to scoot over or be crushed. He was a big guy and extremely handsome, but he was a womanizer and was often hot-headed after a few beers. He put his muscled arm around Alana. She gave a mental groan. She was so not going to be one in the long list of conquests.

Alana caught the mental image that he had of them together and felt like punching him in the gut. He was fantasizing about her going down on him in the bathroom while she fingered herself with her dress up around her hips. Alana sighed and knew she had to extricate herself from his grasp before she said or did something she would regret.

"Now, Sissy, when are you and me gonna' hook up?" he inquired in his southern twang.

"We aren't, Tom T," she advised him and lifted the beer in salute, "but thanks for the beer." She downed it in two large gulps, anxious to get out from under his big body. "I have to go to the ladies' room." His eyes lit up. "Alone," she stressed and put her own brand of compulsion in the words. "Excuse me, please."

He shuffled his muscular frame out of the booth and stood in her way so she had to brush her body against his to get by. He was 'happy' to feel her. *God save me from clueless men.* Alana gritted her teeth and smiled as she quickly escaped to the restroom. She walked down the dark, dirty hall and went inside. She leaned back against the door, wondering why she was here. What did Bernice see in this place? Granted it was one of the only places to hang out, but she was the happiest when she was at home in her flannel pajamas, watching the news with Grandpa.

Alana teetered on the heels as she walked to the sink. The glass of wine and quickly consumed beer worked on her. She burped as she stared at herself in the mirror. *Crap*. Could she make any more of a mess of this day?

“Alana...” whispered the masculine, rough voice again. It tightened things in her lower body. She swallowed; both frightened by the bizarre voice and oddly, turned on. Alana narrowed her eyes and leaned in closer to the mirror. Was it in her head? Maybe she was finally going insane. It sounded a lot like...oh no, it couldn't possibly be?

Contrarily, Alana was now ready to get back out to the obnoxious crowd, even the lascivious Tom T. At least him she could handle, strange voices were another thing entirely. She left the bathroom, looking down since her capacity to walk on the heels was diminished. The dark hallway was hazardous in her condition and she had to concentrate on the floor. She didn't notice the tall shadow hovering there so Alana yelped when she bounced into a muscular chest.

He grabbed her arms and walked her back against the door. He pressed his body against hers. Alana felt the press of his hard cock against her stomach. He accosted her so fast and with her head already spinning, she was off-balance and disoriented. The meager light in the hallway gave him a hazy halo as she squinted up at the

audacious man ready to blast him good.

"I told you I would see you again," a deep voice informed Alana, before he pressed a hard knee between her legs lifting her off the ground. She squirmed in his arms and opened her mouth to scream when he covered her lips with his. Alana's yell for help was muted by his mouth and was not heard over the loud thumping in the crowded room next to them. Squirming did nothing to help her escape. Instead the movement rubbed her sensitive clit deliciously against the friction of his jeans. The minute little strand of silk that she wore as underwear did nothing to provide a barrier. She could feel the wet spot as she moved against him.

Oh God, I'm in big trouble.

It was all Rhys could do not to take the human female to the ground and spread her legs. His control, which teetered on the edge, was something he had always depended on. For a Death Hunter, a vampire assassin, it was the difference between living and dying. Emotions were deadly. Nevertheless, he wanted this female like no other before. A bit alarming since, historically, humans had only been a consideration as a food source.

Nevertheless, Rhys ached to fuck her and make

her his with an intensity that was undeniable. He wanted to plunge his cock into her hard and deep while he did the same with his fangs. He imagined filling her cunt with his seed while he voraciously sucked her blood. The erotic exchange of fluids was a vision so enticing that it was almost more than he could handle. He had never felt this out of control. In his current state, he was a threat to every human in the bar.

As a member of the Throng, the vampire ruling class, nothing was ever forbidden him. Females offered themselves to Rhys — thrilled by the chance to be the Death Hunter's lover, his lover. He never felt anything for them other than an appreciation for their services.

Women wanted to sleep with Rhys, be dominated by him, but luckily they didn't expect a long term relationship. He was a dangerous thrill, but not commitment material. Parents used his wrath as a warning to wayward offspring, who whispered his name in fear. Vamps voluntarily met the dawn they heard Rhys was tracking them for their crimes. He enjoyed the feared, exalted position since it ultimately kept people out of his way and made the job easier; one less twisted vamp to kill. Not that Rhys cared one way or the other. He had dealt in death for so long; it was a job that no longer inspired emotion. He was a killer, pure and simple. He just happened to be on

the side of “right”. He saved both humans and vampires from a painful death by some pretty evil fucks, monsters, and vampires, whatever.

This human, however, was totally different. Rhys had never met anyone like her. She inspired dangerous emotions in him; fierce lust, possessiveness, aggression.

Aside from the fact that Rhys wanted to eat her up in more ways than one, her mind was closed to him. He had never met anyone, except for older Throng members, whose minds were shielded so tightly. Their first meeting in the barn was incredibly sensual for him. He had been swamped with lust for her, as he was again, now.

Rhys’ kiss was a wild domination and assault designed to possess. Then, she moaned as he pressed his knee harder between her legs so he gentled and took her lips seductively. Belatedly, her arms rose to strike his shoulders and face, but he captured them in one hand, raised them above her head, and pinned them to the door. His tongue swept into her sweet mouth. She had a natural sweetness that made him crazy.

He skimmed his other hand down and raised her deliciously short dress. His hand slid along the inside of her soft thigh, a place he felt the urge to sink his teeth into. A silky thong provided no protection as he sunk his finger in her wetness. Rhys nudged it aside and thrust his long finger

into her moist heat. She moaned again, and restlessly moved her legs draped on either side of his jean-clad thigh.

His hair brushed her cheek as he licked her neck. He could smell the blood under her skin; a sweet, full-bodied essence. Unable to wait any longer, Rhys sunk his teeth into her neck. Her body shuddered. Blood filled his mouth. He growled in triumph. She was his. After two long pulls of her addictive blood, he felt climax tighten through her body. Her cunt rhythmically contracted and released around his finger. His cock pulsed in time with her contractions – painfully constricted in his jeans. Her essence drenched his hand. The fragrant scent filled the dark hallway, surrounded Rhys and permeated his soul. He would never get enough of her.

Footsteps neared their position in the darkened hallway. Rhys licked her neck to stop blood flow; concerned that none escape. Every precious drop was his. He inhaled deeply of her scent and leaned back to look at her dazed expression. Blue eyes opened, they were slumberous and hazy with desire. Belatedly a bewildered, panicked look entered the beautiful, angelic eyes. He kissed her lips hard and swiped his tongue along the bottom one for one last taste and let her go.

“Sissy?” a feminine southern voice questioned from behind him. Her eyebrows drew together in

a frown. Although her mind was still closed to Rhys, he knew she was frightened of him and of the loss of control. She adjusted her dress and stepped out from behind him to meet her companion.

"What are you doing?" the blond, curvaceous female inquired.

"Ummm..." She took a breath and ran a hand through her hair. "This is..." she said in a husky voice, looking at Rhys with a question in her eyes. She looked wounded; uncertain and confused...and reluctantly aroused.

"Rhys," he said in a rough voice. Now that help arrived for her, Rhys was ready to go. He couldn't stay with her and not fuck her. He would catch her again when she was alone.

"Yeah, from Ramsey's stables," she explained. "This is Bernice, my cousin."

"Nice to meet you, Bernice," Rhys said to the voluptuous female that gazed at him with a narrow-eyed look. He turned back to Alana. *Sissy?* "I was just leaving, but I'll see you again, Alana. Good evening, ladies." Rhys speared Alana with another long, heated look of promise packed with a healthy dose of compulsion and walked down the hallway and out the back exit. He breathed hard along the way in an effort to keep himself from going back and to take what was his.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Oh my God,” Bernice squealed, which shook Alana out of her mental fog. She glanced at the door that the mysterious Rhys had just disappeared through. *What the hell?* A ferocious headache erupted and Bernice’s voice grated on her nerves.

“I can’t believe you,” she squealed, “making out in the hallway! Did I see his hand up your dress? You should see your neck! You have a gigantic hickey. I can’t believe this. Wow! He was so hot. Imagine. I was coming back here to check on you for Tom T.” She laughed in delight.

“Bernice,” Alana said, and grabbed her hands to stop the gesturing and chattering flow. “I have to go. My head is killing me. Please let me take your car. You can get a ride home right? I’m really sorry. I drank too much and I have to get out of here.”

She gasped and then shrieked. “Are you going to meet him?”

"Shhhhhh! No," Alana said, annoyed now that her mind functioned again. "I'm going home, for real. Please let me have your keys. I'll come back with you next weekend and stay for the band, okay?" Bernice was attempting to seduce the lead singer of the new band that played on the weekends.

"Oh well, okay, but you shouldn't drive. David's in the bar. Let me go get him and he can drive you home."

"Okay, just hurry." Alana knew Bernice was right, but her head was still whirling and she wasn't thinking straight. Normally, she would never consider driving after drinking. She was in no condition to drive and that result was not only from the alcohol. *He made me climax!* Alana realized again in amazement. Her first, well, her first with someone else anyway; she owned a toy for desperate times.

"Sissy, are you okay? Bernice said you needed a ride home," Alana's boss asked in concern. There are a few people whose minds were tightly closed and one of them was her direct boss and horse trainer, David Billings. He was a good man and good with horses. He was married with two boys that loved to come to the Big House and ride Alana's horses, Maisy and Grit.

"Yes, do you mind?" She didn't want to make him leave if he wasn't ready.

"Not at all, Deb just called and asked when I would be home. I was just leaving. Come on," he said, and nodded toward the door.

Alana closed her eyes on the trip home, dazed — overwhelmed by the events of the evening. They pulled around the driveway in front of the Big House. Alana got out and leaned down in the window, "Thanks. I really appreciate the ride. By the way, have you met the houseguest at the farm?" She was curious to hear David's opinion of Rhys.

"No. Who is it?" he asked, his eyebrows lifted in question. Alana forgot he attended the races in Lexington that day at Keeneland, the race track.

"Never mind," she said and shook her head. "Anyway, he rode Cyracco tonight. You might want to drive by tomorrow and make sure he's okay."

"Really?" he asked as his eyes widened in amazement. "Wow. Okay, will do. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm going straight to bed. Tell Deb hello for me and be careful." Alana shut the door and watched as he drove down the long drive and onto the country road. She turned to go inside.

She was pondering the long the day, when her skin prickled with the odd sensation of being watched. A shadow crossed the lawn from the corner of the house. No thoughts or brain waves

warned her. It could only be one person and he was a blur, moving fast. Alana's heart skipped a beat and after a brief hesitation she ran as fast as she could. He caught her before she reached the porch. How did he move so fast? She opened her mouth to scream when a firm "No," was voiced so compellingly that she froze. His hand covered her mouth.

Rhys turned Alana around and pressed her against his chest. "Don't scream," he commanded fiercely. His gaze held hers for a mere moment and then he plundered her mouth with his. Protest died as she experienced the onslaught of his vicious desire. After the total silence of his mind, the sudden barrage of his desire was overwhelming! His lust, frightening in its intensity, was mixed with a darker desire for something that she couldn't fathom. What was particularly alarming was her desire for him. She was too tempted. Alana remembered her easy capitulation at The Dog and her resulting climax. Her resistance to him had already proven nil.

Those thoughts were pointless when his tongue swept into her mouth past her lips and teeth. He tasted of something nameless...something intoxicating. She was so erotically turned on – exponentially hotter than ever. This man was something so totally beyond her scope of reality. She couldn't think or feel anything other than the

consuming desire that lit her body at his dominant masculinity. She felt the cream gather between her legs.

Holding her against him, he lowered them to the damp ground. His strength was incredible and she knew escape would not be easy, if she was of a mind to try and was serious about it. He ground his cock against her belly. The rough jeans rubbed against her skin since she still had on the ridiculous thong. *Note to self: the useless scrap of material was going in the trash.*

Another grind and the coarse fabric slid again, oh so slowly, roughly. Alana's lower body shook. She moaned in pleasure from the sensation that radiated from between her legs to the rest of her body. Her breasts were suddenly full. She wanted his strong hands on them. Her nipples hardened with the thought. Her fingertips tingled and she curled her toes in the heels. He made her crazy. She was someone else in his arms.

He grabbed her hands in one of his and trapped them above her head. He used the same move in the bar, taking no chances of her escape. Alana closed her eyes and arched her back to press against him. He growled and dropped his full weight on her body. The long heavy length of him pressed Alana into the lush grass.

The fragrant scents and soft sounds of the Kentucky night were earthy and sensual. Crickets

chirped, the creek babbled a short distance away and the smell of hyacinths provided an inciting backdrop to the sensual haze of sensation that she was hooked in. The stars and moon were bright over head and combined with the lights from the Big House; Alana knew he could see the expression on her face, capitulation and desire. Abruptly, the thought of the lights from the Big House seemed to tap that independent streak within her – and spurred thought again. Grandpa was inside. He was asleep, but the very idea that she was practically having sex in her front yard, released Alana from the dark stranger's spell. She opened her eyes and turned her face from his. She felt his lips skim her cheek. She stretched her arms in an effort to get him to release them.

“Stop,” Alana breathed and winced as she recognized the unconvincing plea in her voice to do anything but stop, “now,” making an effort to instill some authority in her voice.

He didn't stop but he did lick a path to Alana's collarbone and nipped the tendon there. Feelings burst from that very spot and tingled along her spine. A moan inadvertently escaped and Alana tried to squeeze her legs together, but his body was holding them apart. She squirmed underneath him. Finally, he became aware that she was trying to get free, albeit half-heartedly. He lifted up and looked at her with a gaze so feral

and deadly that her heart stopped. Red blazed in the pupil and the fierce look on his face made Alana want to whimper in fear. *He was going to kill her.*

"Rhys," Alana whispered harshly, reluctant to show fear, but anxious to bring him back from the brink. He growled and it rumbled through his chest. She shrank back against the grass, unsure what he would do. He blinked and his eyes cleared. He sat up and looked away. She was free! She leapt up to run. He firmly grabbed her ankle before she could take a step.

"Sit," he ordered, in a voice so low and deadly that Alana didn't refuse. On shaky legs, she sat back down and protectively wrapped her arms around her legs. She didn't want to give him a chance to get back on top of her; well the sensible side of her didn't — apparently the slut side of her wouldn't object, she acknowledged silently. She bit her lip as she looked at him. He was every woman's wet dream. His long dark hair framed a rough, square clean-shaven jaw that was sinfully seductive. She imagined kissing her way along the rough edge of his jaw. Her eyes dipped down. His large, muscular body inspired dark fantasies, amazing for a woman who had forsaken men.

Despite his appeal and in defiance she reported, "I'm not afraid of you." Okay, she was, but she wasn't about to admit it. He laughed softly as if he

knew otherwise.

"You should be," he promised her. "I could kill you with nothing but a thought and no one could stop me, but you know what you should be most afraid of?"

Alana shook her head no.

"You should be in terror of the fact that you are mine. You will never be free of me and I'll never let you go. That's probably a fate worse than death." He informed her in a tone lined with steel covered by a humorous edge. Rhys laughed wryly and Alana caught the flash of long white teeth in the meager light.

*My, what long teeth you have...*she swallowed noisily. What do you say to someone who tells you that you are theirs forever and they won't let you go? She wondered. *Ummm, no? I don't think so?* What was insanely funny was a dark part of her secretly thrilled at his words. The thought of him making her his made her belly tighten.

"Why *me?*" Alana asked hesitantly, almost afraid of the answer, but he wasn't going to let her go and since she was curious...He laughed dryly again and his wide shoulders rose in a shrug, as if he were as clueless as she. He raked his hands through his hair. The wind picked up the ends and blew them gently. Alana was tempted to touch the silky sheen to see if it was as soft as it appeared. It was so like Alana's though hers was a

tad bit thicker.

“Who is the male you were with? What is he to you?” he demanded. He ignored her question and continued to look away, as if he wanted to compose himself. Alana blinked a couple of times to clear her head. What male? The whole male population seemed to pale in comparison to him. Oh, she realized as the wheels began to turn, David. He had seen David drop her off.

Oddly, Alana got the feeling that her answer could spark a violent reaction. Her enhanced intuition told her he would be enraged if he thought she had a lover, and she didn’t want any harm to come to David so she told him the truth.

“Not that it’s your business,” Alana felt obliged to say, “but he’s my boss — happily married with kids. He gave me a ride home since I had a few drinks at the bar.” Alana was a bit irritated since she wasn’t used to explaining herself to anyone. But a deep part of her knew that he had a right to that knowledge, even if she wanted to deny it — deny that he had any claim on her at all.

“And the male in the bar who was all over you, is he your lover?” he asked with a growl. She sighed. Tom T. didn’t deserve his anger either and since Alana didn’t think he would leave it alone, she told him the truth yet again.

“I don’t have a lover, okay? Stop questioning me, please.” She was getting frustrated and

confused at her response to this charismatic man and this bizarre evening. He snorted in amusement. Alana thought he muttered, "That's what you think" or some such nonsense.

"You aren't like other humans, are you?" he said, more like statement of fact, rather than a question and turned to look at her.

Humans? Well, two could play this game, she thought, and she wasn't a total wuss. "Neither are you," Alana said defensively.

He laughed sardonically, "You're right about that. Tell me why you are different, Alana."

She started to demand that he tell her why he was different, when he put his finger against her lips. "Tell me what I want to know before you suffer the consequences," he warned as he raked his gaze over her body. Alana's nipples tightened again and her mouth went dry at the look of lust and promise in his eyes.

She looked away, unable to meet his gaze. "I'm a telepath," she told him. *Why?* She had no idea, except for the fact that she knew he would understand and believe, and not think she was crazy like everyone else. "I pick up people's thoughts and emotions." She gathered the nerve to look at him again. He stared at her intently, a curious look in his eyes. He reached out to brush her hair back from her forehead and pulled a piece of grass free.

"Telepaths are special. I have never met one before who wasn't mated. It is said that their taste and strength of mind are like an aphrodisiac. They are highly sought out among my people."

"That doesn't make sense to me. What do you mean, your people? Who are you?" Alana was upset by his words. It was so *Twilight Zone* that she was having a hard time coping. Had she fallen down the rabbit hole?

"This is who I am," he said before he lifted his lips in a snarl, displaying long fangs. His pupils turned red again and she gasped, and backed up in a crabwalk. His large hand reached out again and grabbed her ankle. "Don't run. I'm on the verge of claiming you right now. It's all I can do to maintain control. If you try to run, I'll attack you. I'll fuck you hard, whether you agree or not. I'll drink your blood and make you mine. Do you understand me?" He growled.

The blood rushed out of her face. She felt faint, which was a prissy response but it wasn't every day that a vampire wanted to fuck her. She froze, not wanting to provoke an attack.

"Do you want to hurt me?" Alana asked tentatively and then hated the sound of vulnerability in her voice, the quavering. Again, she felt out of her depth.

"No. Then I would have to kill myself." He laughed dryly.

Alana didn't understand why that was amusing, but was relieved with the answer. She believed him. *He* believed the words he spoke and that eased her mind, until he spoke again.

"But I am really fucking tempted to make you mine right now. It's only a matter of time you understand but I am trying to ease you into it." Unfortunately, he believed those words too. His claim intimidated her but it also aroused her and intrigued her and that was never good. Being intrigued always got her in trouble.

"But if you did run from me," he continued, "instinct would take over. I would go feral on you and you don't want that." Was his rueful response, his fangs glistened in the moon light and Alana realized how conscious he had been to cover them until now. Now that she knew, he had no qualms flashing them about. They were great for intimidation.

"Why are you here? In Versailles, I mean." Alana wanted to distract him from the whole being-his-forever idea.

"I'm here for Cyracco. Once Ramsey comes back to town, I'll finalize the deal. I was going to take him this evening, but then I met you. Now I have reason to buy the horse legitimately." Alana realized he was going to stick around because of her.

She shook her head, "No, you don't have

reason to stick around. This town isn't ready for you, and honestly, I'm not either. For your information, I don't sleep around, despite evidence to the contrary and especially not on a one-night stand with a vampire. Yes, I did say *vampire*. Listen to me." Alana shook her head again in bewilderment and continued, "Please feel free to steal Cyracco and go back to your supernatural life in Europe."

"Yeah, I could do that but you are mine and I won't put you in an awkward situation since you were the last one with Cyracco and you work there. You might be implicated," he added with a deadly smile and changed the subject. "Your mind is locked up tight to me. What do I do about you?" He tilted his head as he looked at her, one beautiful eyebrow arched, waiting on her response.

Alana cleared her throat. She wasn't about to let him tamper with her mind. "Um, yeah, well, I won't tell anyone about you and you don't have to worry about me, no one would believe that I took Cyracco. Go do what you need to do."

He laughed softly. "No, Alana. I'll wait it out. Then, I'll have time to decide what to do about you."

"There's nothing to decide about me! There is nothing between us besides some wicked crazy lust. I'm sure you can find that elsewhere. So just

forget about us and worry about Cyracco,” Alana said heatedly. For the first time in her life she desired a man, but said man...vampire, no less, was not about to start making decisions regarding her future. There was no relationship between them and she didn’t want him to think she would acquiesce to one just because she kept falling into his arms.

“The more you fight me, the more I want you. Vampires are predators; there’s nothing more seductive than chasing down prey — hunting it, stalking until you wear it down and then closing in. It’s ironic really but I’ve gotten everything I’ve wanted my whole life, any woman, any horse, any work of art, but you,” he said, as he tilted his head as he looked at Alana, sifting his hand through her hair, “you challenge me and it turns me on like you wouldn’t fucking believe.” His hand caressed a path down her arm where he clenched her forearm and jerked her into his lap. Alana cleared air as she landed on top of him, facing him.

She flailed, trying to get out of his grasp, but he quickly had her immobile and helpless in his arms. He smiled a sexy smile of satisfaction at having Alana where he wanted. Did he really have to be so gorgeous? He lifted a hand and slid it down her chest and into the front of her dress. His calloused hand caused shivers where they passed. He squeezed her rounded breast and

rubbed the nipple that pebbled into hardness. His rough hand scraped against the softness. Alana inhaled sharply. Desire robbed her of protest.

Fire shot through Alana's body. He was savage and sexy and mesmerizing and she was enthralled again. Alana caught her lip between her teeth and her head fell back over his arm. Her long hair brushed his lap and fell to the grass. She closed her eyes to the luminescent moon above. Tingles spread from her breasts down between her legs. He growled and she felt it rumble through his body.

"Who else is in the house, Alana?" She moaned as he pinched her nipple between his thumb and fore finger. He swirled the hard tip back and forth. Alana's senses were overwhelmed; she started to thrust her hips against him. "Tell me."

"My grandfather," Alana whispered.

"I'm taking you to your room so I can fuck you. Invite me in." He lifted her in his arms as he stood.

Her desire was overpowered by fear once again. He couldn't go in the house.

"No!" She said and struggled to stand and fix her dress. "No, Rhys. You can't go in my house."

He growled in frustration. "Alana," he said in a warning.

"I'm serious. Look. Not tonight. I'll go out with you tomorrow night, I promise. If you will give me space and...and not come in my house."

Alana's brow wrinkled in thought. "Can you come in uninvited?" Not sure if the Hollywood myths were true or not.

"Yes, that silly myth isn't true, but even if I couldn't all I would have to do is convince people to let me in so even then it wouldn't be a problem. Alana, I'm not going to hurt your family. I'm, well, I'm a cop, of sorts, for vampires. I kill vampires that kill humans."

Alana winced at the word "kill" used so nonchalantly. "What about me? You've threatened me and taken me against my will. That's not much of a cop."

"I haven't done anything to you against your will." He snarled. "Maybe on the surface you protest but when it comes down to it, you want every bit of what I've given you and you're going to want every-fucking-thing else that I give to you too. I have no control where you are concerned but I won't force you because I won't need to. I've held you down, I admit, but fortunately for me, I smell your desire, Alana. I will always know what your body wants; mate, so forget about me leaving. It's not going to happen. I have to have you and I will."

His assurance struck that reckless, independent part of Alana, the stubborn part, that didn't like being controlled, so like an idiot, she said, "You're way too sure of yourself."

He growled and she heard something like, "Let's see about that..." He lifted his hands to her neck, and softly but firmly wrapped them around the smooth column. She swallowed as his thumb pressed against the pulse that was beating wildly there. His other hand clenched a handful of hair and tilted her head back slightly as he pressed on her throat. The very spot he had ravaged at the bar, where Bernice said she sported a hickey. His fingertips pressed on the spot and heat flashed through her body as it arched in shock.

"You're mine," he growled into Alana's ear. He pressed harder on her throat. A moan broke from between her lips and she clamped them shut to stop the scream that threatened to erupt. Climax raced through her, flinging her in every direction. It was the wildest, mostly uncontrollable sensation imaginable. Thousands of nerve endings tightened and erupted as euphoria spread throughout her body. It raged through her. Her body arched again and she cried out, helpless. His hands caught her boneless body as she slumped.

"Mine, Alana. You're mine. Don't ever doubt it. I'll never let you go," he whispered in her hair. *Oh my God.* She realized he was right. He had only touched her neck where he had marked her, and she came unglued in his arms. What kind of spell had he put on her?

He held Alana tightly for long moments before

he released her to stand on trembling legs and turned away to run his fingers through his hair. She could tell he did it often when he was agitated...when he was struggling to control himself. He looked up at the moon and closed his eyes. "I won't give you up. I can't. I'll see you again." He turned to look at her, eyes glowing eerily, beautiful in the moonlight. "I'll be back for you tomorrow night. Be here if you don't want me to do something drastic. Do you understand?"

Alana nodded and blew out a frustrated, uneven breath and tried to come to grips with and get over the near debilitating climax that just ravaged her. Aside from that, the most gorgeous man she had ever met said that he *had* to see her again. Vampire or not, he had just demonstrated that she couldn't resist him and in fact could be incapacitated at a simple touch.

"I have to go." She couldn't deal with anymore tonight. He growled again, very much like an animal, she thought. A tendril of unwanted fear streaked through her. She turned to go inside but couldn't resist looking back one last time. He was gone. Sweet Jesus...

CHAPTER FIVE

Saturday mornings were good days at the Big House, but this Saturday Alana slept in. Tossing and turning most of the night hindered her usual early rising. She dreamt terrifying nightmares of glistening fangs and dripping blood that then turned into wet dreams of hands that caressed her body, and plunged into that moist, silky part of Alana that was too long denied. She woke, exhausted after the restless night, but more than that, Alana was soaked. She was so incredibly aroused it was embarrassing.

“Screw breakfast,” Alana mumbled as she rolled over and finally sank into a deep sleep determined to ignore the tingle in her limbs and sensitive nipples. She got up when nine o’clock rolled around and tugged on her comfy yoga pants. Alana’s yoga instructor quit teaching to have a baby, so the pants were mostly used for cleaning day now. She pulled a tank top from a drawer and shrugged into it. Her neck tingled as

the strap scraped the abrasion. Alana shuddered as she relived the extraordinary moment. Dear God.

Grandpa was dozing in the recliner with the newspaper across his lap and Bernice was still in bed by the time Alana moseyed downstairs. She decided to fix breakfast since no one had eaten. She puttered into the kitchen and turned on the coffee.

After her first fragrant, soothing cup, she was awake enough to whip up pancakes. All of the essentials; pure maple syrup, butter, sausage links, OJ and coffee were on the table when Bernice staggered in, still sporting silk pajamas. Alana figured the cozy, enticing smell of sausage and coffee roused her cousin.

The disoriented look cleared from Bernice's eyes and she pushed her empty cup across the table, wanting more. Alana could almost see the wheels beginning to turn and she tried to keep the smirk from her face. "So tell me about him," Bernice demanded, and munched on a link. Alana glanced into the hallway to make sure Grandpa wasn't coming and flipped a pancake on the griddle.

"He gets to me," Alana admitted as she shook her head in confusion, still bewildered by his potency and her lack of resistance to it. "I can't stop thinking about him." At least Bernice might

be able to clue her in to why her body was so uncontrollable. Alana had to consider that maybe it was all vampire vibes or something. "He kisses me or touches me and I melt. I don't think I could say no to anything he wanted to do. That's frightening in a way. I'm kind afraid of losing myself with a guy like him."

Bernice smiled hugely and licked her fingers free of grease, checking the damage to her crimson nails. "Well, hallelujah! Finally," she exclaimed. "It seems like I've waited forever to see you let someone get close to you, to be human like the rest of us. You need to have sex! You are a healthy, beautiful young woman. Let loose, live a little! Sleep with the man and then move on," she advised.

"Hey! I live. I just don't sleep around," she said, offended by Bernice's claim. She also found it ironic that Bernice used the word *human* in this situation, since the man in question was not one.

"But you're not living, Sissy. You're barely scratching the surface. A close relationship with someone else, that intimacy, adds so much to life and by the way, sleeping with one man is not sleeping around," Bernice informed Alana expertly. "How can you not want him? He's a sex god. You don't find men like him in Versailles. There are cute guys here, I know, but not like this guy. Not *amazing* and hot and sophisticated and

worldly and dominant; you know I'm right. He finds what he wants and he takes it. If he wasn't into you, I would gladly do whatever he wanted me to, whenever and wherever. But he is into you and he is exactly what you need. Take my advice on this one." She sat back and sipped her coffee. Alana turned around and flipped the pancakes. She wondered what Bernice's advice would be if she knew he was a vampire.

"Grandpa, come eat!" Alana yelled. A moment later, he shuffled in and they started eating. For some reason the silence made her want to confess everything. These were the people who knew everything about her. How could she not tell them that an insistent vampire demanded to see her? Not warn them of the potential danger in their midst?

Let them make a decision about him after meeting him. Her family was very open-minded, they accepted her and her differences, so she figured they could accept vampires with their usual down-to-earth aplomb, after a short period of shock, that is. She inhaled deeply through her nose. *Okay, here goes.*

"Grandpa, I met someone last night. Well, I met him at work. He's a visitor of the Ramseys, but I also saw him at the bar last night."

"Oh really?" He asked as he took a bite of pancake as he looked at her in question. He gave

her his full attention since she 'had no life', as Bernice so eloquently pointed out. His bushy eyebrows gathered in a frown. "An acquaintance of the Ramsey's?"

"Yes sir, he's here to buy Cyracco. What's interesting is that he's different, like me. Well." Alana sighed again, "Not like me, but um...he's different."

"How different?" Bernice asked. "You didn't say anything about this to me. All you told me is that you couldn't "hear" him, but you've met people like that before. So what do you mean?" Bernice inquired with a frown on her pretty face, obviously annoyed that Alana didn't spill all the beans.

Okay, straight out would be best. "He's a vampire," she said. Grandpa looked at her like she was crazy and Bernice burst out in laughter. She shrugged and then stared at them with a serious face, until they got the picture. The smile drained off Bernice's face. Grandpa looked befuddled, but not scared.

"Are you serious, Sissy? Don't joke about something like this. Did he bite you? Are you going to be a vampire?"

Alana rolled her eyes. Sometimes it was hard to get a word in edge-wise.

"Yes, I'm serious. No, he didn't bite me. At least, I don't think so and since I'm up early in the

morning, I must not be a vampire. He did try some kind of *mojo* on me at the stables but it didn't seem to work and then of course you met him last night, Bernice." Alana glared at Bernice to make sure she understood *not* to mention how she practically broke them apart last night.

"I want to meet him," Grandpa said. Trust him to get to the heart of the matter. He reserved judgment about people until he met them himself.

Alana shrugged. "I told him I would see him tonight." She decided not to tell them about his heavy-handed tactics.

"How old is he? Does he sleep in a coffin?" Bernice's eyes grew wider with each thought. "Can you kill him with a stake?" She was really on a roll.

"Bernice! I don't know. Why don't you ask how to kill him when he comes tonight, okay?" Alana gave her an insincere smile and her face paled at the thought.

They ate the rest of their breakfast in silence and contemplated the fact that a vampire would be at their house. Of course, *they* could have been planning how to get her checked into the psych ward, but *she* thought about Rhys. She cleaned up the kitchen as Bernice dusted the furniture. Vampire or not, they still had chores to do.

Alana washed and put away the dishes. She cleaned the kitchen and mopped the floor. Four

hours later, the three of them had vacuumed, dusted, polished and mopped the house into a sparkling, fragrant haven.

No rest for the weary, Alana went to the kitchen to make chicken salad and black bean soup for lunch. She made out a store list as she waited for the soup to warm. Dinner was her responsibility tonight so she needed ingredients for manicotti and salad. She had a desire for red wine too and paused with her pen above the paper. She thought about red wine and blood, hmmm, Rhys.

Alana sighed heavily. Distraction worked for a while but now her thoughts circled back to him. She had no idea what to expect tonight and the unknown was always a bit intimidating. *What do you do with a vampire?* She wondered, besides the obvious and pictured his fangs in her neck. Calling tonight a date seemed, well, weird for some reason, she thought. She had no idea what he intended. Alana did know that he seemed determined to consume her — body and soul. She squirmed in her chair at the idea.

Grandpa and Bernice trucked in so Alana put lunch on the table. While they ate, Bernice informed her that Tom T. was disappointed when Alana left the bar. They laughed. He would never learn. She was not going to go out with him and he couldn't seem to get that through his thick

head. Alana didn't tell her about his mental vision of them together. *Yuck!*

She asked Bernice about the band and the lead singer's seduction. She smiled a Cheshire grin that made Alana think she had and Grandpa, "humphff'ed," and shook his head. He usually ignored her abundant appreciation for the male population. Alana guessed she would get the goods on that later when they were alone.

They spent the rest of lunch debating Kentucky Derby picks. After she cleaned the kitchen, Alana and her grandfather exercised their horses, Maisy and Grit. He took care of their morning feedings since Alana worked, and good man that he was, did it on the weekends too. On Saturdays and Sundays, her days off, their routine was the same; they exercised them by riding along the boundaries of their property, sprayed them down, scraped off the water, brushed, curried them and cleaned their hooves. Grandfather performed the same routine for them on weekdays while Alana did the same tasks for Ramsey's horses.

After Alana finished in the stable, she left for the store. It was already three o'clock and she imagined that Rhys would be by at sunset. Only four hours to grocery shop, eat dinner, and shower and dress. Yikes! The direction of Alana's thoughts suddenly struck her and she realized a good ass-kicking was needed for being excited

about a relationship that could only end badly. Interestingly, her deflated spirits did nothing to squash her anticipation for the evening.

Alana's good friend Annie was at the grocery store. They talked as they browsed the pasta section. She was married with two boys and was pregnant with her third. Amy, Alana's other good friend, Bernice and Alana threw a baby shower for Annie's first boy at the Big House. If she found out it was a girl when she went back to the doctor, they had decided to have another one for her. She needed stuff for a girl, right?

The girls didn't get to see each other much, but once every two or three months, her husband watched the kids and they had "girl's night out". Amy usually came along too, but she was a nurse at the hospital and had a harder time getting off work. We watched movies and gorged ourselves on food and wine and tea for the expecting Annie.

After twenty minutes of catching up, Alana finished her shopping. She didn't tell Annie about Rhys. The jury was still out where he was concerned so she didn't want to spread the news until she had something real to say. It was hard though for her not to talk about it though; aside from Bernice, Amy and Annie were her sounding boards, her support.

She stopped by the liquor store for the red wine, then the bakery for a fresh loaf of French

bread and a box of petit fours for dessert. She sang to the words of *Me and the Devil Blues* covered by Widespread Panic on the way home and thought of Rhys the whole ride. How appropriate, right?

"Guess who called me?" Bernice asked excitedly when she came out to help Alana with groceries.

"Lucas?" Alana asked smiling. *Wasn't that Mister Band Dude's name?*

"Yes!" Bernice screeched. Alana laughed affectionately at her silliness. "I told him he would have to wait for me to do some family stuff first though since I wanted to hang around and meet Long Tooth."

"Bernice," she said with a frown that threatened to erupt into a smile — long tooth. Okay, that was pretty funny, she laughed silently.

"Oh no, Sissy," Bernice interrupted. "I'm not going anywhere. This is the biggest thing that's happened since...well, I don't know when, but it's very monumental and I'm not about to miss a minute of it."

Alana fixed the manicotti and filled the shells. She set the table while the pasta baked. She put the petit fours on the dessert table. She lit the candles and opened the bottle of wine so it could breathe. *Smile.*

In the kitchen, she tossed the salad prepared with romaine lettuce, spinach, blueberries, dried

cranberries, and feta cheese. She slightly dampened the top of the bread and then put it in to bake as the manicotti finished. Ten minutes later, Alana set dinner on the table. Steam rose from the manicotti. Three salad plates tossed with olive oil and vinaigrette completed the place settings. A Longaberger bread basket held the warm bread. Delicious smells wafted from the kitchen and permeated the dining room. The candles were aromatic and soothing.

"Come eat!" Alana yelled from the dining room. They wolfed down the food like it was their last meal. Ten minutes later, she cleared the dinner and salad plates and served the petit fours. She refilled their wine glasses and they ate the sweet cakes. It was a quiet dinner and she realized they were all preoccupied with their own thoughts. She was very distracted with the evening ahead. What would the night hold for her?

They cleaned up the kitchen and Alana went upstairs to shower and dress. She took a steamy shower and dressed in black cargo Capri's and a white silky tank with black spaghetti straps and a black ribbon that lined the edges and flared out below the breasts. It was a very feminine top; one of her favorites. Black sandals, wrapped around her ankle, completed the outfit along with large hoop earrings and a crystal choker. She applied light mascara, eyeliner, and lip gloss and brushed

her hair until it shined.

She went downstairs to wait. Bernice and Grandpa sat on the couch watching *Survivor*. Both changed their clothes too. Grandfather wore his Kenneth Cole button down and combed his full head of hair back. Bernice wore clothes for her date so she looked hot. *Jeez*. They were going all out for the vampire.

Alana felt a small hum in her mind. He was outside. "He's here," she warned them. "I'll be back and don't look out the window!" Alana ordered, giving them her seriously-I'll-be-very-pissed look.

"Oh, go on Sissy," Bernice said, as if she had been insulted; like she didn't plan to run over to the window as soon as Alana left the room. She narrowed her eyes at Bernice and walked outside. Alana wanted to test the waters before she brought him in to meet her family. Last night, or rather this morning, seemed so surreal that she had no clue as to what to expect when she saw him again.

With her heart beating fast, Alana took a deep breath and stepped outside. She saw the long silhouette of his body. He sat on the wicker loveseat in the shadows, eased back with his arms spread across the top of the seat. His long legs stretched out on the porch.

"You can tell Bernice she's welcome to look out

the window." Alana's cheeks burned with the knowledge that he heard their conversation.

She walked over to him to stand in front of him. His eyes flashed as he looked up at her. "I can hear your heart and," he inhaled and closed his eyes, "smell your arousal." He stood and towered over her, red haze glittered in the center of those deadly eyes, "You look good enough to eat."

CHAPTER SIX

He wore a pair of black slacks and a dark blue shirt that delineated his muscles. Alana sighed at his mouthwatering sexy, sophisticated appeal. She pictured herself wrapped around him, one of her long legs wrapped around his thigh, as his strong arms held her close. He kissed her, hotly, thoroughly. His hand slid down to her backside where he squeezed the soft flesh there and pulled her tight against his hard cock. Her breath came faster and then she realized the image filled *his* mind. This was *his* desire. His head lowered and he looked at her with a predatory glint in his eyes. A sexy smile full of glistening fangs crossed his face.

"You saw it didn't you?" Satisfaction permeated his tone. "That's how I want you, in my arms, wet and ready for me. I open my mind to you and you'll know what I want, unspoken. You are powerful, gifted, and mine." He pushed her toward the door. "Let's do this, I can't wait too

long.”

Alana’s lips parted, her eyes partially closed as his words did what he intended. She *was* hot, wet, and ready for him. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, and tried to regain her balance. She licked her lips and in a husky voice said, “Okay, let’s get this over with.” She straightened her spine and opened the door. She looked back to see a triumphant grin cross his face. Alana narrowed her eyes at his smugness, but then they were inside. She knew that her cheeks were flushed and hoped they didn’t notice.

Bernice and Grandfather sat quietly on the couch, but they both practically screamed false innocence as they sat there so focused on Survivor. Those stinkers had indeed looked out the window. Alana glared at them, but both had innocent expressions on their faces.

Bernice’s eyes were wide and Alana could tell she was biting her tongue. He walked to them with his hand outstretched and both rose simultaneously to shake his hand. Bernice barely remembered her manners and let Grandfather go first. Alana rolled her eyes at their silliness.

“Nice to meet you,” Rhys said in his deep voice as he shook Grandfather’s hand. “Bernice,” he said, nodding to her.

“Are you really a vampire?” Bernice gushed; apparently the strain of holding her tongue was

too much on her. His head whipped around as he gave Alana a look; obviously not expecting her to tell them. She shrugged. They were a package deal. *You get one; you get them all. No secrets here.*

"Yes, I am," he admitted and as she watched she saw the compulsion that almost visibly flowed from him. She read their minds as they thought that they would never tell another person what he was. Alana was tempted to stop his mind spin on her family, but then she figured it was probably for the best. They wouldn't have told anyone anyway, but this way he wouldn't see them as a threat or attempt to remove their memories.

"Can I see your fangs? And do you sleep in a coffin? Can you go out in the day? And what about food?" Bernice was gearing up for twenty questions, Alana could tell; despite Grandfather's elbow that poked her side and the soothing compulsion from Rhys

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Alana asked Rhys, in an effort to halt the flow of twenty questions. She poured the remaining wine from dinner into two glasses for them. They would drink the wine and then go before he lost his patience with them and she could see that as a distinct possibility.

"I don't sleep in a coffin, but a regular bed just like I imagine you do. I could go out in the day since I'm older, but it's not comfortable so I

usually don't. I eat food and drink wine." Alana handed him the glass, with which he toasted them with and took a huge sip. He ignored the fangs question. Soothing emotion flowed from Rhys to Grandfather and Bernice. He soothed them into accepting his presence, his words and his compulsion. She watched carefully but he did nothing to cause them harm so she let it go.

Not one to let a subject go despite the situation, Bernice persisted, "Can I see your fangs?" He gave an I-don't-think-so look. She would so have to master that look because it totally quieted her loquacious cousin.

Grandfather didn't stay quiet long. "You aren't going to hurt my granddaughter, are you?" He narrowed his eyes at Rhys in an intimidating look. Alana remembered lesser men who quailed under the stare; of course, Rhys didn't but he did treat Grandfather with the respect he deserved. Alana admitted it increased his standing a notch or too even though he still sent out soothing, acceptance vibes.

"I absolutely will not hurt Alana. I give you my word. I like her, a lot, and just want to spend time with her. I will not hurt her and will not allow anyone else do so while she's with me." Rhys looked him in the eye as he promised Grandfather. She could tell Grandfather was satisfied and convinced that Rhys told the truth.

"Works for me," he muttered, "and don't turn my granddaughter into a vampire." He sat back down and grabbed the remote. Alana smothered a laugh as she grabbed Rhys' arm.

"We're going," she said, "later." Bernice was obviously dying to ask more questions and followed them to the door.

"Bernice, get back over here," Grandfather yelled. Alana laughed and shut the door in her cousin's face. As soon as the door was closed, Rhys pulled Alana in his arms and laid a hard kiss on her.

"You'll be punished for putting me through that," he threatened and bared his teeth. He sent Alana a mental image of herself, on her hands and knees, naked. Her wrists, waist and feet chained to steel loops bolted to the floor held her immobile while he spanked her. He grabbed her by the shoulders as she leaned against him. Her legs were weak-kneed after his vision.

After a lifetime of abstinence, to suddenly be exposed to such eroticism was overwhelming and well, breathtaking. Her womb clenched and she soaked her panties at the thought of the erotic punishment. The thought of his hard hand as it rubbed and spanked her, and made her backside tingle and ache exhilarated her. Alana's nipples hardened against her silky tank top. She laughed breathlessly and he smiled evilly and oh so sexy.

He ended the moment when grabbed her hand and walked toward the drive.

A moment later when she could breathe again, "By the way, don't think I didn't notice the voodoo you did on my family." Just so he didn't think she wasn't wise to his manipulations.

"I know you picked up on it. Just as I know that you agree it's for the best. This way you can be honest with them, but they will do nothing to put themselves, you or me in jeopardy." He was right so she let it go.

He stopped on the other side of the large oak tree, out of sight of the window and where Bernice's shadow was visible at the glass. He wrapped his arms around her. "Are you ready?"

"What are we...?" Alana started to question and screeched as they materialized in a different place. She squeezed his arms and swayed. Her eyes blinked as she tried to keep the manicotti and petit fours in her belly and not on his shirt. "Where are we?" Her voice was faint and weak.

"Don't worry, you'll acclimate to it soon." He brushed his lips across her temple and held her tight.

"Couldn't you have warned me?" She was slightly annoyed at his methods, but totally curious and excited to see where he lived.

"Like you warned me before facing the blond inquisition?" he queried in return. *Touché*. Alana

laughed, genuinely amused, as she leaned her head against his chest. His masculine scent and hard body were quickly distracting her from the queasiness and annoyance. She felt his erection against her belly and stepped away. Be strong, be strong.

"Besides," he continued, "I wanted you to see my home. If I had warned you, you may have resisted in coming and I wasn't going to give you that option."

Alana was affronted by his arrogance and also realized that she was at his mercy since she had no idea where she was and then she remembered. "Wait a minute! Didn't you say your home was in Europe?" She asked and twirled around the look at the landscape.

"Yeah, I have you in my lair. What are you going to do now?" A wicked smile crossed his face, his long fangs flashing in the dark. Oh shit, crossed her mind quickly followed by, *how totally cool is that?!* She was in Europe in the blink of an eye! Europe! From Kentucky! *Holy crap!*

"You can take me anywhere in the world that I want to go?" Amazement was evident in Alana's voice.

He smiled, "I should have known you would enjoy it. I can take you anywhere that I can visualize. Otherwise, who knows where we would end up? Plus, you have to consider who might see

you pop into view. You don't want to drop in on a crowd of humans; then you'd have to perform mass removal of their memory of the event; although I've done it before in dire situations. Anyway, I've traveled the world so there aren't many places that I can't picture in my mind and I usually have a secluded spot scoped out that I pop into." The amused smile on his face was so sexy. His long hair fell off his shoulder and caught her eye as he nodded his head in direction. Alana wanted to run her fingers through his hair. "Come on. Let me show you the estate."

"Don't you have horses?" She could only imagine the horses in his stable and her palms itched to touch them.

"We'll stop by there first." He grabbed her hand and they walked across the field. The stars shined overhead and the air smelled fresh and clean. The moon blazed in the sky and lit their way. It was a beautiful night and she suddenly felt alive and free with this man. Alana loved Versailles but this was amazing. How fantastic it would be to have the world at your fingertips! Speaking of fingertips, his strong, firm hand was so much larger than hers. She enjoyed his strength and heat as he clasped her hand in his.

The stables were grand and gorgeous. Bigger than most homes, the care and structure that had been put into their construction were evident. The

woodwork was beautiful and the facilities contained state of the art equipment. As they entered, a young man that Alana could tell was human trudged sleepily out of the back room.

Rhys wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Alana noticed earlier that her body quivered with a slight zing when in his presence. One that went above and beyond the shivers that came from sexual attraction. She began to think that all vampires would be noticeable by that different sort of...vibration that struck her. Hmmm...another talent discovered...She was vampire radar – vampdar. She almost giggled but reined it in at the last moment. Tonight was just too much.

“Monsieur, I didn’t know you were back,” his eyes blinked and squinted as he noticed Alana. “Pardon, Mademoiselle, I was asleep. Can I get horses for you both?” he asked, familiar with his employer’s late night rides.

“Go back to sleep, Rene. I was going to show Alana around. We’ll saddle up when we’re ready, merci.”

“If you are certain, Monsieur.” He paused to wait until Rhys nodded. “Bonsoir, Mademoiselle,” he said and nodded before he went back to bed.

The horses poked their heads over the stalls, whinnying as Rhys approached. It was obvious he was a true horse lover. The care with which he

greeted them and handled the gear was noticeable. Alana decided he designed the stables and was fully involved with the horse's care.

Cyracco would be in excellent hands with this man as his owner. She would miss him but he deserved to be ridden and loved and given a chance to shine. He would get that here. Rhys would never be an absentee owner, but one that was responsible and knowledgeable about what was needed. Alana's heart lifted even more at this discovery. Okay, so they shared a love for horses. Oh and a fierce animalistic attraction for each other.

He looked at her out of the corner of his eyes while he rubbed a mare on the snout. The look in his eyes was hot and savage. He picked up Alana's thoughts. Her legs felt weak and her heart thumped. She swallowed. He was the hottest man she had ever met. She wanted him to lick her all over, hold her down, and fuck her. She wanted him to bite her.

The smell of leather, horses and male was an incredibly arousing scent. He snarled as if he couldn't take anymore. One second he rubbed the mare and the next he loomed over her. Startled she backed up against the column between two stalls and he leaned closer to her, his hands caged her on both sides. Alana's breath came fast; her chest expanded and touched his.

"You can't think those thoughts and expect nothing to happen." He smelled her and growled. "I can smell your arousal. I feel the lust coming off of you." He bared his white teeth at Alana. His eyes flashed as he leaned his cheek against hers. "I want to fuck you right now more than I've ever wanted anyone." His low, rough voice in Alana's ear turned her on so incredibly that she panted. She wanted him to fuck her against the stall. She closed her eyes, blocked the sight of his lustful eyes, as she tried to bring herself under control.

The practical side of Alana didn't want to be with him. He was unlike anyone she had ever known, and she knew it would be hard to go back to being alone when he was done with her. A human had never done it for her and she knew now, never would. But the other part of Alana, the one that had gone twenty four years without being close to another person was tired of being practical and good — that naughty part of her wanted him to lose control and make her his. She wanted him to take her, and her wild need was almost impossible to resist.

He pushed away from the stall and Alana's breath whooshed out of her lungs. Her head dropped. He gave her a reprieve. He whirled around to stalk toward a black stallion at the far end of the stables. The huge, fierce horse was beautiful. He stood about seventeen hands high

with a gleaming black coat. He quieted as Rhys approached but she knew instantly that he would destroy anyone else who attempted to tame him.

Rhys led him out of the stall and placed a black bridle in his mouth and around his neck. He threw a black blanket over his back and walked out of the stable. Alana followed Rhys quietly. She could see he strived for control and appreciated the mercy that he displayed.

He sat astride the monstrous beauty when Alana left the stable. He stretched a hand out to her. She grabbed it and he lifted her easily on the horse in front of him as if she were light as a feather. Damn. He nudged his knees and they were off. The horse thundered across the field and cleared a black fence landing with a seamless stride. The moment was extraordinary for Alana. The horse was magnificent and a part of Alana ached to surrender to the man that controlled the beast. A dark part of her wanted to be controlled by him in the same way; guided with his body, ridden hard and fast. He may not have the key to Alana's mind, but the rest of her was an open door to him.

He knew exactly how to stimulate her heart and body. She hadn't felt this alive in, well, forever. Even though the stallion was still galloping at full tilt, he let go of the reins and maintained perfect balance bent low over her body. His hands came

up to cup her aching breasts and her fingers clenched in the horse's silky mane. Both of his large hands squeezed the globes working the sensitive nipples to a peak. She felt the pull on her nipples tingle between her legs and her head fell back against his chest in surrender. He leaned his head down. Alana felt soft lips as he kissed her neck. Their hair mixed together. The dark, twisting strands caught her eye — the moment was so carnal and sexy.

She could feel every stride the horse took pulse between her legs. He dropped one hand down to her pants and unbuttoned them while the large hand on her chest slipped inside her tank top. His rough hand touched the soft skin there, and he fondled both breasts as his other slid inside her panties and touched the curls there. He palmed her, lifted slightly, so that his strong fingers could have free reign of her.

Those fingers were quickly soaked. One long digit plunged into Alana, in and out in hard strokes. The hand on her breasts switched from one to the other, rubbed each nipple, twirled them between his fingers, and across his callused palm. He removed his finger from deep inside of her and rubbed swirling strokes around her clit, over and over as his fingers plucked and teased each nipple.

He was so large and powerful. Alana felt small and vulnerable in his arms and that thrilled her.

He filled her with such pleasure that all she could do was bask in it. Doubt, practicality and reality scattered as she became a slave to the feelings he invoked in her. She felt his cock pressed against her lower back and pressed her body against it. She wanted more. What he did was too much and yet not enough.

The sensations built to frenzy. She was close to the edge. She raised her arms to grasp his hard forearms and dug her nails in his skin. She moaned and whispered his name and felt a flash of white hot pain in her neck for a moment and then, ecstasy. Climax stormed through her and she cried out. The stars in the sky blurred in her low-lidded, dazed sight.

Alana closed her eyes and raised her arms behind her and up around his neck. She arched her back as he continued to thrust his finger into and around her. He drew out the spasms that racked her body. She rode his hand and didn't want the feeling to end. Each sucking pull of his mouth at her neck brought another wave of fire that flamed through her.

"Lick it," he ordered in a husky voice, and she opened her eyes to see his arm. Blood drops pooled in the half moon spheres where her nails gouged him. "Lick," he growled again. She did so, not in the least bit horrified by his request. Instead the act bonded them closer. It was a sensual

experience so erotically beyond anything she imagined. She felt that small taste of his blood enter her system. Her nipples hardened even tighter and her pussy contracted again. His blood was electric, and she knew he could do whatever he wanted to her, and she wouldn't stop him.

Moments later, she slumped over the horse's back. They had slowed to a brisk walk. She didn't notice when the stallion slowed from the gallop so lost in sensation she had been. She felt satisfied, full. She tingled from head to toe.

His hands dropped and clenched into fists on his thighs. Alana looked at Rhys over her shoulder and her heart stopped for a beat before resuming.

He was magnificent; a sensual, savage look on his hard face. His eyes blazed and fangs glistened in the night. A harsh battle of control was visible in his eyes. Alana knew he wanted her in an animalistic, terrifying way and a dark, secret part of her was thrilled by it. How long could she resist? How long would he let her?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Her wild, tousled look combined with the scent of her arousal made Rhys' muscles strain against the urge to impale her on his cock. The urge to drive hard and deep into her was almost more than he could handle. She was a very sensual creature and it nearly fucking killed him to keep from taking her. He was aware of the reticence and uncertainty, not to mention self-preservation, that conflicted with her lust however and not from her tightly closed mind, but from the look that crossed her face after the desire faded. He could take her despite those feelings. She was ripe to be fucked by him, ached for it, but she tried to protect herself emotionally and he understood that.

It was the same reason he didn't let emotions in. The same reason he didn't let his wife be a real part of his life over one hundred years ago. Memories roared back that he had not considered in decades. Flashes of the beautiful wife that he

didn't love reared in his mind. He saw it all again; her mutilated body spread across the cold marble stairs. Lifeless, vacant green eyes stared at him as if in accusation of his neglect and lack of emotion. Dark blood pooled and dripped down the hard stairway. He remembered the smoldering stables that housed his prized horses and the stench of burned flesh. As he bent over the body of his dead wife, he heard his brother's soft, mocking laughter as he disappeared. Even Cullen, who tried to defend his Mistress, was beaten and left for dead. Rhys gave Cullen his blood and saved his life. He could almost still smell the death in the air that night almost one hundred years ago.

Rhys and his wife had a companionable relationship; they were friends. They sated each other with their bodies, but participated in discreet affairs when desired. Celia would have given him everything; fidelity, emotional commitment had he but shown a glimmer of interest. But Rhys was a Death Hunter and had been for three hundred years when they married; the killing and death had long since smothered his emotions when he met the young, vibrant female vampire. Both families considered theirs a match of great advantage and convenience, and Rhys did his duty though he knew he would never feel anything other than friendship toward her.

The guilt he experienced at her death was

tremendous. She was a loving, intelligent woman, denied the right to a meaningful relationship. And she died because of him and because of Merrick. Rhys' twin brother killed her.

The jealous, twisted sibling that his family thought dead stalked him and struck where it hurt the most — his woman and his horses; the innocent, gentle aspects of his life. With a life full of death, they grounded him, anchored him. Rhys regretted not giving them more of himself especially since they ultimately died because of him. Afterward, he used the guilt and rage at Merrick to become an even more deadly Hunter. He invoked fear and terror in his prey.

Rhys spent the last hundred years hunting evil, hunting for Merrick and at times he felt like it encompassed him; sometimes he wasn't sure that he wasn't just like the fucked up souls that he preyed on. All the while hoping, praying, that he would encounter Merrick. The brother who had killed and tortured their little sister, Christiana when she was but sixteen, who had broken the hearts of their parents and who had taken all that was good in his life and destroyed it. Rhys could almost taste the need for vengeance. The desire to send his death sword into his brother and strike his head from his body was palpable. He eagerly awaited Merrick's return.

He shook himself and tried to erase the

melancholy and anger from his mind. He couldn't afford the distraction or the pain of emotion; not from his past or in his future. Unfortunately, he had no defenses against this woman. His body, heart and soul were urging him to take her and make her his forever. It was instinctual and it took every ounce of control he had learned in the six hundred years of his life to stop myself.

Rhys wanted to take her into his home and never let her go. Fuck Merrick and revenge. For a brief moment as he contemplated life with Alana, those things held no interest for him. He *shouldn't* keep her for that very reason. Merrick was a threat to her and if he knew about Alana and how much Rhys wanted her, Merrick would try to find a way to hurt her.

Right now however Rhys could no more send her away than he could have taken his own life. He turned his stallion Luc toward home. He needed a distraction and showing her his home was something he had anticipated doing since he met her. Cullen waited in the formal dining room in front of the fireplace with chocolate covered strawberries, raspberries and wine.

Rhys walked her through the immense castle with its many rooms, marble floors, and stone turrets. Silk woven tapestries, large fireplaces, tall ceilings and velvet drapes characterized the rooms in an old world charm. Satisfaction ran rampant

through him at the sight of her in his home touching his family's history. Rhys wanted her there always. Such strong feelings were dangerous and foreign to him, but he had no desire to ignore them despite the threat of his brother. He was determined to include her in his life forever; one way or another. He would overcome her resistance and their differences.

Rhys took her along the corridor with the oil paintings of his family. He told her about his parents. His loving, youthful-looking parents still lived in Greece. They loved the Mediterranean and though they returned to France for seasonal Throng rituals, they spent the rest of their time on the island.

"Who is this?" she asked, pointing to the beautiful picture of Rhys' fair-haired wife.

"She was my wife. She was killed over one hundred years ago," he said, as he watched her eyes widen in surprise. Rhys could tell she was shocked that he was married.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said with a frown, sympathy evident in her voice.

"My brother murdered her as he also killed my sister, Christiana. Merrick." He said and pointed to the next picture, a replica of himself.

"Your twin," she gasped, stating the obvious. "What happened?"

"He was always unstable. Jealous of anyone

who threatened what he felt was his alone. He tried to kill me once, but he didn't succeed. Unfortunately, I never told anyone because I knew he would be killed. Punishment for our people is fatal; the Throng takes no chances with corruption. Our race is deadly enough without allowing evil to be tolerated. So I kept the secret and thirty years later, he killed our sister when she was sixteen. My parents and I thought he had been killed for his crime, but for some reason, he wasn't. We've never been able to determine what happened but for three hundred years, he stayed in hiding and we never suspected he was alive. Almost a hundred years ago, while I was in Paris, he came here and killed Celia. He torched my stable and most of my horses were burned alive. I've wanted to face him ever since. I don't know why he hasn't come for me because I would have fucking relished the battle." His voice was low and deadly and a look so feral and threatening crossed his face and she stepped back and her heart picked up speed. He smelled her fear. He took a deep breath and turned back to the painting. "Anyway, Merrick sold some of the more prized horses and I've been tracking down their bloodlines, when I have time. Cyracco is descended from my stables."

"How old are you?" She asked him in a tentative voice. Rhys could tell she was amazed at what she had learned. His long existence provided

another glaringly obvious difference between them, but he smiled when he realized that she was excited by the thought of his long life and experiences.

"Nearly six hundred years old," Rhys informed her, "old enough to be invulnerable, but not old enough to be considered an 'ancient'."

"I noticed the pure gold cross in your study – the one with the monstrous rubies inlaid. Obviously you can have religious relics in your home?"

"Yes. I can even go to church...if I wanted to. We are just another species, like you only different. Some of us are good and some of us are evil. Many of us believe in a higher being, God, if you will, although it varies according to religious preference, just as with humans. I don't believe vampires have been forsaken by God; although maybe I have," Rhys mused, staring at the image of his brother.

"Why do you think so?" she asked, as her head tilted to the side. Her beautiful, silky hair slid off her shoulder to swing free. His fingers itched to touch it. He reached out and felt the softness. Her scent was hypnotic and potent. He was obsessed with her. He was never going to let her go, he thought, despite the odds. She was his.

He dropped her hair and turned from her. His expression was fierce like his thoughts and he

didn't want to scare her again. "I have killed too many."

"But you have helped by killing. You have saved people doing what you have done." She protested, trying to convince him. She touched his arm, her hand warm on his skin. He inhaled her scent again, closing his eyes as it wrapped around his soul. Her conviction and belief in him spiked his determination to have her for a mate.

"But I am still a killer." He said in warning, as he turned and looked at her. He didn't want to be under any illusions. He knew his eyes glowed like the predator he was. He grabbed her hand and turned away from her gaze. "Let's go. Cullen has a treat prepared for you." The discussion closed.

Alana could tell that he didn't want to talk anymore about his past. She was honored that he had told her as much as he had, and she was amazed and saddened at the death and violence that was a natural part of his life. No wonder he was such a scary mother fucker and seemingly so cold and deadly.

She took a deep breath and tried to put the sadness behind her and enjoy the evening. The fact that he had been married threw her for a loop. She shook her head and tried to escape the mood

that enveloped her.

Alana admitted that his experiences made him more real to her; he was frightening and dangerous, but he knew pain and experienced heartache, no matter how much he tried to seem oblivious. He was a good guy and even though he wasn't convinced, she was, and she liked him...a lot. He was sexy and strong and male. Sensual and dark, he appealed to her on so many levels.

The dining room possessed a long table that nearly covered the length of the room. It was the longest table she had ever seen. She imagined the vampires seated at this table centuries ago as they enjoyed decadent and extravagant course after course. A large harp graced one corner with a petite gilded chair behind it. Three large crystal chandeliers hovered over the tables, suspended from the high ceiling. The wealth of the room enough left her speechless.

Cullen was human, apparently the hired help in a tux. Alana smiled her appreciation as he placed strawberries and raspberries drizzled with chocolate on fine china in front of them and filled champagne flutes with sparkling liquid. She was raised with fine manners and proper etiquette but she felt out of place here.

"Wait!" Rhys ordered with a smile. She froze the heavy silver fork suspended in midair. He laughed at her silliness and gestured with a wave

of the hand to an antique table with a side that lifted up and in. The panel opened to show a modern sound system.

A wide smile crossed Alana's face as she recognized the beat of Rob Zombie. She enjoyed his vampiric theatrics too and relaxed more at ease, as the music filled the room. He smiled that sexy, sinful smile and flashed his glistening fangs. Her heart stuttered at the sight. He pierced a strawberry with his fork and lifted it to her lips. He pressed the strawberry against her closed lips.

"Open, Alana," he ordered, in that husky, accented voice. Alana took a deep breath and opened her mouth. They were the most succulent, tastiest strawberries she had ever eaten. He fed her more and Alana knew she would never have strawberries or raspberries again without reliving this moment. The smooth champagne slid down Alana's throat and she was thoroughly seduced.

An hour later, Rhys showed her the solarium. He leaned against the door, sexy and mysterious as she entered, entranced by the beauty within. The glass room was filled with flowers. The moon and stars provided a silver glow that touched the precious blooms. The temperature was humid to accommodate the plants. Fragrant, exotic aromas drifted in the air. The warm, pungent room was cozy and romantic. Alana touched a large hydrangea blossom feeling the soft petals under

her fingertips.

She turned to tell him how extraordinary the room was but he wasn't behind her. The door to the foyer had been shut so the only light in the room was from the moon above trickling through the glass and the canopy of hanging plants. Shadows filled the room. She turned in a circle and smiled.

Did he think she would fall to the ground in fright? She reached for him with her mind and felt the strange buzzing silence that she associated with him, but not his exact location. She ducked to the floor out of the shaft of light that she so visibly stood in. She quietly slipped around the large stone planter. Soft laughter came from the other direction and her heart raced. A thrill ran through her body.

Alana reached a high table and bent to look underneath. She paused to look for some sign of him in the darkness. Shadows permeated the room and she couldn't see a thing. She squirmed out from under the table. She didn't want to get caught under it with no easy escape. Her clothes slid silently on the smooth marble floor. Something creaked above her and she saw a dark blur shift overhead. Alana's mouth dried and her heart pounded. She was both turned on and spooked by the game. Was he flying? The hair stood on the back of her neck. It was a delicious

feeling, she realized, scared and horny simultaneously.

Alana backed away from the blur, her eyes wide and desperately tried to see in the dark. She bumped against a solid wall that reached around and enclosed her in strong arms. She yelped and was squeezed in punishment. The hard body behind her was immovable as she struggled.

Teeth nipped Alana's earlobe and tingles raced down her body. His hands covered her breasts and squeezed the rounded globes. The masterful fingers plucked and pinched until she panted and ached. Her nipples hardened; stiff points poked through her tank top. She moaned as he feathered her neck with his lips, tongue and teeth. One hand slid down her body to cup between the legs. Her eyes closed and her head fell to the side to give him better access to her neck. *Oh God.*

His hand found the front of her pants and jerked. The clasp and zipper came undone and his hand slid into her panties. His long fingers stroked the wetness there. The combination of the erotic hide-n-seek, his strong fingers, and lethal teeth at her neck produced shivers that skated across her body. He was almost a foot taller than Alana. Strong arms, caged her against his hard body. Long dark hair felt soft against her cheek. He pressed her body against his cock. His fingers pushed against her clit and her stomach clenched.

He grabbed her hand and tugged it down. He laid his hand over hers and he forced them both into her moist heat. Alana tried to pull her hand away and he held her tighter. She cried out as he swirled her fingers around until they were covered with her cream.

He lifted her hand out of her panties, put one finger into his mouth and licked it before he placed the other in front of her own lips. Alana pressed them tight in defiance. He thrust his other hand into her panties and slid a finger into her again. She moaned at the slide of his long finger into her warmth and he used the opportunity to insert her drenched finger into her mouth.

"Suck it," he directed. Heat invaded her already over-warm body at his command. His masterful attitude was striking everything feminine in her; that dark part of her that wanted to be submissive to his demand. She glanced up at him from the corner of her eye and sucked her finger seductively into her mouth. Desire raged in his eyes. Despite her initial modesty, the rawness of the moment took her breath away.

With a growl of frustration, Rhys jerked Alana's pants and silk panties down to the floor. He sat down on the stone ledge surrounding a small pond and fountain filled with trickling water. He held her tight against him, her back to his chest and positioned her legs on either side of his long

ones.

He splayed his legs wide, forcing Alana's open further. She was accessible and vulnerable to him. Long fingers glided through the moist cream of her pussy and then entered her forcefully again as his fangs penetrated her throat; where he used one finger before, now he used four. Four wide, long fingers that stretched her and rubbed against the walls inside of her.

Heat soared through Alana's body. She arched back against him and gave him her neck. She pushed against his fingers between her legs. He growled; the sound rumbled through his chest against her back. His control was amazing; she knew he wanted to take her fiercely, more than he wanted anything in a long time. That brief bit of insight filtered into her mind before his thoughts shielded again.

Each pull of blood that he took from Alana stoked her climax even higher as it went on and on. It was as if there was a direct path of sensation that stretched from his teeth in her neck to her pussy, and every suck of blood brought a fresh wave of feeling. She writhed and bucked on his lap, moaning and insensible until he pulled free of her neck. She slumped back into his arms. Her head fell back on his chest; strands of their dark hair intertwined. His fingers slid out of her. He leaned forward to make sure she watched then he

licked each finger that had been inside of her. His gaze was full of desire and intent as he did so.

“Delicious,” he stated.

“Oh God,” Alana whispered. She was sated but she still wanted him with a fierceness that was new to her. After twenty-four years, that he could so totally create this wild responsiveness in her astounded her. She had accepted that she would never experience passion like other people, but after meeting this man, she was suddenly out of control.

Even more bewildering, she wanted to satisfy him too. She wanted to kneel between his legs and suck his cock until he exploded. She had never sucked anyone off before, but although she was wicked hot for him; an increasing smaller part of her was still fighting complete capitulation in some small way. Ironically her actions were in direct contrast to that concept, resistance. Every time he touched her the desire to not get involved with him became insignificant. She wouldn’t last much longer.

Honestly, she felt bad about where this was heading. Going back to her normal life after romantic evenings in the French country side and mind-blowing sex was going to be hard. If she fell in love with him, she might never get over him. Doubtless, the lust and challenge of her would fade and he would return to his otherworldly life.

Her life and job would be lonely and empty; things she didn't feel before he forced his way in her life. She didn't want to spend her days pining for a vampire who could show her the world in the blink of an eye.

With that depressing thought, Alana roused herself and slid out of his lap. He squeezed his arms around her once in defiance and then let her go. She stood and straightened her clothing. She could feel his gaze burning a hole in her back. She gathered her courage and faced him.

"Can you take me back home now?" Alana's voice wobbled. Was it this hard for other women? Why couldn't she enjoy the here and now and not worry about what came later?

Rhys studied Alana, trying to read her thoughts but her shields were securely in place. He ran his hand through his hair. "What if I don't want to let you go?" He asked curiously. She could feel his conflict about returning her home. She admitted to herself that her heart lightened at his need to have her stay in his castle.

Alana laughed lightly. His possessiveness would be so easy to fall into. "Come on." She grabbed his hand. "You can stalk me tomorrow, if you still want."

Silently, he stood and folded her in his arms, "I want," he said. A misty second later they were standing on the veranda in front of the Big House.

Alana stood in Rhys' arms for a minute or two while she regained her equilibrium. Suddenly she was very tired. *What a night.*

"Thanks for an amazing night. Thanks for telling me about your life."

He put both hands in her hair and tilted her face up to his. "I want you so fucking bad, Alana. You're mine, you know that? I'm going to fuck you soon and you'll want it as bad as I do, despite your doubts." He licked her lips with his tongue and then he was gone.

Alana walked unsteadily to the chair and sat down on shaky legs. Her heart pounded. She was scorching hot from his simple declaration. The man absolutely made her tremble and shake with no effort whatsoever. The entire night was the most bizarre and marvelous night of her life.

Alana shook herself and then went to bed. She brushed her teeth and washed her face. Hopefully she could get a couple of hours of sleep before time to wake up. Fortunately, it's Sunday so she didn't have to wake up early. She undressed down to her panties and fell into bed. Half asleep before her head touched the pillow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Alana and her grandfather went to church at eleven. She enjoyed the sermon and her spirits were uplifted when she left the church. Alana noticed Ramsey ambling down the handicap accessible ramp. It was rare for him to make an appearance. He stared at her as usual.

The painful thought struck her when she realized that Rhys could finish his horse sale now that Ramsey was back in town. He would soon be out of her life. Somehow she just didn't picture him hanging around her small town. A huge knot formed in her throat as she struggled not to cry. Her wave of happy feeling, generated by the good word, dissipated.

"Don't frown so, Sissy," Grandpa scolded as he walked beside Alana to the Jeep. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing," she said, not about to go into details with Grandpa. She knew an unconvincing smile perched on her face, but he let it go. "Let's

go see what Bernice has for lunch before we work the horses." She waved to David and his family and left the church parking lot. She looked in the rear mirror to see Ramsey standing in the road staring after them. *What is with him?*

Alana dismissed him from her thoughts and wondered if Rhys would show up tonight. Would he finish his business today and come see her one last time? Did he go back to Ramsey's house after he left her last night? Was Monique there? Disgust filled her at that thought. She was so not the jealous type and didn't want to think about his dark, muscular body pressed against the curvaceous, blond bimbo. She growled at herself.

"What is wrong with you, gal? Was your date last night that bad? I didn't even hear when you came in." It wasn't like him to be so curious, but she supposed her date with a vampire warranted him the right to be inquisitive.

"No, it was amazing and wonderful, but I don't imagine that we're meant to be together and I really don't want to start something that I know can't lead anywhere."

"How do you know what's gonna' happen?" he asked wisely.

"Oh, come on, Grandpa. He's a vampire. He lives in France, where he took me last night, by the way." Alana saw his eyes widen at this piece of info. "He's extremely wealthy and he's a cop, of

sorts, for his people. I'm a human, horse trainer from Versailles, Kentucky. How different can two people be? It would never work, and you know, he probably doesn't have forever in mind. Let's also include the fact that he's six hundred years old. I'm twenty-four and will die much, much sooner than he."

"Well, those might seem like insurmountable odds, and I know that mine and your Grandmother's relationship doesn't compare to yours. But in a small way, it does. I too believed that we were too different. Your grandmother was from a wealthy family and I was the hired help. But I loved her and I wasn't going to let anything stand in the way, if I could help it. Of course, whatever you decide to do is fine with me, but I know you are very special and you deserve a man who can understand you. It seems to me that Rhys would understand you better than anyone around here." He said his piece and then leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He always napped on the ride home from church. She pondered his words all the way to the Big House.

Bernice whipped up tomato tilapia paninis and minestrone soup for lunch. Alana consumed every drop on her plate and then changed into jeans, a t-shirt and boots for her chores. Grandpa met her out in the barn as she sprayed out the five gallon buckets that they used for water.

Ramsey's Farm used automatic horse waterers, but at the Big House they sprayed out the bits of hay and backwash and refilled the buckets daily. Grandpa took the horses out to walk while she finished watering and then replaced the bedding. Grandpa took care of the feed that morning and gave the horses flakes of hay, so all that was left was to exercise them.

When Alana finished the stalls, she and Grandpa exercised the horses. They had owned other horses over the years that they raised and sold, but for now they just owned the two. They were her babies. She loved walking into the stable and seeing them peak their heads over the stalls; their ears perked in excitement to see her.

After running the pair, they walked them again, sprayed them down and then used the scraper to remove the water. Alana put away the blankets, saddles and bridles and then tidied up the stable. Grandpa went in the shower and get ready for his poker date. He and his buddies got together every Sunday to play Texas Hold'em. They ate fish and chips and drank beer. Hank and Sue hosted the party. Sue cooked and then drove them all home. Grandpa loved Poker Sunday.

Alana took a long, hot, leisurely bath to sooth her muscles and body. She thought about Rhys again. Would he come back tonight? Steam rose around her and she squeezed her legs together as

she remembered riding the stallion in front of him. She remembered his hand sliding into her pants. His strong palm cupped her, lifted her, and his fingers rubbed her. They dipped into her wet cream and swirled around her clit deliciously. Her nipples puckered, aching. She closed her eyes; she wanted him badly.

As scary as the emotions were and as much as she wanted to protect her heart, Alana also wanted to feel love and passion. She hadn't thought she was missing anything until the last three days. She had a new perspective on sex since meeting Rhys. Now she understood the depths of what could be reached by being intimate with someone. She ached to be with Rhys and experience it all with him. She shook her head and rose from the tub, determined to avoid such thoughts for now. She hurriedly dressed and went to the kitchen, knowing her cousin could ease her heavy mood.

The cousins ate couscous salad with cranberries and almonds seasoned with ginger and basil and bowls of fresh fruit for dessert. They filled each other in on their dates while they sipped a glass of wine. Bernice and Lucas had sex at the bar in the back room and Alana listened to the juicy details of that encounter with a more experienced ear and a wide grin. Bernice and Lucas planned to meet later to play pool.

Alana told Bernice her trip to Rhys' castle in Europe. Her cousin was appropriately amazed and speechless. She listened with an avid ear while Alana dished about their night. Alana didn't talk about much about sex; other than to say that he made her crazy and made her forget everything around her when he touched her and Bernice tactfully left it at that. Intimacy was still new to her and she hesitated to broach the subject of the blood-drinking that was very much a part of sex with Rhys. Actually Alana was surprised Bernice hadn't asked already.

They lingered over dinner for a couple of hours as they talked and drank wine. It was a typical Sunday evening. Alana helped Bernice clean the kitchen and then went into the living room to watch the tube while Bernice went upstairs to get ready for her date.

Later, Alana waved to Bernice as she left and then sprawled on the couch. A few minutes later, she felt the buzz. A thrill zinged through her body. Hands reached around her and she shrieked in surprise. Amused male laughter tickled her ear. She relaxed back against him. Not many could sneak up on her since she could hear their thoughts before they reached her, but he could do it.

Alana turned to look at Rhys and her mouth dropped open. He wore black leather pants and a

black leather vest with no shirt underneath. Black leather boots completed the sexy ensemble. His muscular chest was bare and ripped. His dark hair was braided and fell across his shoulder. *Oh my God.* A sexy smile crossed his sensual lips at her expression. She didn't doubt drool dripped down her chin. He was so fucking hot; a predator – powerful, sensual and irresistible.

Rhys grabbed Alana's hand and jerked her to him for a hard kiss. "Let's get some different clothes on." He sniffed and then headed in the direction of her room. He smelled where she slept. For some reason, that turned her on. He strode to her walk-in-closet and dressing room and pulled out a short black dress with spaghetti straps; another gift from Bernice. He went to the shoe shelves and turned around with black stilettos in his grasp.

Alana, perched on a stool to watch him, straightened in alarm as he stalked back to her, determined. He hung the dress on a hook on the back of the door and turned to her. He grabbed her silk tank and lifted it over her head.

"Hey!" Alana protested his treatment of her, despite the fact that she was thoroughly turned on. Yes, again. Arousal was a constant state in his presence.

"Quiet," he ordered. "Unless you want me to fuck you right now, let me do this."

Rhys stood Alana up and jerked down her shorts and panties. He pulled the black dress over her head and then bent to put on the shoes.

"I don't have on a bra!" Or panties, she added silently.

"This is the way you are going." Rhys twirled Alana around and a second later a heavy diamond necklace was placed around her neck. Five of the largest diamonds she had ever seen bounced on her chest. *Holy shit*. He started to drag her out the door, when she finally put her foot down.

"No!" He quirked an eyebrow in challenge and she swallowed, "Okay, at least let me fix my hair and put on some lip gloss. Please."

"Since you asked so nicely." He smirked and followed her into the bathroom where he sat on the corner of the black granite counter.

Alana brushed her hair until it shown and left it straight down her back. She applied black mascara and red lip gloss. She also grabbed her onyx earrings. They were small and cubed and wouldn't distract from the fabulous necklace. She glanced at Rhys in the mirror and saw the heat in his eyes. She stopped breathing.

He stepped behind her. His dark, sexy image towering over her dark, petite frame was incredibly erotic. They stared at each other as he placed his hands on her shoulders and a second later, they were...somewhere else, behind a

building, where she heard music blaring.

He held her tight as she acclimated. "Where are we?"

"Paris." He grabbed her hand and they walked around to the front of the club called Le Mort. They entered ahead of the long line of people. The attendants at the door lowered their hands and averted their eyes as Rhys walked past. They were afraid. Alana could feel their fear of him.

Nine Inch Nails pounded in the immense room where hundreds of bodies gyrated. They walked down a stairwell and were immediately welcomed by two people. The buzz grew stronger and Alana realized they were vampires. *Wow.*

"Rhys." A tall, thin blond man nodded his head in greeting. He was handsome in an ethereal way and the other man with him was tall and rough, savage looking. Both were sexy in their own way, though they couldn't compare to Rhys and his dark, sensual sex appeal.

"Gavin, Roark," Rhys said as he pulled Alana in front of him and wrapped his arms around her. Gavin's eyebrow rose at the pose. The one called Roark began talking to Rhys as Gavin looked into her eyes. He tried to gain entrance to her mind. Did they all think it was okay to do this? Alana felt sorry for the other humans they encountered.

'Get the fuck out,' she ordered Gavin mentally and saw his eyes go wide.

Rhys laughed. "Good luck, my friend. She's not that easy." Roark and Rhys had stopped talking at Alana's mental yell.

"Rhys, you found one. Do you know where there are more?" he asked her. He was talking about telepaths and no, she didn't know of any others.

"No. Not that I would tell you if I did; however, honestly, I don't."

"Amazing, Rhys, you fucking dog, let me know if you get tired of her," Gavin said, his eyes still on hers, his gaze raked down her body.

Rhys growled. "Back off, Gavin, she's mine." Alana felt the flash of fear that crossed Gavin's mind before he decided to let it go. His mental thought was, 'she's the Hunter's, leave her be, ole' boy.' Alana let this go and decided not to answer back to his mental thought. They might not appreciate it if they knew she could read their thoughts too.

"Anyway," Roark continued, "Malyk has another one. He's got the info for you in his office."

"I'll see him before I leave," Rhys told him in dismissal.

They both faded into the sea of bodies as quickly as they appeared. Spooky. Rhys procured a table, although she was sure there were no empty ones when she first looked around, and

went to get drinks. Did he compel someone to give up a table? She wondered, nice trick. She saw him returning with a Cosmo and a Guinness and smiled.

He always managed to anticipate her needs. Alana watched him walk the final distance to the table, his gaze on hers. Bodies moved out of his way as if they knew not to get too close, even though the women all watched him with lust visible in their eyes. A palpable field surrounded him. It shrieked death to anyone who dared to cross him.

The lyrics to the *Nine Inch Nails* song, "Bow down before the one you serve...you're gonna' get what you deserve," were appropriate to the moment. The music and his sexuality affected Alana. She stood as he arrived and grabbed the Cosmo from his hand. She downed the drink and he smiled. He knew of her need. He drank a good portion of the large Guinness and set it down. He licked his lips. *Oh heaven.* He pulled Alana to him and turned her around against him, her back to his chest. They were just two more in the midst of many that performed the mating ritual, but in Alana's mind, it was as if they were the only ones there.

He was flush against her body and they moved to the music. His hands slid down her sides and raised her dress to her thighs. She was comforted

by the fact that no one paid them any attention. Alana raised her arms up and around his head; her butt pressed and swayed against his hard cock. She leaned her head back and as he reached around and fingered her moist slit. She gasped and moaned. "Rhys," she whispered. Her nipples hardened against her dress. The lyrics crooned about domination, and their forbidden movements in a room full of people was incredibly arousing.

Another *Nine Inch Nails* song came on "I want to fuck you like an animal," and they continued to dance. After the song was over, he eased her out into a hallway with alcoves covered by heavy red velvet curtains. Rhys nudged Alana into one and placed her hands against the wall. They faced a mirror. He ground his hips against her from behind. Her dress, without panties, was no protection and he opened his pants and released his long cock. *Oh shit*. She could feel him between her legs. He was huge. She breathed in deeply and closed her eyes. His fingers came up and pinched and pulled her nipples. The slight pain only flamed the fire higher.

"I want to fuck you. Hard, until you scream," he growled, very much the predator.

Suddenly Alana knew what she wanted too. It was her turn. She turned around and pushed him against the wall. He let her do it with a smug smile

on his face. Alana knelt between his legs and took his cock in her hands. He smiled; fangs flashed and leaned against the wall. He let her take the lead. He clenched his hands into fists. She knew he tightly controlled the urge to fuck her. An image of him pounding into her from behind, lifting her off the ground with his thrusts filled her head and she knew it was his fantasy. She squeezed her legs together at the erotic thought, ready to do what he wanted, but she wanted him in her mouth desperately.

Alana looked up at him and paused, her lips a breath away from his cock; his face reflected a hard sensual mask of control. She opened wide and took him in. He closed his eyes. She had never performed oral sex but she needed no direction. She knew exactly what to do. She deep-throated his silky, hard cock and undulated her tongue against him. Not all the way to the shaft, but very close. He was so long and wide. It was impossible for her to take him all the way. She closed her hand around him at the base where she couldn't reach. She sucked and sucked and then backed off. She laved him from head to hilt with her tongue and then surrounded the tip before she closed down on him again. She sucked him hard and ran her tongue along his shaft. She nursed him harder and harder. He growled and clenched his fingers in her hair. Her head ached slightly where he

pulled the strands tight.

Alana wasn't sure how long she pleased him, but she could have gone forever. Her mouth was tired, but she was so incredibly aroused that she didn't want to end it. She reveled in the act. There was pure power in having a man vulnerable in this way, especially this man, and she wasn't ready for it to be over. Minutes later, she had no choice. He growled again and canted his head back as he thrust roughly. He exploded in her mouth. She swallowed the warm cum and couldn't believe how hot sucking his cock made her.

Rhys lifted Alana roughly; his look savage and deadly. "I'm going to fuck you, Alana. It's killing me to wait, but our first time is not going to be here. I need you where I can do what I want with you." He grimaced as he tucked himself back in and zipped his pants. Alana stood and felt cream between her legs.

He inhaled deeply. "I smell you." He opened his eyes. The pupils were red. He looked feral; like his control hung by a thread.

Rhys walked Alana back to the table and pushed her down in the chair. "I'll be right back. Don't move." She watched him run agilely up the steps to a door. Five minutes later he hustled her up the entrance steps and out the door. They walked to the quiet backside of the building where

the music was muted. Rhys took Alana in his arms and soon after they stood in his castle bedroom.

CHAPTER NINE

Alana was impressed by the room during the tour yesterday. It was a modern, masculine room that still contained traces of its medieval history. A large, very large, bed with a black silk comforter, pillows and sheets filled the middle of the room on a raised dais. The thick cherry headboard and footboard were carved with images of intertwined bodies, wolves, trees and the moon. It was a magnificent piece of work.

Matching cherry nightstands bordered the bed on the dais and a large cherry armoire with the same carvings stood tall in the corner of the room. The floors in the bedroom, and actually the entire middle floor of the castle, were made of stone; only the downstairs and the gigantic stairwell boasted the marble floors.

The floor was covered by a cream oriental rug laced with black and red. Picture windows graced one wall enclosed by black velvet curtains. A stone fireplace occupied the opposite wall where a fire

blazed ferociously. Alana felt like a princess in the medieval room.

Rhys picked Alana up and carried her to the dais where he dropped her on the bed. He quickly followed her down. His strong body covered hers as he plundered her lips. He kissed her as if he was starving and she was the last food on earth. His tongue tangled with hers sharply and then he leaned back and licked along her lips, teasing her. She loved when he licked her as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of her. He bit her bottom lip and sharp pain pierced her briefly and then he laved and sucked at the wound.

Rhys growled as he tasted Alana's blood. He reached up to grasp her face and forced her head to the side. He licked and bit at her neck softly. Shivers covered her body. She shook slightly in anticipation, so aroused and ready for him. He bit sharply on the tendon in her neck. He didn't break the skin, but as he did so a sharp current of desire traveled the length of her body and caused her stomach muscles to clench and her legs to press together. She felt the moisture as it trickled between her legs.

Rhys reached down and pushed the dress over her hips. Alana arched to accommodate him and he slid it off over her chest and head. Her arms rose to assist but he left them tangled in the dress above her head. She tried to pull them free but he

pressed them into the bed firmly. He let her know, in no uncertain terms, to leave her hands bound as they were.

Alana was naked now except for the stilettos and his heated gaze slowly traveled the length of her body. His nostrils flared and she knew he smelled her arousal. His eyes glowed and his mouth parted so she glimpsed the edge of his fangs. He looked primal, savage; on the verge of losing control.

Rhys leaned over and with his teeth pulled at Alana's nipples that were rock hard. She arched her back again to give him more access. Every nerve between her nipples and cunt tingled. Every pull and scrape on her breasts pulsed between her legs. She clenched her fingers in his hair and held him to her.

A long finger slid in the moist spot between Alana's legs and then entered her as his thumb feathered and rubbed across her clit. The dual combination produced heady sensations. Through half closed eyes, she saw again the flash of glistening fangs. He pierced the skin of her breast around the nipple. He sucked her nipple hard as the blood welled and poured down his throat with each pull.

Fire raced across Alana's body. Climax engulfed her and she screamed. His hands and mouth held down her bucking body. Her hands

were still tethered in the dress above her head. He lifted his head, his face a sensual, hard mask of dark beautiful features; glowing eyes, blood red lips, strong jaw, and long, braided hair draped over a sculpted shoulder.

Rhys' predatory look made Alana swallow in desire and fear. She knew he could smell her fear; hear the pounding of her heart and the blood rushing through her veins. He moved over her and lifted her legs until they draped over his strong arms. She was open to him, to his desire. He paused for a brief moment to look at her, to stare into her eyes.

Then he entered her in one long, hard thrust that pushed her up on the bed. He felt so deep and huge that there was pain for a moment, but then he started to move — hard and fast and long and she was gone. There was no more Alana. She was whatever he wanted her to be and do. He could have killed her then and she would have happily gone on to the afterlife.

Rhys growled as he pounded into Alana. She felt the thought of "*mine!*" come from him. It roared through her mind, startling her, before going quiet again. His eyes blazed and his teeth bared in a snarl; his long fangs so forbidden and erotic. He leaned over again and licked and sucked her nipples before he pressed his finger, still drenched with her essence, to her mouth. Her

lips closed until he harshly demanded, "Open." Alana tasted herself as he continued to thrust into her and entice her nipples. Another climax edged closer and her eyes closed in bliss.

Alana felt it hover and bit his finger sharply with her own teeth. He roared and his climax sent her soaring headlong into her own. He pumped several more times, but didn't stop there. He leaned his body up and away from her and with minimal effort flipped her over onto her stomach. His long arm reached across her belly and jerked her up on her knees. He thrust deep into her again and she shrieked. She had risen up on her hands but he pressed the back of her head and forced her upper body back down on the bed.

He pinned her to the bed with her ass in the air and pounded into her. A sharp slap and instant pain spread across her bottom as he began to spank her with every thrust. He varied the slaps all across her ass and, after a second or two; the area numbed to the pain and began to tingle in the most intriguing way. She breathed hard and pushed back against him, insane with lust. The thrusting and spanking sent her to heights never imagined.

Rhys was so deep that Alana felt full of him. She could no longer tell where she left off and he began. With one finger he reached under and pushed on her clit. "Come now," he demanded

and she did. She came with a powerful climax and screamed into his silk sheets, as he jetted his seed deep inside her.

Alana eased her ravaged but satisfied body down onto his decadent sheets. Rhys spread out beside her and wrapped her in his arms — a leg and arm thrown possessively on top of her. She felt so good lying with him, comforted in the frenzied aftermath. She smiled, she felt well-used and drowsy. He lightly rubbed the strands of her hair draped across his chest.

Alana vaguely wondered if he had lay in this bed with his wife and frowned at the direction her thoughts took. She generally considered herself above jealousy, but she was curious about their relationship and curious if he still missed his murdered wife. She didn't want to bring up such a topic after what they had just done — besides, she was too tired.

"I didn't love her. I felt guilt after her death more than anything else." Alana rolled over to look at him. "We were friends and satisfied each other with our bodies, but we had an unspoken agreement and participated in discreet affairs when we wanted. Our families arranged our marriage so we did our duty."

Alana was vastly relieved to hear the news. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

"The more blood I take, the easier I have access

to your thoughts. I know I shouldn't have spied on them, but I am a male and after fucking, we always want to know what our woman is thinking. Not that we want to talk, we just want to know if you thought it was good."

Alana hit Rhys on the arm and he laughed. She knew he teased her. It was nice to see this side of him. Personable, rather than the deadly, purely sexual man she had come to know.

"So you felt guilty that she died?" Alana asked.

"That I wasn't here to protect what was mine, that I didn't give her more of me. She was a loving woman who deserved a real commitment. I should have given her that or released her so she could find it with someone else. I am a Death Hunter. I've been a killer for too long. I couldn't give her the love and emotional support that she deserved. Although, that doesn't seem to be the case with you..."

She smiled a very wide smile. She could so easily love this man. As soon as that truth hit her, doubt crept in. "Don't," he ordered. "Just let things happen. Don't fight me or what you feel and I'll try not to do the same."

Alana decided to take his advice for now. She knew as soon as she got back home the doubts would resurface, but for now, she wasn't going to spoil the moment. She remembered something else she was curious about.

"The vampire at Le Mort said that you had 'another one'. What do you have to do?" She questioned.

He was silent for a moment while he decided what to tell her. "A human was drained in Zurich. Tortured and left in plain sight of other humans. It's my job to hunt down the fucker and stop him before he kills again," he explained in a grim voice.

"Will you be okay?" Alana heard the concern in her voice.

"Of course, baby. Don't worry about it, okay?" He ran fingers along her hair and caused goosebumps to stand up.

She shivered and he smiled. "I love how your body responds to me. I could get you to do whatever I want and that makes me crazy," he whispered in a husky voice.

Alana lifted up on her forearms and leaned over his chest to kiss him. Unbelievably, she wanted him again. Her tongue slid into his mouth and tangled with his. She leaned back and sucked his lower lip into her mouth and lightly bit it, recalling when he did the same with her.

Rhys lifted Alana up with strong hands and settled her on top of him. She took his cock inside her. He pinched her hard nipples with his fingers and she ground herself against him in slow sensuous circles until they couldn't take anymore.

Strong hands gripped her sides. The slight pain intensified the sensations as he lifted her and thrust forcefully and brought them to a shattering, spine-tingling climax once again.

Alana slept on top of his chest for an hour before he awakened her for the return home. Her work day began in five, short hours. In the dewy grass outside of Big House, he softly raised her chin with his fingers and kissed her, before he disappeared. She wearily, but happily meandered in to bed thinking that she forgot to tell him Ramsey was back in town.

CHAPTER TEN

It was nighttime in the Republic of Mordovia, located in eastern Russia. Merrick drained the dark-haired whore and dropped her with a thump. Her glassy-eyed friend, whom he was saving as dessert, had long since gone silent. Her mind was vacant due to the trauma she witnessed. Disgust curled his lip at her easy defeat. He liked when they fought. His mind drifted to his sister and to Rhys' wife, Celia. They knew how to fight a man. He killed other women over the centuries, but those two stood out in his mind since their deaths gave him so much more satisfaction.

The abandoned castle where he resided was in ruins. The neglected appearance of the castle served its purpose and kept unwanted visitors away. Plus he covered the ancient castle with an evil miasma that discouraged any brave citizens not initially turned off by the derelict facade. His large, elaborately appointed chamber, however, was reminiscent of his former station and wealth.

It was also filled with medieval torture devices. He delighted in the fear that the contraptions inspired when his victims first saw them.

Despite the convenience and the suitability of his inner lair, he hated hiding *and* the fact that he lived secreted in this forsaken stronghold. The ancient city was boring. He was ready for more. He *needed* more. Rage and jealousy burned like acid in his gut when he thought of Rhys and his coveted position in the Throng. He lived like a king on the family estate, feared by all as the Death Hunter. He lived the life Merrick should be living. It should be *his* name that people whispered in fear. *He* should be a leader among his people.

The Throng was ridiculously civilized and lame. He yearned to kill the hypocritical, ineffectual elders. They sentenced his people to obscurity and a dull, oppressed eternity. His race should be considered Gods by the human sheep, yet they lived in the shadows, hidden; in fear of discovery. Well, he wasn't fearful. His power was a heady thing. The urge to make humans into the slaves they deserved to be was almost uncontrollable.

He had lived on the run since he killed his sister over three hundred years ago; knowing his father and the Death Hunters would kill him if he was ever captured. One summer night, in a Parisian

alley he attacked a homeless man and felt the immense power surge from the human blood, when he felt another vampire approach. He dissolved into mist as a Hunter stalked him and found the drained vagrant where he smelled the vampire scent upon him.

Merrick attacked and entered his adversary's psyche before he could defend himself. After a brief struggle, he assumed control of the Hunter's mind long enough to plant the memory of his own demise. The Hunter returned to the Throng satisfied that he had executed Merrick; unaware his mind had been altered from reality.

The pride Merrick experienced from deceiving the Throng was tremendous and his disdain of the ruling class was born on that night. Power came from killing humans, he realized. Not from being staid pretenders of the Gods they should be; only tapping into a fraction of the abilities at their fingertips in their fear of human detection.

After his escape, killing became his life and blood was his addiction. He didn't just need it to survive; he craved it with an all-consuming need. He woke every sunrise and planned his next kill. He was convinced that the blood, the fear and the power he held over human life made him invincible.

There was nothing more thrilling than watching the terror cross his prey's face and knowing that

he could do whatever he wanted with them. The ultimate moment was when he watched the light go out of their eyes and knew their souls exited their bodies, leaving only a husk behind. It was an invigorating experience and he couldn't get enough of it.

With his looks and vampiric charisma, women offered themselves to him and after he fucked them and terrorized them, getting high on their fear, he killed them. Women were his targets though he didn't discriminate when he felt the need for a change.

"We should rule the earth, not you fucking pathetic sheep," he shouted at the girl as she kicked her limp legs. She didn't even stir; already practically a zombie as her mind attempted to shield her from the trauma. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he turned from her sight. He loathed his image; the one so like his brother, Rhys; the firstborn, most loved son, who he reviled more than anything. Enraged, he threw out his hand. Glass shattered from the force of his power. The woman barely winced.

He dragged her over to the window by her long hair so he could feast his eyes on the moon as he drained her blood. He jerked her head back at an angle. She whimpered then and the sound was like music to him, hardening his cock again after he had already slacked his lust with her and her

friend multiple times. He squeezed her breasts painfully with one hand and struck. He sent his fangs deep into her neck and savagely ended her life.

He dropped her as he stared at the potent moon and licked the blood from his lips. It was time to confront his brother again, he thought with an evil smile. He was fed up with this unsatisfying life on the fringe. He deserved more and it was time he got it.

He must cautiously plan his attack. He couldn't rush into a challenge with Rhys, who surely expected him this time. Killing his brother would not be an easy feat. He heard the tales of the feared Death Hunter's prowess.

Merrick snarled. So he broke an ancient law and killed other vampires — a crime punishable by death. Rhys killed other vampires too. Yet his brother was a celebrated hero.

If he simply confronted Rhys, there was a very real chance that he would not survive. He needed an advantage over his brother — some way to distract him and leave him vulnerable. It was time he returned to France.

Ramsey walked in the stable while Alana was gathering Ryder's tack. She glanced over her

shoulder as she heaved the leather bundle onto her shoulder. His intense blue eyes unnerved her as always. He leaned against the wall and watched while she saddled Ryder.

"You know," he began, "you are an excellent horse trainer, Alana. You might actually be one of the top trainer's in the world, if it weren't such a male dominated field."

Surprise didn't begin to describe what Alana felt. The only conversations they ever had were purely business. He never offered compliments about her work or discussed anything remotely personal. Alana always felt there was something on the edge of his tongue. Some unspoken truth he forever withheld, but she never went any deeper into his thoughts than that and he never voiced them so she let it be. What circled his mind now was a vague sense of happiness at being where he was.

Bewildered, Alana responded, "Thanks, but I'm okay with what I do. I don't need to be the primary trainer. I just want to be with the horses." She draped the reins over the horn.

"I've watched you with them. They respond to you more than anyone else. Your grandfather is a good trainer, but your Mom was like you – in tune with the horses." Ramsey looked at her closely as he spoke.

Speechless, she wasn't sure what to say. "I

didn't realize you knew my mother."

"I've known your family a long time," was his cryptic reply, "and you are very much like her."

Okay, what is going on? "Yeah, well, thanks. I wish I had known her. Anyway, if I can't get anything for you, I had better get Ryder here out for exercise." She started to lead Ryder out of the stable in an effort to escape the bizarre, disconcerting conversation.

"I've seen you riding Cyracco," he said to Alana's back. She stiffened.

Damn. Alana sighed and turned back to her boss. After his last tirade about Cyracco, she wanted to avert the impending rebuke. So she apologized. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ramsey, he won't let anyone else around him and he needs the exercise. I know I should have told you."

"It's okay. If anyone can ride him, I'm glad it's you," he reassured her. Her eyebrows rose.

Alana was immediately suspicious of the pride that seeped from him. She wanted to know the motive behind his friendliness, but suddenly he built a wall around his thoughts; something most people don't know how to do. She narrowed her eyes and peered at him in an attempt to decipher his intentions.

He pushed away from the wall. "Well, I shouldn't keep you from your work. I just wanted to let you know that I appreciate the job you do

here. You work hard, and you're good at what you do."

He turned and walked out of the stable. His tan linen suit and handsome visage looked sophisticated and cool in the early afternoon. Alana was dirty and smelled of horses and noticed the contrast. She rubbed her forehead and sighed; caught off guard by the visit. *What was that about?*

She left the stable. Ryder pranced behind her, tail swishing and she glanced at Ramsey as he walked up the hill to the mansion. She looked past him to the house and saw Monique watching. She stood at the top of the hill and stared in their direction and glared. Her expression, so full of hate, was visible despite the distance. The woman always had a sour look on her face when she looked at Alana.

The rest of the work day passed uneventfully. She drove into town and picked up a pizza for dinner —not in the mood for the effort of a home-cooked meal. Salad and the remaining meringue pie would make it a meal.

Annie called on Alana's cell when she pulled into the driveway. The ultrasound showed a girl. Tears filled Alana's eyes when her friend cried, overjoyed with the news. She and Bernice would plan a shower now. Ten baby-planning minutes later, Alana sat on the porch and finally told her friend that she was dating a guy that she met at

Ramsey's. No mention of the word vampire or blood-sucking, etcetera, in the conversation, but Alana was glad her friend knew of him at least. Annie had to go when Jon, the oldest, hit Drew, who started crying.

Alana, Bernice and their grandfather sat in the living room and munched on the pizza, salad and pie while they watched TV. Bernice sat on the floor painting her nails. Grandpa snored lightly, asleep in the recliner. At nine o'clock, Alana decided Rhys wasn't coming and went up to take a bath. Armed with a bottle of water and her latest book, a Lily Bard mystery by Charlaine Harris, she anticipated relaxing in the hot water.

She put her hair up in a loose knot and lit candles. With the mirror light on so she read, she eased into the hot, heavenly tub. There was nothing like a hot bath to sooth away the stress of the day. She leaned back in the tub and closed her eyes for a bit of rest before reading. She must have fallen asleep, not a smart thing to do in the bath, when she became aware of someone else.

A hot mouth enclosed her breast that poked out of the water and a long finger slid into the V of her legs. Alana opened her eyes to see Rhys leaning over the tub without a shirt. Tanned, muscular arms, sparkling eyes and long, white fangs filled her vision. Need raced through her in a rush. The drowsiness disappeared with the flash of desire.

Alana moaned as his finger entered her in a long stroke. She spread her legs further apart for him. His lips licked and kissed a path up her neck and then found hers. She opened to him eager for his taste and curled her tongue around a fang. He breathed her name.

Rhys pulled back and lifted Alana out of the water. The room was warm. The mirror was steamy with the heat of the water. He perched her on the side of the tub. The cool tiles were refreshing against her over-heated body.

He braced Alana's hands on a towel rack above her and spread her legs. He kneeled between them. He kissed her thigh and she closed her eyes, thrilled for what was next. His fingers slid through the moist area before he used them to spread her swollen lips open.

His tongue licked along the crevice and then latched onto her clit, suckling, pressing, swirling with his tongue. Alana moaned again as shivers racked her body. Instinctively she squeezed her legs together against him to increase the pressure. His hands tightened firmly on her thighs holding them open.

Rhys alternately licked and nipped her clit before he descended further to pump his tongue inside of her. Alana started to lower her hands from the towel rack to grab his head when he bit her and whispered firmly, "No". He raised a hand

and gestured to hers. Suddenly, Alana's hands were locked into position, grasping the rack. She gasped and tried to jerk them off and found that she couldn't move them an inch.

"You can move them when I'm ready, Alana," Rhys warned, before he thrust his tongue inside her again. Alana's body trembled from the sensations. She wanted to scream, but she didn't want to rouse Grandpa and Bernice.

"Oh God," she moaned, "Rhys, please!" She leaned her head back and lost herself as the feelings took her over. She thrust her hips at him and squirmed in his hands. She wanted to touch him but being bound as she was left her with no control. Her body was his to command. She wanted him to fuck her hard. She wasn't sure how much more she could take before she dissolved into a million pieces.

Rhys laughed softly and with one hand let go of Alana's thigh and thrust a finger into her. Soon, she felt two fingers as he continued to tongue her clit. Then four large fingers entered her and he used his teeth and bit her sharply. She flew over the edge, moaning and bucking insensibly. The blood slipped from her into him as wave after wave of sensation crashed over her and through her.

Rhys growled as he sucked Alana's blood from the most sensitive spot between her legs. His

cheeks became flushed as she watched him through dazed, heavy eyes. His own eyes cast a brilliant glow — beautiful. He pulled back, released her hands and the pulses coursing her body slowed to small aftershocks. She slumped back and almost fell into the tub when he caught her and carried her to bed.

The cotton sheets felt cool and smooth against Alana's over-sensitized body. She lay still, thoroughly satiated and unable to move and watched him peel his pants from his body. He crawled over her, his long hair hung down on either side of his face and brushed against her breasts and neck.

Rhys kissed Alana long and hard and she responded in kind, amazed when her body revved up again. She felt his long cock and pressed her hips against it. He leaned back and looked at her, "Ready to go again?" he questioned in a husky voice.

"Yes," Alana whispered breathlessly.

Rhys leaned up to kneel on the bed and lifted Alana on her knees. He faced her toward the headboard and placed her hands against the wood. He pressed them firmly. *Don't move them.* She heard in her mind. She felt him move behind her — the brush of his body against hers. Then his body pressed flush against the length of hers. He bent her over slightly and then powered into her,

pushing long and deep. She squeezed her hands against the headboard, her knuckles turned white with pressure.

“Fuck, Alana, you’re so tight. You feel so good,” Rhys breathed against Alana’s neck. He kissed her softly. His lips against her bare nape sent chills down her spine and tingles through her body. He thrust into her with slow, steady, long strokes. His hands were firm on her hips. She pressed back against him, unable to imagine him getting any deeper. The pleasure was overwhelming and the slight pain of the fullness only enhanced every feeling that cascaded through her.

Rhys leaned Alana’s head to the side and kissed her shoulder. He licked a trail up the nape of her neck and left shivers in his wake. He thrust harder and faster. Alana knew he was getting ready to bite her. Her stomach clenched in anticipation. He reached around with his hands and covered her breasts. He pulled at her nipples and twirled them in his fingers.

The feelings that coursed through Alana’s body were extraordinary. Rhys tightened his arms about her and then bit into her shoulder. Fangs pierced her skin as he drank from her again. Another climax flung her out of this world, and she shuddered in his arms while he filled her with his own.

They fell onto the bed and lay in each other's arms for long moments, his leg draped over hers and her head rested on his arm. Alana smiled, happy and sated, and commented, "I didn't think you were coming tonight."

"I finished up my business with Ramsey." She stiffened at Rhys' words and waited for the inevitable goodbye. "I'll be sending transport for Cyracco tomorrow. I'll do it all legit, since you have a lot of ties here. I don't want you to face any questions about disappearing horses."

"So you're done here?" Alana heard the slight tremble in her voice and hated her weakness.

"I'm done with my *business* here," Rhys stressed with a frown, "but I'm nowhere near done with you, Alana, and I'm not going to be. I told you that. You are mine — forever. Don't think that's going to change. I've made my feeling about this clear, haven't I?"

"Yeah, but I just figured guys say things like that until they are done with a woman." Alana felt the slight anger in him.

"I'm not like other guys, right?" he asked then continued, "Let me say this to you again. You," Rhys stressed as he turned her head to face him, "are mine. There is no going back or getting out of this." He stared into Alana's eyes. "Do you understand?"

"So you're going to do your poof thing from

France to Kentucky all the time?"

"I'll do whatever I have to do to see you. You love your family and want to stay with them, I realize that, but I hope you will stay with me too. We can go from one place to the other easily. I know that you enjoy the work at Ramsey's Farm, but I could use your assistance in my stables too."

Happiness filled Alana when she realized that he was speaking truth. She felt his honesty and determination to make the situation work. She sensed his resolve that she remain in his life, by his side. He didn't say the "L" word but neither did she, but his feelings for her were obvious.

"You're right, Alana," he said when he picked up on her thoughts. "I do. You were meant to be mine. I need you. We'll take our time and work things out, but I do plan to introduce you as my mate to the Throng when you are ready."

Alana yawned, suddenly tired; a good kind of tired. She smiled. "I'm glad you came tonight."

"Me too, but I'll go now so you can sleep. I'm going to Zurich tomorrow night, but I'll be back on Wednesday night."

Rhys kissed her, a hard, quick, dominant kiss. "You're mine, Alana," he confirmed again. He stood and with a wave of his hand was dressed again.

"That's pretty cool, you know?"

He smiled and reminded her, "Wednesday

night, mate," and then was gone. She drifted off to sleep with a goofy, satisfied smile on her face.

Rhys appeared in his parents' Mediterranean villa to find them sitting in the moonlight nibbling on wine and cheese and each other. He smiled at the pair. They were so much in love; two halves of one whole. Triumph and satisfaction shot through him with the realization again that he too had found his other half.

"Son," his father said in greeting, never looking away from his blond wife.

"Come sit down, darling," his mother invited. The moonlit waters and the fragrant ocean air provided a soothing atmosphere. He sat in the empty chair and without further ado told them he had found his mate.

"Rhys, that's wonderful! Tell us about her," his mother exclaimed happily; her eyes bright with joy at his news.

"She's a telepath and very strong. She's a beautiful, desirable woman and now that I've met her, I know I can't be without her."

"Has she had your blood?" his father inquired.

"Only a bit," Rhys responded. "I'm trying to give her time to get accustomed to me, but she will eventually. I plan on spending an eternity with

her."

They talked longer and two hours later he arrived in France. His parents' congratulations and blessing rang in his ears. He smiled as visions of Alana's supple skin and curves made his body hard, ready to plunge into her warmth. He looked forward to finishing his business in Zurich the next evening. He couldn't wait to get back to his mate. There was one more errand to finalize before the sunrise. Determined he strode to Cullen's rooms and pounded on the door. A sleepy-eyed Cullen answered in his pajamas, running his hands over his scattered hair. "Monsieur?"

"I need you to start filling this place with things that a young American lady would like," Rhys began and noticed the wide smile that crossed Cullen's face. Rhys gave him a look and then continued, "Put some color around the place. Place fresh flowers from the solarium and gardens in vases. Keep food on hand that you imagine she would prefer." He turned away and then thought of more. "You might as well get a couple of flat screens for the study and living room. I have a laptop for work but you better get one for the study with the works so she can use it and while you're at it, pick up an iPod." Rhys stood there for a moment and tapped his fingers on the door in thought. "Oh, and get her a new saddle. Also,

you've seen how she dresses. Get her some clothes, shoes and toiletries to keep here too. If you have any questions about the feminine purchases, call Mom and she'll come and help you out with it. I'll be in Zurich tomorrow night. I think that's all — any questions?"

"No, sir. May I also say that I like your lady? I'll be eager to get things that will make her feel more at home here. It's time we had a female back in the castle, my Lord."

Rhys turned and went to his room to sleep. He smiled and imagined Alana's reaction to her new stuff. He drifted into sleep and dreamt of her silky hair, fingertips and mouth moving over his skin as he plunged into her body and drank her blood.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On Tuesday morning, Alana exercised Cyracco extensively. He would soon begin the arduous, stressful journey to France. She was comforted by the fact that the horse would thrive in Rhys' stables, and she would ride him there. Alana bent low over Cyracco's neck and tightened her knees against his side. They jumped the rail cleanly and she laughed out loud in delight. She noticed Ramsey watched from the balcony off his study and turned in the opposite direction.

After thoroughly pampering Cyracco, her day was done. Annie was invited for dinner to help the cousins put together an invitation list for the shower. They actually knew who to invite, but it was a good excuse for Ryan to keep the kids so Annie could get out of the house. The timing was perfect since Rhys was in Zurich. Her heart stuttered for a moment while she considered the danger he was in. *He's a Death Hunter. He'll be fine*, she thought. She shook her head and forced

herself to be in a good mood for Annie.

Alana was quite famished since she ate only a banana and pretzels for lunch. She anticipated Bernice's dinner so she hurried home and showered. After slathering lotion all over her body, she danced into sweatpants and a tank and pulled her hair into a high ponytail. She ran lightly down the stairs to find Annie and Bernice sipping on tall glasses of raspberry tea.

"Serve me up!" Alana requested as she gave Annie a hug and sat down. Bernice poured her a glass and pushed a plate of bacon bites over her way. Alana loved her cousin's bacon bites. They were little crackers topped with cheese and wrapped in bacon baked until crispy. Sounded simple, but they were scrumptious. They worked on the list and gossiped for an hour at the kitchen table while Bernice slaved over the stove.

The girls gorged themselves on fried chicken, wild rice and fried apples. Sometimes there was nothing better after a long day than a home-cooked, southern meal. Bernice took a plate to Grandpa where he watched TV to let them have "girl's night".

They adjourned to the living room to eat blueberry cheesecake and watch the movie, *In Her Shoes*. They cried during the movie. It was a fun night, and Alana fell into bed tired and thought that she looked forward to Wednesday before she

fell asleep.

Rhys hovered in the shadows of the building and waited for the vamp to appear. Zurich hadn't changed much since his visit last year when he tracked and killed a vampire only miles away, but this kill sucked. Duncan, the stupid fucker, someone he had known for centuries, was his next assignment. But in his job, there were no favorites. If a vamp murdered, they were added to the Death Hunter's list.

He glanced around the dank doorway. The smell of vampire was strong here. This was his lair. Not many vampires could track the way he could. Of course, it helped that Malyk often supplied him with an address or at least a city.

He pulled his hood closer over his face and pulled the shadows around him. He leaned his head back against the building and thought of his mate. She was sex personified; so beautiful and exotic. She was the strongest telepath he had ever met and she suited him in so many ways.

Her athletic, sexy body appealed to him on so many levels. He wanted to eat her up, literally. He wanted to make her his in every sense of the word. He wanted her to have his name and live in his world. He wanted her to be his forever. A

sound caught his attention and his magic flared out. It was his prey.

Mist rolled along the cobblestone alley. He heard feminine laughter and a low voice as lovers huddled and walked toward Rhys. Duncan with his “dinner” for the evening was oblivious to the danger. Cloaked in invisibility with his mind shielded, Duncan never suspected that Death lurked in the shadows.

Rhys didn’t intend to let them enter the building. He was going to finish it here and now in the deserted alley and then erase the traumatic event from the human’s mind. She would be confused but at least she would be alive.

Rhys grabbed Duncan from behind and pulled away him from the woman. He turned the hissing vamp to face him. The female shrieked and he quickly put her into a trance.

“Fuck,” Duncan spit out, immobilized as Rhys moved in a blur of fatal speed and power to thrust a sword into his heart. The sword swirled and air whistled a split second before Duncan’s head flew from his shoulders. The body burst into flame instantly and then dissolved into ashes that scattered in the midnight air.

He wiped the memories from the female and took her to a busier area where someone would find her quickly. She would be okay, despite her near brush with Death. He removed the trance

and then disappeared from the empty street of Zurich with a swirl of his long leather coat.

Merrick perched on the roof of the stable and examined the thoughts of the human servant inside. Home sweet home. He hadn't been here in centuries. The countryside was lovely this time of year.

The horses whinnied, a high-pitched sound of fear, disturbed by his presence. The human, bewildered by their stress, moved from stall to stall and tried to sooth the beasts.

His brother was not on the estate. He would feel Rhys if he was near. Merrick scanned the humans' memories to gain the information he sought. Ah, he smiled in triumph; Versailles, Kentucky was where his brother spent his time as of late. Interestingly, there was a woman and a horse involved, and Merrick laughed evilly at fate. He would hit his brother again where it hurt the most; right before he killed him.

Feeling a new presence, he swiveled around to see Cullen standing on the lawn in the moonlight. Cullen, the faithful servant that had been with the family when he was a boy, felt the presence of a vampire and came to investigate. *Damn.*

He didn't want Cullen to identify him as the

trespasser. Surprise was an advantage he wanted to keep for a while longer. He got what he came for — the clue to his brother's destruction. It was time for a visit the States.

Wednesday night couldn't come soon enough for Alana. Pathetically, she missed Rhys and ached to see him again. She thought about him throughout the day and hoped he was okay. The thought that he could be dead ate at her and put her belly in knots.

To exacerbate matters, Alana felt weird all day. People speak of bad omens or premonitions, well, she was having one. She didn't know *what* was going to happen, but she knew with every fiber of her being that something bad *was* going to happen soon. It made her nervous, on edge and unsure where to turn or what to do. The threat felt like it was coming from all directions. She prayed for Rhys, her family and friends.

Dinner was her duty tonight. Luckily, this morning she put a roast in the crock pot seasoned with carrots, potatoes, fresh rosemary and a marinade made of soy sauce, lime juice and a splash of red wine. After her shower, Alana threw together a salad and warmed rolls. Dinner was a subdued affair, almost as if they all sensed the

wrongness in the air.

After cleaning the kitchen, Alana eased her muscles in a hot bath. She tried to shake off the funk she was in. She needed to see Rhys; she knew her tension would ease once she was with him. She sensed that the threat wouldn't come to fruition tonight so she relaxed and tried to put her worry behind her.

Later, dressed in faded jeans, a tank and boots, she went out to the stables. She sat on the rail and talked to Maisy and Grit. The music of *Drive By Truckers* played low on the old CD player crammed on a table in the corner. The horses never failed to provide therapy. Their perked ears, happy whinnying and playful nudges always brought a smile to Alana's face.

She felt the tingling buzz begin. She saw a flicker in Maisy's eyes a second before strong arms surrounded her and pulled her off the rail. She yelped, her heart nearly pounded out of her chest. She turned to look at him; relieved to see him healthy and in one piece after his assignment in Zurich.

Rhys swooped down and claimed Alana's lips. He bruised them in his fierce desire. She tasted the tang of blood and he groaned and roughly backed her up against the rails. He lifted her top over her breasts. She had no bra on to hinder his access. He lowered his head to pull on her nipples with his

lips, tongue and teeth.

Alana moaned in ecstasy and wrapped her arms around his head holding him against her. Her eyes closed as she surrendered to the thrill. She would never get enough of this, enough of him.

The melodic music of the song, *Danko/Manuel*, with its low, slow throb soothed Alana's ears and permeated the air. His lips and hands were firm and knowing as he laid her soul bare to him and coaxed her into a shattering climax.

Seconds, minutes, maybe hours later while she whispered, pleaded his name over and over, Rhys moved and lifted her against the smooth, wood pole in the center of the barn and impaled her with his cock. Alana raised her arms above her head to grab the pole for stability and thrust her hips back at him. His hands wrapped around her thighs, lifting her legs up on either side of his waist. He pounded into her. The feelings that raced through her body and mind were extraordinarily intense. She would never recover from this man.

Rhys thrust harder and faster, groaned Alana's name and said, "I missed you," he growled in her ear then he sank his teeth into her neck, taking and giving everything. She screamed as climax poured through her body.

He thrust a few times more and sucked at

Alana's neck in two more long pulls. Rhys threw his head back and arched into her as he sent his cum deep into her body. She swore the earth shifted in that moment and realized she would love him forever. There would be no going back for her. He was *the one*.

Rhys held Alana against the pole for several seconds. His lips soothed the twin wounds on her neck. She leaned against the pole on shaky legs and tried to catch her breath. She would probably have bruises on her back and hips tomorrow. He laughed softly and she felt him tremble against her. She closed her eyes and smiled.

"I'm can't believe Maisy and Grit were so quiet," Alana mumbled with another smile and touched his long, soft hair.

Rhys shook his head. His long, sexy hair swayed with his movement. "I had to soothe them when they scented your blood." He laughed ruefully. "You have no idea how hard that was because I was on the verge of being out of control. I've come so close to going feral on you. Your body, your blood — *you* make me crazy. My control is hanging by a fucking thread but I don't want to hurt you."

The thought of him going wild was exciting, she realized. "I trust you, Rhys. Take me anywhere, do whatever you want; I don't think I could say no to you. I lose all sense of reality when

I'm in your arms. I'm yours."

"Damn, Alana. You don't know how that makes me feel to hear you say that. I'll never let you go, ever. I can't." His eyes solemn as if this was news she wouldn't want.

"That's okay because I'm not going to let you," Alana said with a sideways smile on her face.

A brief smile crossed his lips and his eyes lightened in a carefree, almost happy way. That she could do that for this man, who symbolized death to so many, lightened her heart.

They rode Maisy and Grit around the farm. The dusk glow that settled over the rolling hills edged into moonlit luminosity. The smell of the Kentucky night was aromatic; perfumed with sweet-smelling honeysuckle.

They put up the horses and then snuggled together on a lawn chair on the veranda. The silvery moon and the mist rolled in over the green fields and enveloped them in a hypnotic, romantic atmosphere. They talked and dozed until the early hours of the morning.

Humans were so easy to manipulate, Merrick thought contemptuously, as he walked out of the local diner into a parking lot of pickup trucks. Ten minutes inside, seated at the barstools, talking to

the overall-clad, old men, resulted in the name of the farm that recently sold to a European. Horses were big business in Kentucky and everyone seemed to know what was going on. Ramsey's Farm owned the horse his brother was buying.

Anticipation filled him. He was so close to taking down his brother. He smiled evilly; it would be so sweet to see his brother's expression when he realized it happened again and after he realized exactly *what* he lost, then Merrick would kill him.

Need pierced him; it was time to feed. He went to the town bar, The Dog, to find information on the female that worked at the farm. He eyed a particularly luscious blond who sauntered up to him.

"There you are, Rhys," she drawled.

Well, well, this was going to be so easy. One could almost suspect that fate was on his side, he thought smugly. Deciding to play it out and see what happened, he simply smiled, as she pressed her body against his and looked up at him.

"I thought you would be gone after finishing the sale of Cyracco, but I'm glad you aren't." She ran a finger down his arm, her eyes sultry and full of invitation. "I thought we would, um, get to know each other better, but then you were gone." She pouted prettily. "I'm so glad you're here now." She moved closer to him, rubbing her

breasts against his arm.

Anger tightened her features briefly, before she smiled a toothsome grin and said, "I saw you talking to that bitch Sissy in the stables, but I should have known that a man like you wouldn't be interested in a girl like her."

He smirked at the jealousy in her eyes. A creature such as this could be very useful.

"Sissy?" he questioned in a silky voice.

She laughed in delight. "You don't even remember her. That's wonderful, because I am so much more memorable — if you just give me a chance." Unobtrusively, she reached down and cupped his hardening cock through the black dress pants.

"Tell me about Sissy," he ordered.

Annoyance flared in her eyes before she explained, "She's the tramp who works in the stable — the hired help," she said disdainfully.

"Monique!" A tall male approached the female. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Sorry, Tom T., maybe some other time." She tossed back the remains of her drink and clonked the glass on the bar. She grasped his arm and pulled him toward the exit. He let her lead the way, anticipating the acquisition of the information he desired and the way he would get it.

They walked into the fragrant night. The

mountains and the dark tree canopies hovered over the building, the parking lot and road. His fangs tingled and extended in his mouth. The sound of blood rushed through her veins and the pumping of her heart enticed him. Impatient, he pulled her into his arms to have a taste.

“Hey, asshole, that’s my woman for the night!” It was the tall male from inside who had anticipated leaving with the lady in his arms.

Feeling mean and nasty at being thwarted from his drink, he snarled and warned, “It isn’t now. Move on.”

Tom T., intoxicated, and not cognizant of the danger before him, bellowed and ran to tackle the encroaching foreigner. He was lifted off his feet by a strong hand that squeezed his neck. Fangs glistened in the night and red eyes blazed in his fuzzy line of sight. Oh God, he thought, he stared death in the eye.

Pain raced through his body, the thing attacking him growled loudly in his ears. Fear was a rancid taste in his mouth. He heard his heart pounding. It thumped in his ears. The beats became slower, more sluggish. His last thought was of his ex-wife and regret.

Merrick let the body drop. Power surged through him with the abundance of fresh blood filling his veins. He laughed evilly then scanned the surrounding, wooded countryside. Shouldn't be too hard to hide a body, he mused.

He looked at Monique. He'd used his power to paralyze her body when he killed the male. He didn't want her screams alerting the patrons of the club.

Now, her eyes were filled with a mixture of horror and helplessness. Her face reflected a mask of terror and though her body was frozen, her mind was fearfully aware of what happened.

He snarled as he heard voices approach from the doorway. He was out of time. He would take her with him. He would drink her blood elsewhere and acquire the memories and information he needed. There was no way she would just tell him now after she watched him kill her escort. He grabbed the keypad she had gotten out of her purse when they walked out of the bar and punched the unlock button. The chirp of the lock release echoed off the mountains.

Faster than the eye could see, he used one hand to lift the carcass and stuff it in the small trunk of the powerful car. He broke a couple of limbs to achieve his goal. He returned to his paralyzed

lamb and guided her into the passenger seat. They were driving on the winding roads before the exiting bar-goers ever got outside.

He drove until he found an obscure trail hidden on the side of the road. They sat quietly as he took stock of his surroundings. The insects created a cacophony of sounds in the isolated hollow.

He lifted his head and inhaled. The only scents he could discern were animal. It had been some time since humans had passed this way. He left Monique, still in her wax-figure state, in the car, and hiked a quick couple of miles where he tucked the body underneath a rock ledge on a creek bank.

He dissolved himself back to the car and then parked it deep in the woods, out of sight of the road. He wrapped his arms around Monique and rematerialized them in his lair a continent away. She swooned as they reappeared and he left her where she lay.

It was afternoon, the time all vampires needed rest — he could feel the pull on his body. Waving a hand, he lit candles and secured the entrances so she couldn't escape while he slept. Not that he intended to give her the chance; he planned to drown her so deep in sleep that she wouldn't even twitch without his permission, but it never hurt to be extra prepared.

He waved a hand over her face and sent her mind deeper into hibernation. He dragged his

body onto the bed and found a comfortable position where he died until sunset. As the sun faded behind the horizon, oxygen filled his lungs and his eyes snapped open.

He levitated off the bed and into the upright position. After assuring all was secure in his lair, he crossed to Monique's side. He jerked her into his arms where he freed her mind and body of his control.

She came to consciousness on a scream as he smiled down at her. His fangs glistened white in the dark room. She struggled briefly before he squeezed her throat cruelly, cutting off vital air supply.

She surrendered; her body fell limp in his arms. He laughed softly and ran his hands down her body and between her legs. Her short skirt provided easy access and her stringy thong offered no protection from his penetrating fingers.

It was in a vampire's power to give pleasure while taking blood, but he had no interest in her pleasure in this moment. At some point, and he wasn't exactly sure when, he decided to use her for more than just information. He wanted her body. He wanted to dominate her, to show her she was his.

He would introduce the pleasure later. But first, he thought, first she needed to know what he could do to her. He thrust his fingers in her

roughly and tore at her neck with his teeth as he drank her blood. She whimpered in pain and fear as her aroused blood flowed into him. Power flowed through his body – a heady combination for a vampire.

Images and thoughts of Monique's husband, Rhys, and his female filled Merrick's mind as he drank her blood and her memories. He would enlist this woman to aid in his revenge. Satisfaction roared through him and he gulped the tangy fluid more vigorously. Rhys' destiny once again dangled in the palm of his hand.

He pulled himself from the brink in time and leaned back. He licked his teeth and lips. This was what vampires missed, he thought, the thrill of a life at their mercy; to watch the fatal recognition fill a human's eyes; to drink in their fear. Fear was power and it was intoxicating.

He gazed at the woman in his arms. Her body, powerless in his arms, and her neck savaged – torn and bloody. She was beautiful and selfish; ruthless with other humans but easily subdued against greater strength. Her clothes were expensive but skimpy. She was similar to many other women he had killed over the centuries; drawn to money and power at their own detriment. He would talk to her when the sun set again and he would decide then how best to use her. She would most likely die after she fulfilled

her part in his schemes, but he would enjoy her until then.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Thursday inched along; the work week was nearly over. Alana was oddly relieved. It wasn't often that she felt that way. She enjoyed the peaceful therapy of the horses and the hard work, but this week she looked forward to the weekend.

She finished putting down the fresh bedding. Myst's was the last stall in the long row. When she was done, she gratefully headed to the office for her belongings. She was tired from staying up late with Rhys, though she didn't regret a minute of it. Her lips curved in a smile when she remembered him ravishing her against the pole in the barn. Her nipples hardened as her mind and body replayed the pleasure.

She shivered and laughed ruefully. She was hooked and anticipated seeing Rhys later. Mr. Ramsey startled Alana out of her reverie when he entered the barn and called her name. She sighed and paused at the office door. She removed her gloves. She didn't want to stay and chat, but she

had to hear what the boss wanted to say.

“Alana, will you come with me to the house? I need a word with you.” Ramsey gazed at Alana intently, his blue eyes sharp.

“Yes, sir. Let me get my things.” She tried not to let her annoyance be obvious in her voice. She grabbed her purse from the office and followed him up the hill to the house. They walked in silence, each in their own thoughts. His were turbulent but the shield was so tight that he offered no answer as to what he wanted to say.

They went into the study, a masculine room with dark wooden shelves and hardwood floors covered by sleek rugs. Leather wing-back chairs and a sofa, sat opposite a large, wooden desk — the type of dark wood that screamed “expensive”. Vases and classy knickknacks crowded the table tops. A carved wooden box of cigars perched on the corner of the desk. Long beige drapes shut out a view of the farm.

Alana was hired in this very room. The only other time she had been here. Even then she wanted to curl up in one of the huge chairs with a book from the crowded shelves. She still did. It was a great room and she imagined there were awesome equine books and bloodline histories on these shelves.

“Please have a seat.” He gestured to a chair next to the leather sofa in front of the picture

windows. He walked to the desk and took a cigar from the box.

"Do you mind?" he asked politely. Since he was the boss and this was his house, she shook her head no, although she really didn't relish breathing in smoke. "Would you like some tea or perhaps something stronger? I'm sure you've had a long day." He smiled; his handsome features seemed sincere but his eyes remained troubled and his mind in turmoil. "Aria is going to be difficult to break, isn't she?"

Why couldn't people just say what they mean? She much preferred the direct approach, but since he was the boss with a question about work, then she would answer — despite the fact he wasn't interested in the answer at the moment. That much she could tell.

"No thank you, sir," Alana began as she referred to the drink, "and yes, she is feisty but she'll come 'round." Aria was his newest acquisition. A beautiful filly that was showing great promise and Alana already loved her. She just needed to work out her skittishness around others.

Alana could feel Ramsey as he tried to decide how to broach the topic he wanted to discuss. She had never known him to skirt the issue so she braced herself for bad news. She impatiently wanted to order him to come clean, but realized

long ago that she learned more if she waited and see where people go with their thoughts. Alana bit her lip instead.

Ramsey lit the cigar and sat down on the sofa next to her chair. His long legs were near hers, but she didn't move. She looked him directly in the eye and willed him to hurry with her gaze. He smiled and shook his head.

"I have wanted to talk to you for so long that I don't even know where to start." He lifted his head and blew smoke to the ceiling. Alana studied it as it curled and swirled in the air. *What did he have to talk to her about?*

"Your grandmother was such a beauty, so sophisticated. She was older than me and I grew up infatuated with her. She attended all of the parties my family did and I loved to watch her work a room." He watched Alana and gauged her reaction but she learned long ago to master her expressions.

"I also knew your mother," he continued. "Your grandfather consulted with a new trainer that I hired, long before David. He taught him the ropes and introduced him to people here in the state. Your mother would come with him to the farm. She was twenty at the time and was so gifted with the horses that I asked her over to assist my crew from time to time." He sighed wearily. "She could soothe a horse like no one I

had seen, until you. Anyway, we became close. I was in my thirties then and unmarried, trying to build this farm and make it one of the best in Kentucky."

Alana really didn't like where this was headed, but kept her lips and teeth clenched to hear the rest. His mind was closed tight and still gave up no information, other than vague feelings of regret and dread. His mind shield was one of the stronger ones she had known, in a human that is, she reminded herself as she briefly thought of the whole new world she was exposed to. He paused as he inhaled the cigar again.

"I'm just going to say it, Alana...there is no easy way. Your mother and I loved each other and we were together for a while, secretly of course." He paused and then dropped an even bigger bombshell. "You are my daughter." Alana gasped as his words sank in. *What?!* She stood to go. For some reason, flight was instinctual in that moment. She tried to run from the bombshell that was dropped on her. Ramsey grabbed her wrist.

"Please! Don't go. Hear what I have to say." She looked down at him. "Please," he whispered sincerely. The last anguished plea did it, and she plopped back down in the soft chair. He let go of her and sat back in the sofa.

"We were happy together, but no one knew about us. My parents, at the time, were pushing

me to wed a young lady from New York. Your grandparents were upstanding people, prosperous and well-off, even, but the family I was to marry into was wealthy. I had bought this farm with money loaned by my father. He was demanding his loan be repaid," he muttered in disgust.

"It was his way of blackmailing me into the engagement, I later realized. The farm wasn't bringing in any profit then. He threatened to cut off my inheritance. I would have lost the farm, the horses. I was struggling with his ultimatum when we found out your mother was pregnant and soon after that, she was diagnosed with leukemia. Back then, it was a death sentence. The doctors gave her a year to live. She knew my situation about the farm, the engagement, my father. I couldn't hide my emotions from her. She urged me to marry, to carry on with my life. To save the farm." He laughed bitterly.

"She knew how much it meant to me to stand on my own. She made me promise that I would always look out for you, but she wanted me to move on. She never told anyone I was the father. I was devastated when she died. I loved her." His sentence trailed off as he stubbed out his cigar. He stood and walked over to the windows and lifted the drape to look out. "I made a huge mistake. I married Liza and we were divorced three years later. We couldn't stand each other. By that time, I

didn't know how to come into your life. Your grandparents were raising you and every time I saw you; in church, in town, I could see you were happy and loved."

"Why are you telling me this now?" Alana asked in a hoarse voice that reflected her raw emotions. His feelings, she sensed, were lighter, as if relieved of the huge burden he carried, but he still waited. Apprehension filled him and Alana realized he waited to see what she would do with this knowledge — if she would accept him. He faced her. His eyes full of emotion.

"Last week, I went to the doctor. I have heart disease. My arteries are ninety five percent clogged, and I am having bypass surgery next week. I am old and when your mortality punches you in the gut like this, you want to right your wrongs. I should have been there, for you, for your mother, before she died. I should have been your father all of these years. Now, I want to be in your life for the time I have left and I want to leave you my legacy, but I know it isn't fair to ask that and I know I don't deserve it."

Ramsey sat back down next to her. "I'm sorry, Alana. I'm sorry for what I've done." He took her hands in his. His skin, dark like hers was wrinkled with age. The similarity in their hands struck her and tears welled in her eyes. Sadness surged through her. She struggled to keep it all in. She

swallowed and tried to dissolve the knot in her throat.

He lifted a hand to sift through her hair. "You are so like your mother. Can you feel other's emotions and thoughts too? It's why she was so gifted with horses. I knew you had to be the same way."

"Yes," Alana whispered, somehow relieved at this small truth, "but I've never been able to feel yours, only brief flashes of your more intense emotions but even then with no explanation or thought."

He smiled. "Your mother taught me how to imagine building walls around my thoughts. She felt I must have some natural ability since I was able to shield so well. She wondered the effect that our gifts would have on you; if you would inherit them. I know she would be so proud of you." He paused for a moment then said, "Alana, I'm going to leave you the farm, my businesses, everything. If I had done the right thing twenty four years ago, it would already be yours and you would be involved, but you know horses and you're smart and with your gift — you'll do well with it all. I would never leave it to Monique. I intend to leave her a big sum of money, but she'll move on after I'm gone. Hell," he laughed, raking a hand through his thick silver hair, "she'd be gone already if she found out I was leaving everything

to you, but I'm not going to tell her."

Everything seemed to fall into place. The stares, the job, his blue eyes...it all began to make sense and Alana felt foolish for not knowing. For someone who was telepathic, she had not even recognized her own father. "I can't believe I didn't know," Alana said, puzzled.

"You wouldn't have known. Your mother always said I had a strong mind. There were times even before she taught me to mask my thoughts that she couldn't read me. The shields only strengthened what was already there. I was always conscious of that in your presence. I made sure to keep a tight lock on my thoughts and emotions." He shook his head, "Ah, Alana. How devious I sound. I've made such a huge mistake not getting to know you. I'm so proud when I look at you. You are so beautiful and strong. You are the kind of woman a man wants by his side and in his heart, and you are the kind of woman a father can be proud of."

Alana never thought to hear those words from her father and even amidst the turmoil of her emotions, she appreciated him saying it. But many thoughts whirled through her mind, and she experienced a barrage of emotions — one after the other as the impact of his revelation struck her. She was glad to finally know her father. She was glad that her mother loved him and he loved her,

if only for a short time.

On the other hand, Alana was angry that he didn't stand up to his father and fight for her mother while she was alive. She must have been hurt that he didn't chose her over his family's wishes, even though she urged him to go on with his life. Alana was hurt that he was just now told her, but despite all of those feelings, she didn't hate him. She didn't care about his money. She did care about the horses, but that was beside the point. Money was not a concern of hers. It couldn't make her any happier than she was already. Overall, she wasn't sure what to feel about him exactly. It was too soon to know.

"Why did you marry Monique?" Alana asked suddenly, to distract herself from those thoughts.

He laughed sardonically, "Because I am a stupid old man who wanted to stay young. I knew what she wanted at the time, but I wanted her and I didn't care why she was with me. I know about her infidelities and I've had my own, but I don't want her to have my money or my farm. You are entitled to that." He took a deep breath. "Can you ever forgive me, Alana?"

At that question, she knew she would forgive him. She didn't want to face guilt later for not giving him a chance, especially if he was ill. Despite the fact that he didn't give her a chance for twenty-four years, he tried to make up for it

now.

Forgiving him would set her free. Alana would never resolve feelings about him, even after his death, if she didn't forgive him and let the hurtful past go. It would affect every other relationship she ever had, if she didn't.

"Yes," Alana said cautiously in response to his question. He smiled and clasped her hand. "Thank you. Would you like to stay for dinner? Monique didn't come home last night. I assume she is with her latest lover," he said derisively. "We'll have the place to ourselves."

"No, but I will some other time." Alana added, "When she's not here. Now, if you don't mind, I need to go home and get cleaned up. I need to process all of this," she told him honestly. She wasn't ready to jump right into a father-daughter relationship with him tonight. It might take a little time for her to come to terms with everything.

"I understand. Let me know when you're ready. And when you are, I'll start bringing you into the business." Ramsey walked out with Alana and after offering a ride back to the stables, which she declined, he went back inside. She took her time as she walked the few acres back to her car. She looked out at the farm that would apparently one day be hers.

Alana sighed. She couldn't believe that he and her mother were together. She was really floored.

She never suspected they had a connection in any way; much less that he was her father.

That she never picked up that knowledge from him in all the time she worked here meant he had superb mind control. Maybe she inherited talents from both sides of her family — telepathy from her mother and mind control from her father — weird.

She was struck by the oddity of what she just said; the new ability to use “my father” in a sentence. What Grandpa would say? Hopefully he wouldn’t be too upset.

She realized another bizarre fact was how much she looked forward to sharing her shocking news with Rhys. She realized in that moment how much she depended on him being in her life and prayed again that she wasn’t going to regret knowing him. What a day...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Monique awoke with a scream before she was slapped across the face. She could almost feel her brain rattling in her skull with the force of the blow. Her shriek died, cut off abruptly as pain radiated across her face and neck.

Her body felt like she had been hit by a truck. She whimpered as she tasted blood in her mouth. She felt someone move beside her and froze.

Fuzzy memories of the horrific night flashed through her mind. Oh God. He was a demon, she thought. He was going to kill her. Oh why didn't she leave with Tom? She whimpered again as she remembered Tom's fate.

Finally gathering enough courage to open her eyes, the fuzzy image of a gothic bedroom filled her vision. She squinted before her battered mind realized a layer of red gauze draped the bed. She gazed around a dark room of forbidden opulence. Wall sconces projected meager light throughout the large room. Corners were dark with shadows.

There were no windows in the room and seemingly no way to escape.

The floor was beautiful marble that she imagined was cold and the walls were cream with ornate woodwork and molding. What was astonishing were the leather and wooden instruments of torture that filled the room. Once she visited a club in New York with a prominent but perverted businessman and saw such things there, but the sight of them in this demon's lair was much more sinister and frightening.

A leather swing hung from the ceiling in a corner. A large wooden wheel with leather wrist and ankle restraints decorated another corner. A wooden handle protruded from the side which was used to spin the wheel. Against one wall there was a wooden chair with head, wrist and ankle straps. Against the other wall sat a cage. Next to that whips of different sizes, ball gags, and masks, hung in twisted display.

He stood with an elbow braced upon the marble mantel. Memory of his red eyes and long teeth hit her suddenly and flooded her with fear. What was going to happen to her?

He breathed in deeply, in appreciation of the pungent scent and said, "I need to talk to you. Come over here and sit down."

Trembling, she climbed out of the bed. Her clothes were ripped and dirty but still intact for

the most part. She gasped as she tried to stand. Her body felt ravaged and it was all she could do not to collapse back on the bed, but disobeying his orders was the last thing she was going to do.

"I can kill you or I can make you feel better," he started as she sat down. "If you help me, the reward will be great. You'll live, most importantly, but I'll also make sure you are financially benefited." Greed sparked her for a moment before fear settled in again.

He smirked, "It's up to you. You can do everything I say and live a long life." He shrugged, "Or don't do what I say, piss me off and die here. Well," he amended, "after I torture you." He disappeared while he talked and finished that last threat from behind with his strong arm wrapped around her throat.

Her scream broke off when his hands moved down to squeeze her breasts. "What's it going to be," he inquired in a silky voice.

"I'll do what you want," she whispered, ready to do whatever he asked of her. She couldn't take anymore pain; she didn't want to die; and the promise of money was more than she could resist. She had let men abuse her for money before.

"Tell me about Sissy and Rhys," he ordered and appeared again by the mantel before her.

One minute in one spot, the next in another. She swallowed and then his words hit her.

"Rhys?" she gasped in astonishment, "but..."

"I'm his twin, haven't you figured that out yet? The evil one," he explained with a laugh.

"Oh man," she whispered, breathing fast. There was something so frightening about that.

"Sissy and Rhys," he prompted.

"S-Sissy works at the farm," she began compliantly. "She's helps with the horses," she explained and snorted and briefly forgot her fear at the thought of the woman she hated.

"She's my husband's daughter. I found out by picking the lock on his desk and going through his paperwork. She gets everything in his Will. I have a feeling that he is going to tell her soon since he just found out he has to have surgery. I stuck with the old man for a whole year waiting on him to die so I could have his money and then I find out he has a kid." She shook her head in disgust. "Anyway, Rhys came to the farm looking for some horse to buy. I saw them together in the barn, but that's all I know about him. I wanted him, but he brushed me off," she said with a frown on her face, obviously bewildered by the fact.

She looked at him. She told him all she knew, and he frowned. Fear shot through her and her fingers clenched the arm rests; red nails dug in the leather. What would he do now?

He stalked toward her slowly; apparently done with talking. She swallowed and felt like prey.

Monique yelped as he grasped her hair and pulled her up. His lips pulled back in a snarl as he growled, "Up, bitch." She trembled at the savageness of his features. Pain streaked across her scalp and she struggled to make him release her. She slapped weakly against his arms to no effect.

He forced her over to the wheel and manacled her to the surface as if she weighed nothing and then stood back to observe her and she looked at him. He was dressed in leather pants, a black shirt and bare feet. His dark hair was pulled back with a strip of leather at the nape.

Despite the danger of the situation, she realized that he was incredibly sexy, fatally so and despite the circumstances, she became excited by his deadly, exotic beauty and predatory grace. Danger always turned her on. Cream seeped between her legs; despite the fact that this was the furthest she had ever pushed the danger envelope before.

For some reason the harrowing events of the past two days seemed but a vague memory. Thoughts became foggy, confused. She frowned for a moment. Something wasn't right, but that knowledge was swept away when he picked up a flogger and snapped it in the air. She jerked at the sound, and he smiled — a sensually wicked smile that thrilled her; obliterating her fear and anxiety. Suddenly, she felt nothing but an all-consuming

desire for him to master her and she moaned when he sent the first teasing stroke of the flogger across her thigh.

Red marks soon covered her breasts and thighs. Burning tingles raced across her skin until he flicked the braided leather tassels between her legs striking her creamy clit. She screamed in climax; the moisture rich between her legs. The combination of his erotic figure, dark leather, muscles and flashing eyes and the sensation he created with his domination was overwhelming and scintillating.

His wrist flexed as he snapped the flogger. His bronze muscles bulged. His hard eyes burned with sensuality and hunger. She drank in the sight of him through half-closed lids. Need spiraled through her body.

The sensuality of the moment was almost more than she could bear. After her climax was complete and her head drooped in satiation, he released her wrists and ankles, allowing her body to drop unheeded to the floor. There was none of the typical gentleness that she had experienced with other men and that very fact made her that much more eager to please him.

He stripped his shirt off and she noticed a silver loop piercing each nipple. They only served to remind her of his wildness. She imagined laving them with her tongue.

He replaced the flogger and dragged her over to the swing, where he lifted and settled her in position. Her wrists were raised above her head; tied with leather restraints. Her legs were raised with knees bent against her chest and tied into place in that position. Her cunt was open; on display for him.

He leaned over and suckled her nipples into stiff points. She whimpered. With a snarl, he pierced her skin and sucked her blood fervently. Another climax roared through her body when he jerked his pants open and thrust roughly into her. He fucked her mercilessly while she shrieked and moaned. His cock pumped into her, hard and long, and prolonged the waves of lightning that coursed through her.

She writhed and jerked in the swing; moaning endlessly. She whispered his name, unable to escape his thrusts and not particularly wanting to. He lifted up and away from her and she cried out in protest. He went to stand behind her and swiped a finger through her slit, gathering the moisture there. He trailed his finger to her ass.

A moment later, he thrust into her there and tunneled into her, relentlessly, over and over. Never breaking rhythm, he bent and bit her in the curve of the neck. A third soul-rending climax raced along her spine. She threw her head back in surrender and screamed. He continued until he

poured all his seed into her tight hole.

He stood and released her from the swing. She dropped to her hands and knees on the floor and a few moments later crawled to the bed and eased her sweat-soaked body onto the silk sheets there. She was hooked. He had shown her how ruthless and cruel he could be and now she knew how powerful, sensual and arousing he could be. Her body was still sore from the abuse of the last two days, but it was also sated and now addicted.

He treated her with disdain and didn't seem to give a fuck about her pleasure, but it was his very brutality, his mercilessness, and power that made her desire him all the more. She had never climaxed so hard and so quick and she knew she would do whatever he asked, or ordered, of her. She only hoped that she would come out alive when it was all said and done, and somehow that even added to the thrill.

He wanted her to help him kill his brother, and Sissy, for some reason. She was more than willing since she had thoughts of her own of taking out the bitch. Maybe in the process they could finish off the old man too and then she would inherit his estate.

She wasn't a fool however and she knew there was a strong possibility that he would either kill her or dump her as soon as her usefulness was fulfilled. She planned to make sure neither

happened and if she helped him, then he maybe would keep her. Maybe he would let her live.

Alana, Bernice and Grandpa sat at the dinner table eating linguine and garlic bread with wine when Alana brought up Mr. Ramsey's bombshell — her father's, or Dylan's bombshell. It was the perfect place since they did most of their secret-telling at the dinner table. Many a confession was revealed around the table over good food. Food eased the palate for distasteful news.

Alana wasn't sure how to tell Grandpa easily so she said it quick. "Mr. Ramsey asked me to his house today after work where he told me that he's my father." She sat back in her chair and watched Grandpa blink his eyes and set his fork, wrapped with long strands of pasta, on the side of his plate. She ignored Bernice's squawk and stared at Grandpa. He put his head in his hands. Alana's heart hurt for him.

"I think I knew, but I wasn't sure," he said regretfully. "Your mother was also seeing a young man at the time. After I found out she was pregnant, I went to see him with my rifle," he laughed wryly, "but he promised that the baby," he said as he glanced her way, "wasn't his."

"I believed him because anyone with a barrel in

between their eyes would have confessed and offered marriage when I gave him the chance. Your mother wouldn't tell us who it was. Then, she was diagnosed and pleaded with us to let it go and when she started getting sick, well, we didn't have the heart to put her through anything else."

He shook his head sadly, "After I confronted Ronnie and knew he wasn't the father, I thought about Dylan. They had been spending time together working with the horses, but when she passed away and we had you, I didn't want to pursue it. We didn't want you to go to him and his uppity wife so we let it go." He tilted his head and stared at her. She saw the sheen of tears in his eyes. "How do you feel about it?" he asked.

Alana sighed and glanced over at Bernice who was surprisingly quiet. Her mouth was open in shock. Alana laughed and tipped a finger to her cousin's chin and she snapped it closed. "I'm not sure," Alana answered, "I'm shocked, but otherwise, not really sure yet what to think. I'm glad I know, but where things go from here for us, who's to say?"

"Well, whatever or however you decide to handle it, I'll always be here for ya," he said roughly and she knew he tried to hold back tears.

"I know, Grandpa, and so you know, I wouldn't have wanted a single thing about the way I was raised to be different. You'll always be

the first guy in my life." Alana teased him with a smile. He snorted and picked up the abandoned fork and stuffed a bite in his mouth.

"Seems to me you have all kinds of men in your life now," he muttered sarcastically, back in his typical mood.

Alana laughed, "Yeah, isn't that weird?"

"You aren't going to move out, are you," Bernice asked, "and live at the farm?"

"No, Bernice. I'm not. My home is here with you and Grandpa." Alana could see the relief in her cousin's eyes.

"Let me know if you want to talk about it all, Sis," Bernice offered sweetly.

Alana promised her she would. They lingered over apple pie and Bernice brought up the latest gossip. Tom T. was missing. His truck was outside The Dog, but no one had seen him for a couple of days and he hadn't shown up at school or called in.

He hadn't missed a school day or practice in a long time. He might not be man enough to commit to his wife, but he was totally committed to his job as coach so it was noteworthy that he was missing. Interesting, Alana told them, since Monique was MIA too.

Alana helped Bernice clear the table and clean the dishes and then went to enjoy her habitual, soothing bath. She desperately needed it tonight.

She relaxed in the hot water and sipped on a glass of wine, thinking about Dylan, her father. *How strange to say those words.* No answers were forthcoming so she got out and dressed in comfy faded, jean shorts and a long-sleeved pink cotton tunic. She felt the familiar buzz that now sent tingles through her body every time she felt them.

Alana smiled. She slid into her flip-flops, blew out the candles, and skipped down the stairs and outside. She didn't see Rhys and wondered what his adventure would be tonight. She closed her eyes and turned in a circle.

She felt the slight tugging sensation and smiled. She took off in the direction of the pull — toward the barn. She walked inside but he wasn't there and she smiled wickedly as her blood pumped faster. She remembered the solarium. She loved this game.

Alana quietly stalked outside and around the side of the barn — still no sight of him. She squatted down and tried to listen for him. The buzz seemed to be all around her. She could tell he was close.

Her mouth dried and her heart raced. She felt slick moisture between her legs. She stood up again, almost dizzy with anticipation. The hair up in a knot on top of her head had fallen. She felt a light sweat course her body, causing the loose tendrils to stick to her neck.

Alana turned and lurked around the back of the barn. Under the oppressive cover of dark trees, a blindfold was wrapped around her eyes from behind and quickly tied there. She was stopped in her tracks and her instinct was to fight. She lifted her hands, but they were jerked down and tied efficiently behind her back. She felt silk bonds, sensuous against the soft skin of her wrists.

Alana started to run, blindly but after two steps was jerked to a stop and thrown over a wide male shoulder. She was so hot. It was amazing that she hadn't erupted into flames. She felt the wetness on her jean shorts since she didn't wear panties.

Her breath came fast between her lips and still no word had been spoken between them. A large male hand rubbed over her ass and then gave it a quick slap. She squirmed on the shoulder and was rewarded with a rub and another sharp slap.

"Fuck you," Alana uttered dangerously to which he replied with promise, "I intend to. Hard." His words caused a shiver skate down her body. She felt her nipples peak against the soft, pink shirt. She wondered if he felt them pressed into his back. His finger took a quick foray along her slit, made accessible by the loose shorts she wore.

"Mmmmm," he rumbled. "I love how you taste."

Alana felt the strange melting sensation that

accompanied teleportation and knew they were now somewhere else. She yelped as she was dropped but she landed on a soft surface, a bed, she guessed as she was pulled up by her forearms. She could hear every sound as if her lack of sight intensified that sense.

Muted music, erotic and sensuous, played in the background and she thought she could hear whispered voices. The thought that she was on display in front of others tweaked a chill through her bones. A dark fragrance permeated the air, a sensual musk of some sort that stirred her blood. Silk bedding caressed the skin of her legs and caused goose bumps to briefly cover her body.

"Where are we?" Alana whispered. She wanted to hear Rhys' voice.

"Quiet," he ordered. "Speak when I give you permission, Alana," Rhys said in a hard voice that brooked no disagreement. She was pushed down onto her back. Her shorts were unbuttoned and stripped off her legs.

"What," she started to ask when she heard a crack and a sharp sting seared her leg. She yelped and realized that he whipped her. Her mouth dried.

"No more talking unless I say," he ordered again, his voice low and deadly.

Alana swallowed, alternately so scared and so turned on that she wasn't sure what to do. This

was so far out of the realm of her experience that she was thoroughly intimidated and yet... strangely thrilled. It was as if he plucked the deepest, darkest fantasy from her mind, and she mused, perhaps he had. Who knew it was so arousing, anticipating what would happen next, to have sight taken away and be so vulnerable, so scared?

The binds at her wrists disappeared and her shirt was removed in the next instant. Alana tried to raise her arms to her blindfold, but they were captured, stretched wide and again restrained. She was now naked and bound with her arms outstretched. She felt something leather-like, the whip, she guessed trail across her breasts and felt her nipples pucker even more. She felt the tassels, cool but smooth against her skin. Her chest rose and fall at a rapid rate, shivering in reaction to her ordeal, her desire.

Alana moaned. Her body was at his mercy and totally beyond her control at this point. It was his to command. "Rhys," she whispered, before she realized she had disobeyed again. Another sharp sting heated her thighs. Incredibly, this forbidden, overwhelming pleasure and pain pushed her closer and closer to climax, and he had hardly touched her.

Reading her mind, he ordered "Don't cum until I tell you." Unsure sure she could obey that, the

thought of punishment almost *urged* her to disobey. Her legs were similarly spread and bound and she knew what she must look like.

Her tanned, bare body, stretched long – open, vulnerable. Her breasts would be thrust high and her flat belly and wet slit would be visibly tempting. Her covered eyes and bound limbs were an incredible turn-on for her dark lover. She moaned again and twisted her head to the side. She lifted her hips off the bed in offering.

Suddenly, she felt something soft against her chest and belly and realized it was his hair. She wanted to crush her hands in his mane and pull him against her, but all she could do was arch her back, raising her breasts for him. Teeth pulled at her nipples, one after another and it almost seemed like there were two sets of teeth pulling at each.

The thought that there was someone else with them made her moan again. She was nearly burning alive and bit her lip so she wouldn't scream and beg him to fuck her. All she could do was take what he was giving her, no more, no less.

Then, simultaneously, teeth pierced the flesh of her breasts. She screamed in climax, no longer able to wait as long pulls of blood were drawn from her body. The twin suction sent wave after wave of pleasure through her with each concurrent pull.

Finally, they, he, whoever, pulled away from

Alana's sensitive breasts. Her breath rasped through her lungs, and she shivered. She stretched her legs and tried to absorb the feelings that ran through her body and bask in them.

"You disobeyed," his gravelly voice warned. "Now you will be punished." Her binds disappeared, and she was jerked up by strong hands under her arms. She sought to struggle with her free limbs, but they were strangely ineffectual, almost like jelly. She knew Rhys held her. She knew the body of her lover, even blindfolded.

He sat down with Alana in his lap. The hard cock still encased in his pants was a long weapon against her backside. His arms wrapped around her and pinned her against him. Long legs encircled her ankles and held them in place. Her blindfold was pushed down around her neck. She blinked in the soft glare of the candlelight.

"Don't look around," he ordered, "and don't look at me. Just look in front of you." With one steely arm holding her to him, the other fist reached up and clenched her hair — holding her head steady.

To Alana's amazement, she saw a naked woman through a one-way mirror bound by her wrists and ankles to ceiling and floor restraints. Her arms stretched overhead and her ankles spread wide, her feet flat on the floor. A black mask covered her eyes. A man in a leather vest

and leather pants, with a hole cut out where his thick cock protruded, stalked behind her. He raised a whip and it cracked as it sailed through the air, striking the flesh of her buttocks. She jerked and moaned, long and low.

Alana jerked with her. Her breath, which had settled after her climax, came harshly between her lips again. She licked her dry lips thoroughly aroused by the erotic scene playing out before her.

The woman's buttocks were red and she assumed he had whipped her several times already. Alana watched as he stalked up to the bound woman. Breathing on her neck, he said in a low voice, "I know you are dripping in cream, slave. You are wet simply from being whipped by me. What would happen if I stuck my tongue in you? What would happen if I stuck my whip in you? What would happen if I stuck my cock in you?" The woman moaned again. She dropped her head back in surrender; long red hair fell in a fiery cascade.

Alana could feel her own cream soaking Rhys' pants under her lap. Her cunt flowed with it. Rhys' legs were inside of hers, holding them still as he held her down. Alana dropped her head back on Rhys' shoulder and continued to watch. She couldn't take her eyes away and stared at the forbidden tableau inside the other room.

The man licked the rim of the woman's ear and

then bit it as he thrust the whip handle into her. She moaned over and over as he pumped it in and out. Alana could see slick cream on the handle, affirming the woman's desire.

At the same moment, Rhys pinched Alana's nipple and thrust one long finger inside her forcefully. She gasped and shivered uncontrollably. Her eyes slid closed and he jerked her hair painfully. "Keep your eyes on them," he growled.

Alana jerked them open. She felt her desire ooze in a fresh, moist wave on his pants. *Oh God.* Alana watched as the man left the whip deep inside the moaning, thrashing woman. He reached around and squeezed her breasts, plucking and stretching the nipples.

He thrust his cock between her legs and moaned as it brushed against the tassels of the whip hanging down from his partner's cunt. He swiped a hand along her slit. He gathered cream and then smeared it up the crack to her ass. Alana cunt tightened around Rhys' finger as she realized what the man was about to do. He reared back and thrust his cock deep into the woman's ass. She screamed and pushed back against him. He squeezed her breasts and pumped into her furiously.

The sensations were almost more than Alana could take. She was on the verge of another earth-

shattering climax. Rhys lifted her and jerked his pants open. He impaled Alana hard on his long cock. "Keep watching them," he rasped as he lifted her again, his hands clenched her hips almost painfully as he thrust into her.

The man in the other room looked up then, a sly, sensuous smile on his lips —looking Alana in the eye before he leaned over, still pumping his cock in the woman's ass, and bit her. The woman screamed at the same time that she did. Alana's eyes closed, inadvertently as her body soared out of the solar system.

When she came to consciousness, they were lying in the bed with her head on Rhys' chest. A long, black velvet curtain covered the one-way mirror. She looked up at him and smiled, "Oh my God, Rhys," was all she could say.

Rhys laughed and squeezed Alana in his arms. "I love showing you new things," he whispered before he kissed her. She moved up onto his chest and kissed him back thoroughly for long minutes.

His cock rose again between her legs and his hands lifted her hips. He settled her on top. Alana kept kissing Rhys as she rocked back and forth, using her leg muscles to lift up and down on his hard dick. His hands lifted to squeeze and tug on her nipples.

Alana increased her tempo. Rhys pulled her down to bite at her lips then licked the wounds.

She put her hands on either side of his head on the mattress and leaned low over him to increase the friction against her clit. She could feel a third climax quickly rise and fell on him faster. She squeezed him with her inner muscles.

Rhys' hands grabbed her hips as he helped her, lifting his hips to meet her own. He ground her pelvis against his and exploded. She leaned down and felt the fire shoot through her. She bit his nipple with her small teeth. He growled and pumped four more times and sent his seed deep and forcefully into her again.

Alana sank into another sleep on top of his chest and was awakened later when he gently shook her. He handed Alana her clothes. She dressed. She was sated, sore, and drowsy and she was happy. Rhys sat in a corner chair and watched her, a heated look in his eyes.

Alana's mouth watered at Rhys' sinful handsomeness; his long, muscular, dark body in leather pants and black shirt. Long black hair, hard eyes and erotic face were enough to melt any woman, or man for that matter, she thought with languid amusement. She would never get enough.

"You only drank once tonight," Alana said as she moved to him and curled up in his lap. He pushed an errant strand of her hair behind her ear. She hesitated to think what she must look like. Her hair was surely tousled and her lips swollen

and red. He seemed to enjoy the view if she read the appreciative look in his eyes correctly.

"I don't want to drain your energy that much," he explained, "to drink all the time without giving you any in return would be too hard on you."

Rhys kissed Alana's jaw and she shivered. "You can do that?" she questioned. "Give me your blood?"

He nodded, distracted by the curve of her neck or possibly the pulse that pounded there.

"Would I become like you?" Alana was interested despite her aversion to the thought of drinking blood.

"No, but you would gain some of my abilities. When we take human servants, we offer them the chance to drink our blood. It increases their life span and keeps them healthy. Telepaths gain even more abilities: longer lives, more strength and speed, a greater ability for telepathy, better sight, hearing, etc. Except for the craving to drink blood, they become like us in a lot of ways. I'm going to tempt you into this when you are more comfortable with me," he promised.

Alana smiled, a little unsure but not very concerned about it right now, since he wasn't forcing her, and laid her head down on his chest. Suddenly the memory of the day hit her. She rubbed his chest, drawn to his golden muscles.

"Mr. Ramsey told me something amazing

today," Alana began and raised her head to look at him. "He's my father."

He stiffened. "Are you serious?" he questioned, frowning.

"Yeah, I was pretty shocked too."

"You never knew?" he asked and she understood his shock.

"No," she laughed in disbelief, "he has one of the most tightly shielded minds I've ever come across, for a human."

"I realized that too, but I wasn't around him that much. It's incredible that you've known him for so long and haven't been able to read him. That explains why your mind is so strongly closed. Most telepaths I know don't have the strength to keep a strong vampire out of their thoughts, but I couldn't read a thing from you, until I took your blood."

"I know. Apparently both of my parents were mentally gifted." Alana laughed dryly.

"Are you okay?" Rhys asked her. He tilted her head up to look so he could look in her eyes.

"Yeah, I will be. It's a lot to soak in, but I'm glad I know. I've had a lot of changes in my life lately." Alana sniffed, "I never know what's going to happen next."

Rhys laughed softly and hugged her. "We had better go. Will you stay with me in the castle tomorrow night?"

"Yeah, I'd love to. By the way, where are we?"

He laughed again, "Just a little place in Paris I know of. Maybe I'll bring you back sometime. Maybe we'll be the couple in the other room next time."

Alana inhaled a sharp breath, horribly turned on at the thought. His nostrils flared as he smelled her response to his words. "Oh *belle*, you tempt me." He said in a husky voice.

"If you ever do it, you'll have to kidnap me and keep me blindfolded so I won't know and won't see." Alana said breathlessly, capitulating.

"Promise," he whispered as he wrapped her in his arms and they disappeared from the erotic quarters.

They appeared in her bedroom and after a hard, thorough kiss that left her breathing hard again, he disappeared. Alana sighed. *Wow*. She took a quick shower, brushed her teeth and fell into bed, exhausted from the time with her lover.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rohan and John Moberly went fishing like they did every Friday morning. The brothers worked at the lumber company five days a week, including Saturday, so they could take their day off on Friday for fishing. They hiked from their property on the mountain ridge to the creek in the hollow below.

Trout fishing in the wide, low creek bed was at its finest this time of year, and there was nothing better than grilled trout for dinner. Their dog, Blue, a Springer spaniel bounded ahead of them. He was good at scaring off bears and snakes and loved to run the hills while the brothers fished.

At nearly six in the morning — perfect fishing time — the sun rose over the mountain top. It was a chilly, crisp morning. Dew sparkled on the leaf tips as the brothers made their way to down the mountain. They hadn't hit this spot in a while since they rotated fishing holes every Friday. It was a month since they had been to this creek, but

it was one of their favorites.

They entered the valley and Blue stood stock still and pointed. His body vibrated with tension. The brothers looked at each other and Rohan pulled his scaling knife out of its sheath. Blue didn't point unless there were birds or bears.

Suddenly, Blue took off like a shot, barking and baying like the bird dog he was. They found him, yelping excitedly in the creek bed, in an area of low water.

The low water revealed a ledge on the bank just above the water level. Blue stood in front of it going crazy; more than roots and rocks filled the dark hole. Rohan handed John his pole and leaned down to look inside the dark ledge.

He immediately turned and threw up. John bent to look inside and turned around quickly; trying to keep the oatmeal he had eaten for breakfast in his belly. He sat heavily on the ground and fished in his pocket for his cell phone.

No signal, figures, he thought, feeling nauseous and dizzy. "We have to hike out and call the cops."

"Yep," his brother said, looking shocked. He couldn't get the image of Tom T. out of his head with his eyes opened in a final stare of terror; his gray face was a grim visage of death. His shirt had droplets of blood covering the front and his limbs were twisted in unnatural angles.

John dragged Blue away from the body and the brothers turned back the way they came. Moving quickly, they were both anxious to get out of the hollow. Fishing was a distant memory.

On Friday, Alana spent time working with Aria, a beautiful chestnut filly. She was a pleasure to be around. She was finished exercising and spraying Aria when, Mr. Ramsey, er, her father, came in the barn.

“Will you eat lunch with me? If you don’t have plans, that is.” He offered a way out if Alana wasn’t ready.

“Nah, I don’t have plans. I can eat with you.” Alana stepped into the office to tell David she was going for lunch and joined her father in the yard to walk up to the house. They spent an hour talking about horses while they ate club sandwiches, pasta salad and tomato basil soup. They drank tall glasses of iced tea and enjoyed a dessert of lime sherbet — Alana’s favorite ice cream.

“I’ve always loved lime sherbet,” he explained and she smiled. Life was interesting, she mused.

Alana went back to work with a smile on her face. She enjoyed the relaxing lunch with her father discussing their common interest of horses.

He was so much more than the uppity rich snob she had assumed him to be. In fact, he didn't seem like that at all and she was glad to be proven wrong in her judgment of him — something that rarely happened.

She realized he purposefully kept away from her so she wouldn't find out his secret. She formed judgments that were invalid in his absence. His marriage to Monique of course helped to confirm her assumptions, but now she saw him for the lonely man that he was; one who struggled with regret for a daughter he didn't know.

It wasn't until she was on the way home that she remembered her promise to go to the bar with Bernice. *Damn*. It was the last thing she wanted to do tonight, but she consoled herself with the fact that Rhys would find her; wherever she was.

Alana entered the house and skipped up the stairs to shower. She slipped into her robe before she returned to the kitchen to finish cooking. She put soup beans in the crock pot this morning. She planned on serving a truly southern meal tonight. She mixed together buttermilk cornbread, poured it into the cast-iron skillet, and then slid it into the oven. She patted out salmon patties and fried them on the stove in olive oil. She prepared the garlic butter cabbage to fix in the microwave which is far better than it sounds. In fact, it's the easiest way to fix cabbage. After dinner she served

the rest of the apple pie. Grandpa was effusively appreciative of Alana's efforts. Soup beans and cornbread were his favorite.

After dinner and clean up, Alana went upstairs to dress in black silk pants and a black silk v-neck, sleeveless top. She loved the top because it was feminine. She felt very sexy in the backless top. A single tie crossed the middle and held it together. Slinky black shoes completed the outfit; thankfully they were a short heel.

She wore a silver necklace with a large ruby that was her grandmother's and the matching earrings and ring. Their birthdays were in July so she bequeathed the birthstone jewelry to Alana. She loved the set but usually only wore it to church. She brushed her still damp hair until it was straight and shiny and applied light mascara and red lip gloss.

Bernice waited downstairs. She flipped through *Martha Stewart's Living* magazine while she waited. She wore a very short black skirt and black halter top with sandals that tied high up on her calves. *Wow!* She was going to make an impression on Lucas tonight. Alana wolf-whistled and Bernice laughed in delight. She saw her fold the page of the magazine before she closed it. She grabbed her keys from the table and they went out to her car.

"I just found a sweet recipe for the shower next

weekend. Speaking of which, let's go shopping for the decorations tomorrow."

"Okay," Alana said. Unfortunately, she forgot all about the shower with the events of the last couple of days. Thoughts of last night raced through her mind and she bit her lip to keep from telling Bernice; maybe some other time. "Let's go to The Vineyard to get the decorations," Alana suggested. "I also want to look online for some new games to play. I need to polish the silver again." I began a mental list of what we would need to do.

"I mailed out all of the invitations this morning," Bernice said.

"Oh thanks, Bernice. I'm sorry that I didn't help you with that."

"No problem," she assured Alana. "You've had your hands full lately and I was able to work on them while Peggy give me a pedicure. Anyway, if we get the decorations tomorrow, we can get the food later in the week. We should have time to decorate and fix the food on Saturday morning since the shower doesn't start until one o'clock."

"Let's go get her present tomorrow too. We can go to Babies R' Us for the gift. I'll drive."

"Sounds good," she said, their plans were made by the time they reached The Dog and despite the topsy-turvy events of late, Alana looked forward to the shower and the celebration of new life. It felt

good to have a bit of normalcy in her otherwise bizarre existence. They finished their first beer when Lucas came over to sit with them.

"Hi Sissy," he said, before giving Bernice a long lip lock that caused her to moan. Alana sighed but wasn't feeling derisive as she would have only a couple of weeks ago. Now she knew passion and understood Bernice a little bit better. They were making her hot and she wished Rhys would hurry.

Alana was dancing when Rhys walked in The Dog. He could find her anywhere now that he had her blood. She was in his soul. The band played a slow, mournful ballad to which she swayed her hips. With her head dropped back and her eyes closed, he knew she thought of him. He saw the minute change of her body the minute she noticed him. He loved that she felt him when he was near.

Her body jerked ever so slightly and then she turned, sensuously, and beckoned with a graceful, slim arm. Her hips undulated to the rhythm. He felt his fangs elongate and knew his eyes flashed predatorily. He wanted to throw her to the floor and fuck her hard in front of every man there so they knew she was his. It was all he could do not to yell "*mine!*" and bare his teeth to everyone there

so they would stay away from his woman. He saw other men's eyes follow her sinuous body and knew he wouldn't be able to stay here with her long or he would lose the control he had always prided himself on.

She smiled a sexy, come-fuck-me smile that made his cock hard. He would pay her back for this. She threw her head back and laughed – a beautiful sound that caused many a head to turn. He knew she felt what he was feeling and reveled in her power. He wanted to appear in front of her and take her away, but he enjoyed her delight so he continued to stalk her through the bar. He took his time; drawing the game out.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard. You are going to have to beg me to let you go." He whispered to her mentally, knowing she would hear him, even though he was across the crowded bar. Her white teeth flashed in the dim light and he saw her hands skim down over her breasts and belly as her hips whirled with the cadence.

At that moment, Bernice turned and swayed her own body against Alana's. They danced in perfect rhythm and he knew they had done this before. Their bodies flowed perfectly, erotically. He heard many male thoughts around the bar. They all echoed the same desire.

Rhys glanced at the singer's strained countenance and knew he was Bernice's lover. The

women were dangerous and exotic and too tempting to ignore. The song was finally over and the girls hugged. After Bernice blew her man a kiss, they walked back to their table.

Alana winked at him and sat down. She waited on him to come to her. He walked to their table and lifted her out of the chair. She yelped as he lifted her high and he sat down. He placed her on his lap, covering his erection. She smiled and snuggled in, grinding her backside against him. "I should have known you wouldn't just come and sit down like a gentlemen," she said breathlessly.

"You don't want a gentleman," he said roughly and saw desire darken her eyes. "You know, you're going to pay for your teasing," he promised her.

Bernice cleared her throat and fanned her face. "Jesus, guys. You're making me hot," she laughed, "and I still have to wait on Lucas to finish up tonight before I can be sated, so cool it!"

"Oh my God, you guys! Did you hear?" Tayla Jones, one of the biggest busybodies in the county, ran to the table and gushed, "They found Tom T's body this morning," she exclaimed, unable to take her eyes off Rhys. "Rohan and John Moberly were fishing and their dog found his body," she continued. "They are saying he was murdered and all the blood was drained from his body. Can you believe it?"

Rhys stiffened, grim with the implications of blood being drained from a body. It meant that another vampire was here. Was it coincidence that a vampire was here while he was? He didn't think so.

Bernice gasped in disbelief, "Oh no! That's terrible!" she exclaimed with sad eyes. "We heard that no one had seen him since Wednesday night. His truck is still out in the parking lot," she said, throwing a thumb over her shoulder to indicate the parking lot. "We've all been wondering where he was." A frown crossed her beautiful face and she shuddered.

"Well, he didn't leave here on his own," Tayla said.

They left The Dog fairly quickly after that with a warning to Bernice to be careful; then popped into the living room. Grandpa shrieked like a girl and spilled popcorn in his chair. He cussed them a blue streak with blazing cheeks. Rhys apologized and gave Alana a quick kiss, admonishing them both to stay in the house. He warned them that it was a vampire that killed Tom. It was his job to look for a trace of him or her.

Alana said she wanted to go with him. Grandpa snorted and Rhys gave her a look like she was an

idiot and disappeared. She rolled her eyes at the chauvinistic males and then caught Grandpa up on the sad news about Tom T., to which he replied, "What's the world coming to?"

After that troubling discussion, they watched the rest of Ghost Whisperer. Alana fell asleep on the couch while he conked out in the recliner. She finally stumbled to bed where she tossed and turned restlessly; her night full of bloody dreams.

On Saturday, they ate a quiet breakfast of blueberry muffins and started weekend chores. It was mid-afternoon by the time she finished with the horses and ate a turkey sandwich for lunch. She heard her cell phone trill from its spot on the charger and noticed a text message to call the farm. She called back but no one answered. She decided to ride over. She worried that something happened to Aria since she was in the process of breaking her. She hoped none of the weekend stable hands tried to ride her.

When she crunched her wheels into the gravel parking lot, she noticed Monique on the front steps of the Mansion. She waved frantically for Alana to come. She frowned, not sure what Monique was doing. The only thing she could gather from the blonde's mind was a haze of anticipation. A sudden thought struck her that something was wrong with her father.

Alana thought about his heart problems. She

left the stable and ran back to her car. She raced up the drive to the house. Alana felt Monique's glee and excitement as she parked the car. The intensity of other woman's emotions alarmed her and Alana's gut instinct told her not to get out of the car. Monique was happy her plan was working out and that couldn't be a good sign. Suddenly Alana had no intention of going in the house. Her inner voice shouted that something was not right about the situation.

"Come quick, it's my husband," Monique said when Alana cracked the window. Her heart dropped.

Alana just found her father and now she imagined that he was dying and wanted to talk to her one last time. She didn't pick up any thoughts from the house. Alana followed Monique with tears in her eyes. She envisioned the worst and was angry at Monique's joy in the situation. Alana realized that the other woman's exuberance made sense if she thought she was about to inherit millions of dollars. Bitch, Alana thought enraged. Alana followed Monique to the study and then pushed past her when she saw her father prone on the couch.

"What happened?" She didn't look away from her handsome father — not ready to face Monique's evil emotions at his illness. *Why wasn't he in his room? Where was a doctor?* Delighted

laughter was the only response to her question. She whirled around to see that Monique held a lethal-looking little gun — pointed at her.

“What are you doing? What did you do to him?” Anger filled Alana. She wanted to kill her.

“Nothing, just gave him a harmless sleeping pill. So you know, huh?” she said, gesturing to him. “He told you,” she laughed lightly, insanely, Alana thought.

“I’ve wanted to kill you ever since I found out,” she continued. “I married him and all of this” she said waving the gun around, “will be mine when you’re gone.”

“You are such a dumb ass.” Alana said; never had she felt such rage.

Monique laughed again, “Oh, I’ve got a plan, don’t worry. Now sit down in that chair and if you so much as move, I’m going to shoot him. Then I’ll shoot you and say that I found you both here like this. You were so angry to find out he was your father that you shot him and then shot yourself. All I have to do is put the gun in your hand and then the ‘GSR’, as you call it, will be on you.”

Like anyone would believe that. Everyone in this town would suspect the gold-digging, trophy wife.

“Where are the servants?” she asked.

“I gave them the day off.” Monique smiled brightly, a superficial see-how-smart-I-am smile.

Alana was so gonna' take her out, but she wanted to find out who helped her with this scheme first. She could hear her father's breath, regular and even so she knew he was okay. At least, she was honest about the sleeping pills.

Alana felt anticipation flood Monique's mind. She was anxious for someone to appear. She wanted to shoot, but she didn't want to face his fury if she carried out her own plans. Now Alana was really confused and had no clue as to who else would want to kill her so badly. Monique, she understood, but whom else? She was able to discern that it was someone Monique's wanted for her own, but strangely, Alana couldn't pick up a face or name from the other woman's mind. It was almost like there was a void where his identity should be.

They sat that way for probably fifteen minutes until the sun set. Alana's ability to wait patiently, meditatively, had been developed for years. She could wait her out. Monique didn't have the same skills as Alana though and slammed shots steadily the entire time.

Alana wasn't able to get any information from the blonde as her mind dissolved in a drunken haze. Monique *was* sure that whoever he was, he was going to kill Alana. Realizing she was a more calculated than Alana assumed and that real danger was coming, she knew she had to disable

the woman before her accomplice arrived.

"Care if I make a drink?" Alana said as she pointed to the bar. She looked at the bar and then looked at Alana, as she tried to interpret her intentions. Alana looked as innocent and bored as she could muster.

"Go 'head, bitch," she slurred.

Alana smirked and strolled to the bar and filled a glass with ice. She sorted through the haze of Monique's mind and decided that whatever she was going to do, it had to be now Alana decided. She turned and hurled the heavy tumbler at her kidnapper's head. It struck her smack dab in the middle of the forehead. Alana knew the minute Monique decided to shoot and ducked. The bullet missed her and she launched herself at the drunken blonde.

Blood gushed from Monique's forehead courtesy of the heavy glass. Consequently, she didn't see Alana's move. She shrieked like a banshee and dropped her gun when Alana leapt on top of her.

She grabbed Monique's head and pounded it against the hardwood floor. Alana balled up her fist and punched the other woman four times in the face. Eventually the bloodlust eased and the rage died somewhat. She realized she beat a now defenseless woman and got up. She wiped her bloody fists on a blanket draped on the back of the

sofa.

Monique whimpered weakly and Alana told her to shut up. She checked on her dad. His breathing was regular; he was simply asleep. She removed his tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt so he would be more comfortable. Then she used his tie to bind the moaning Monique's wrists above her head and anchored to the heavy desk leg.

Alana called nine-one-one. Then she called Grandpa and told him the story. He was on his way. She looked at Monique while she waited on help to arrive and smiled at the thought of her in jail.

Soft male laughter filled Alana's ears. She was so intent on Monique that the "vamp buzz" registered belatedly. She jerked around to see Rhys and then froze. The mind before her was evil and twisted. She frowned and suddenly knew who he was. "Merrick," she whispered in disbelief.

"Fucking brilliant," he said with a smile. "My brother has done it again. What a blessed life he leads; another beautiful, strong woman that, unfortunately, will die in the end," he said sarcastically. Rhys' sexy smile was obscene on this monster's face, she thought. *Rhys*, she called mentally, *Merrick's here*. She felt Merrick's compulsion of docility battering her shields. His

mind control pulled her back to the present, and she pushed the compulsion away.

"Don't bother," Alana told him with clenched teeth. "It doesn't work on me."

His eyebrows rose in surprise and he smiled again, "Well, well, even better. You're a telepath."

"This is your accomplice?" Alana inquired, gesturing to Monique.

He looked at the unconscious woman tied to the desk and laughed. "Humans, what can you expect?" He shook his head in disgust and looked at Alana again. "But I'm going to enjoy you," he said, pointing. "I've decided to keep you instead of killing you. He'll die knowing you're mine, knowing I'm fucking his woman."

"You can't make me yours, asshole," Alana argued vindictively. "You can't take my will as you do everyone else."

He glanced around the room and then paused when he got to her father. In the blink of an eye, Merrick bent over him threateningly and looked at her. "Maybe I can't take your mind, but I can take your body. You aren't that strong; I can easily overpower you and force you to do what I want. Or I could just do it the easy way and kill your father if you don't cooperate. But don't worry yet; we're just going outside where we're going to wait on my beloved brother to arrive. He will attempt to save you from history repeating itself, but he

will die and then you'll be mine. I'll get to fuck the woman that belongs to the brother I've hated for centuries," he said with a snarl, "and he'll die knowing that."

Alana stared at Merrick. Rhys would kill him. By the power of her gift, she knew he would kill his brother this night. She smiled fearlessly, "Alright, let's go. I'll go with you, for now." She didn't want his hands on her father so she would play along.

He laughed. "You are going to be fun."

They walked out into the night. She could hear the sirens on their way, but still too far to do any good, their sound echoed through the mountains. Then she saw her grandfather's truck in the drive and fear finally struck her. Where was he? She didn't want him around Merrick.

Suddenly a blur streaked across the field and then he was there. Rhys appeared in front of Merrick. It was impossible to look away from the identical vampires — one evil and one noble. One she hated and one she loved.

"Finally, here you are," Merrick said to his brother, satisfaction in his tone.

Merrick was assured of his victory, Alana realized. He made a mistake. He had no idea the power of

the killer before him. He spent lifetimes running, feasting on people who were weaker. Rhys spent lifetimes hunting and killing vampires.

"I've waited so long for this, brother," Merrick continued, "now it's going to be *my* time. I'm going to kill you and take your woman and your life among the Throng. I will be more than you ever were. It should all have been *mine*."

Rhys stared at his twin; death was a promise in his eyes. He said nothing, but Alana felt his cold resolve — his determination to end this twisted soul's evil forever. As they stood, taut, with their eyes locked on each other, she felt the power that flowed between them; clashing. Each brother tried to gain control over the other. She felt the faintest hint of pain Rhys absorbed in the attack. She was vindictively glad to see that blood leaked from Merrick's nose and ears.

He was so focused on the cerebral battle with Rhys that he didn't sense the approaching threat, but she did. She heard the near-silent whistle of an arrow a second before it entered the heart of the vampire beside her. She whirled away from him.

The cord of power that stretched between the brothers' snapped and she felt Rhys' energy pour into Merrick's brain. Blood spewed from his eyes in crimson arcs. He roared and reached out blindly for her. His claws slashed and pierced the skin of her arm. She cried out and jerked away

from his grasping hands.

Rhys spun in a blur of speed, no longer in the mood for mental control at the sight of Alana's blood. The Death Hunter sword shimmered in his hand and whooshed through the air as he struck. The head separated from the body.

The body and arm released her and crumpled to the ground. Alana stumbled over to Grandpa, where he leaned against the truck. The crossbow held in his hand pointed at the ground. The meaty sound of the head as it rolled down the sloped drive made her gag. Grandpa hugged her.

Rhys dropped his sword, where it clattered to the ground and raised his arms. A ball of fire blazed furiously between his outstretched palms. She and Grandpa looked at each other. His eyes widened comically in horrified amazement and she imagined hers were the same.

They watched as he set the head and body ablaze with a streaming deluge of fire that roared as it encompassed the body in a raging flame. He muttered a few words over the melting corpse before it disappeared. Nothing but ash was left behind. Wind blew in and scattered the remains.

It was over so quickly. The battle took less than five minutes, but she knew that each infinitesimal moment would forever be imprinted on her mind. The sirens approached closer, louder on the winding country roads.

Alana was shocked and sickened at the grisly death — the sound of Merrick's head hitting the driveway still echoed in her ears. Despite that, she was satisfied that the man, who caused such turmoil in her mate's life, and some pretty scary moments in hers, was gone. Tom T. was avenged too.

Merrick overestimated his abilities and underestimated those of his twin. He spent a lifetime hidden in the shadows. He feasted on humans, became strong, but he didn't stand a chance against the man who hunted and killed evil vampires for centuries; the man who dealt in death every day of his life. Alana was awed by the power of her mate. He was indeed a Death Hunter to be feared and whispered about in frightened tones.

Rhys rushed to her and held her tight. "I thought he would kill you," he said in a hoarse voice. He lifted her in his arms and licked her wounds. "You can drink some of my blood tonight to help heal these wounds."

They were interrupted when the ambulance and police cruiser screeched to a halt on the drive. Rhys and Grandfather stood with Alana as she gave her statement of the events as they occurred in the study. Merrick was not mentioned. Monique would take the fall for this alone. *Divine justice.*

In Alana's version, Grandpa and Rhys arrived in time to comfort her. Her father was finally roused and gave his testimony that Monique brought him the drink laced with sleeping pills. The drink and the gun were taken as evidence.

Monique was transported to the hospital for stitches to her forehead and afterward to jail. She fingered Merrick as the mastermind but the police assumed that her accomplice bailed on her or she made him up. Alana stuck to her claim that there was no one else involved as far as she knew. Tom T's murderer was never officially found. It was assumed that a stranger passing through killed him. How right they were.

On Saturday morning one week later, Bernice and Alana made punch, quiche bites, finger sandwiches, a cheese ball and crackers, and smoked salmon. They baked a red velvet cake with pink flowers piped on top. Pink decorations and flowers covered the tables and hung from doorways.

The baby shower was fun. Bernice and Alana bought Annie a new pink bouncy chair and tons of girl clothes, little hats, and a pink chenille blanket. Annie beamed and was gracious and ecstatic to receive so many gifts.

Thirty of their friends laughed, ate and celebrated with Annie in the parlor of the Big House. It was a peaceful moment after what Alana lived through in the previous week. She was grateful to be a part of such frivolity.

Alana laughed as Bernice lost her clothes pin for saying the forbidden word. Alana had long since lost her pin since she said “baby” within five minutes of the shower beginning. Amy was likely to win the free manicure at Bernice’s shop since she had the most clothes pins attached to her shirt. She remained ready to pounce as soon as someone said the word so she could grab their pin.

Alana had a secret herself, but she didn’t reveal the news until everyone was gone but Bernice, Annie, and Amy. She told them about her pregnancy. They squealed in delight. Annie cried, happy that they would have children close in age.

Alana was only a couple of weeks along, but she was too excited not to share the news, at least with her girls. Grandpa, she would tell later tonight. Rhys nearly attacked her with excitement when she told him. Moments later they were on a fabulous moonlit beach telling his parents the exciting news.

ÉPILOGUE

Six months later, Alana's father divorced Monique, who was sentenced to twenty years in jail for attempted murder. She would probably only serve eight years, but she won't be back. Rhys visited her in jail and left her terrorized; in fear of her life if she so much as stepped foot in Versailles again.

Alana spent more time with her father meeting other horse owners, sellers, and breeders. It was an interesting world — the owner's world; different from the trainer's atmosphere, but it was a job nonetheless even if it involved high society perks and snobbery. Dad introduced Rhys too. He was proud of the man she would spend her life with. Ramsey made it obvious to his associates that the two were the future of Ramsey farms, even if Alana didn't like the thought of her father not being around now that they found each other. Happily, he came through his heart surgery fine and she hoped for many years with him to build

on their relationship.

Alana was introduced to the Throng as Rhys' mate and was now much revered as one of the rare telepaths. She met others like herself, telepathic mates of the older vampires. It was nice to know there were others and she enjoyed talking to them.

On a Saturday night, Rhys and Alana held their ceremony at the Big House. Grandpa and Dad beamed as they both walked her up the wide curving stairs to the landing above where she and her lover were joined in matrimony. Everyone gathered below in the spacious, simply decorated foyer to watch.

The wedding was beautiful, simple and classy. Lucas' band played. Bernice, Amy, and Annie, with baby Bliss in a pouch on her chest, set up plates and plates of food on the silver outside. Long tables covered in Alana's grandmother's white lace cloths topped with china and crystal awaited the guests. Wild flowers adorned the columns and staircase rails, and huge bouquets made up the centerpieces on the tables.

Practically the whole town showed up. Rhys' parents attended in their youthful, exotic splendor. They introduced them as his brother and sister-in-law since they looked his age. Alana really liked his parents. They were warm and welcoming to their new daughter-in-law. She

loved them already.

Cullen, Gavin, Roark and Malyk came as well. Alana watched the women in attendance eye the men interestingly. She smothered a laugh. At least three women would be happy tonight before their exotic lover disappeared forever.

Alana was glad that Rhys had his own guests. The townspeople were overwhelming at times. Not that Rhys was overwhelmed by anything, she thought. She noticed him smile at something Maggie, the cake maker, said.

She smiled as she realized she married the perfect man for her; strong and powerful and deadly when he needed to be, but honorable and polite to the innocent and he loved her more than she ever thought she would be loved. He looked at her then. Their eyes met across the tables and people as they all congregated outside on the lawn after the ceremony. In the midst of the dancers and the people laughing and eating, Alana's mouth dried at the heat in Rhys' eyes and the promise there. They were distracted as guests came up to speak to both of them in that moment, but she felt the moisture gather between her legs under her dress and anticipated the moment when they were alone.

Life was good, Alana thought on an aside, as she spoke with the pastor. She spent her time between the farm, the Big House and the French

country side where her wonderful husband modernized an already fabulous castle with all kinds of gadgets, clothes and presents for her as a wedding gift. She ran around squealing like a kid at all the new toys and gifts. It was the most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for her.

If someone said any of this was going to happen seven months ago, that she would find such hunger, love and passion here in her Kentucky home, she would have laughed herself silly. Now, she couldn't imagine life any other way. She rubbed the rounded hump of her belly softly; mentally soothing her baby girl. Alana smiled, knowing *she* was going to be all her daddy could handle. Just like her momma.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophia lives among the green, rolling hills of Kentucky. She is a happy wife and the mother of two girls. She enjoys time with family, cooking and sports. Writing is a joy for her and she loves to give people a story to escape into after a long day.