



# Original Sin

By

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Dedication

To my friend Priscilla, who has loved Marco from the beginning ... almost as much I have.

## Chapter One

In the month since the laws of vampiric tolerance were passed, Dracula had made quite the sensation. He has announced to the media that he is the original vampire. And naturally, the press jumped on the name “Dracula.” Ever since he had become my partner, I had been sucked into his little popularity whirlwind. The first time we were seen together, the media went into a frenzy. It seemed like the announcement of real live, well I suppose you could say, they’re alive, vampires was going to pass by quietly. But that had only lasted about a week.

Of course the werewolves were not forgotten, least of all pack leader, Marco Barak. Actually, I had a date with him that night, and my heart was pounding in anticipation of his nearness as I approached the mailbox.

At least twice a week I got letters from animal rights activists bashing me for my wicked ways. Some were sappy notes from touchy-feely soccer moms who couldn’t believe I had been making a living off killing people who just “happened” to be part animal. Most of the activists were cheesy or laughable. But every now and then they managed to hurt my feelings, because they were right.

Aside from this type of correspondence, I had the tabloids to thank for my other letters. Ever since a few headlines had managed to associate me with Dracula, I had been getting “fan mail” from crazed goth princesses. Some of them were six-page letters where they proclaimed all the ways they loved him. They would tell me that I could never understand him, or ‘worship’ him the way they could (gag). I usually dry-heaved a few times after reading these. But, my favorites were the one-liners like, “Burn in Hell,” or “Eat shit and die.”

Of course, I never responded to any of these; it would only add fuel to the fire. Besides, someone who writes “eat shit and die,” isn’t looking for a response. They were delivering a message. Fine. I got it. What would I say anyway? “Fuck you very much, sincerely, Lilith Mercury?” This was what my mail mostly consisted of since his arrival. To be honest, some small part of me felt sorry for the countless women who begged me to pass on a message to the vampire. But it was a very small part, and I’m not his damn secretary.

However, there were some that I was tempted to answer. The ones who sounded intelligent and just genuinely wanted to know what it was like to be with a werewolf or a vampire. But with my luck, if I did respond the answer would probably end up for sale on an Internet auction.

It was mid afternoon when I collected my new pile of mail, and as reentered the house, the phone rang. A storm was gathering outside, and a small tree branch hit my kitchen window, so I screamed instead of answering “Hello.”

“Lilith?” Marco’s frantic voice replied.

“I’m alright,” I explained. “A tree branch just hit the window.”

Marco informed me briefly that we would need to reschedule our date. Tornados

had touched down near his apartment above Club Red, and completely devastated some areas. Even though he was unharmed, there was no way he would ever make it out of town to start the two-hour drive to my house.

Damn southern weather. I told Marco I understood, but it was hard to keep the disappointment from my voice. It was only the second week of March, and already we were experiencing severe weather watches. I really don't know why they call it the sunshine state. I've always loved a good storm, and the rain is very peaceful to me. But I didn't like anything standing in the way of me seeing Marco.

We had only been dating for a month, but I had known Marco since my days as a trainee with The Hunters. His training was about to finish as mine started. Of course, you're considered still in training for the first five years, but after six months of training, you can be paid for your services. Marco worked as a Hunter for a little over a year before he was attacked.

I had wanted him since the first moment I saw him, and now nine years later, he was finally mine. We had agreed to take things slow, but my heart wouldn't listen to reason. The more I was honest with myself, the more I realized I was falling for Marco. And I don't mean just stumbling a little bit. Once I finally hit the ground, I was going to bounce.

After we hung up, I remembered I needed some things in town. I figured I might as well go before the storm got worse. As I was picking out a bag of fresh cherries I remembered Alfred used to always buy them for me, and I nearly had a breakdown in the middle of the produce aisle. It had only been a month, but it seemed like a lifetime since I had been led to the locked drawer in his bedroom by a vision of Alek Ambrose. In this drawer, I discovered that Alfred had not only been assigned to be my partner eight years ago, but my murderer as well. The former commander of The Hunters had ordered Alfred to kill me if I should ever start to become a monster. What hurt the most was that he had signed the paper. The moment suddenly seemed unreal. I felt cold to think of returning home without Alfred there. It was like I was wearing a jacket and someone snatched it off and that warmth was gone. I wasn't his anymore.

Maybe someday the pain would ease, but not today. I put a hand over my heart as I finished selecting a bag of cherries. If anyone was watching, maybe they'd think I had indigestion and leave me alone. My eyes stung and my chest hurt. I coughed a few times and tried to pretend it was allergies. I thought back to the papers and Alfred's signature at the bottom of the last page. This helped me to muster up enough anger to keep from crying.

In the time since that discovery, the wizard who'd recently befriended me, Alek Ambrose, had come to live with me. He had set up an apartment in my dungeon. Dracula was my new partner, and they were both members of my Hunter Assault Team for Violators of Werewolf Code, better known as H.A.V.O.C. I had been elected to not only head up the division of H.A.V.O.C. in my area, but head up all divisions on Earth and Terra. I reported directly to the current commander, my father, Jacob Mercury. Initially, I had been very leery of this new responsibility, as well as the celebrity it brought with it. However, I had come to realize that most division leaders could handle themselves. I would only ever be called if there was a severe problem.

I also needed to accumulate some more members in my area. The main problem was that my team was expected to be the best of the best. It's not that all of The Hunters

weren't qualified individuals, but the members of my team would be watched more closely. It wasn't fair, but it was true. When I thought of the best, one name came to mind, Johnny Angel. I was on my way home to call him as I drove by the corner gas station and saw a familiar sight.

The instant I saw him approaching, something about him caught my eye. It wasn't the motorcycle he was riding, or the hot pink t-shirt he wore. Even at a distance, and with only a glance, there was something about the man that felt familiar. I kept looking back, and trying not to run off the road, or miss my turn. He pulled in at the station, and as he walked into the store, I recognized him. I'd know that walk anywhere. It was Peter.

I didn't get a good look at his face before I turned, but I didn't need to. The years may have changed his features, but his confident swagger could never be mistaken. I was too shocked to have much of a reaction at the time. But as I thought of him on the way home, my heart didn't flutter. I was proud of myself. It could be that I was hurting too much over Alfred to spare any heartache for Peter. Either way, I was still proud of myself for not falling to pieces.

Twice over the years I'd caught a fleeting glimpse of Peter. Both times I'd gone home and cried. It had been a good five years since my last glimpse, and this time I didn't cry. Still, I wondered what he was doing around here. Last I'd heard, Peter had moved away. I was also pleased to hear of his divorce. Not because I wanted him, I just didn't want her to have him. That was cruel and spiteful of me, but it was the truth. Peter had been my first love, and a part of me had never really let him go.

As I gathered up my groceries and carried them in the house, I remembered the night I had told Peter about my attack. He called me a monster. I picked up the phone and called Johnny to keep from crying. It had been a long time since I'd spoken to Johnny, mainly because Alfred hated him so much. We had dated for a while, after Julius, and before Bradley. I cared for Johnny, but he was too deeply in love with himself to have time for anyone else.

I knew through headquarters where to reach him, and dialed the number with trembling hands. It had been a long time. What if he didn't want to talk to me? Nah, that wasn't like Johnny. I steeled my courage and pressed the call button. He picked up on the first ring.

"Yes?" His speech sounded a little slurred, like he'd been drinking, but I knew that tone. I had woken him. He was pleasantly surprised to hear my voice and didn't miss the opportunity to tell me so. "It's been a long time," he said, still with that slur. "I have to tell you, sweetheart, it's good to hear you."

"You too," I admitted.

"Let me guess, you called to beg me to come back to you because I'm absolutely marvelous in bed."

Even though he was a self-absorbed asshole, I smiled at the sound of Johnny's voice. We'd had some good times, but I think we were too much alike.

He was currently in Texas, near the border. I explained the situation to him, and told him I'd like for him to be a part of the team. I was a little surprised when he agreed so easily. You know the expression, there is no "I" in team? Well, there is no team in Johnny Angel. Don't let the name fool you. He said it would take him a few days to wrap things up, and he'd be on his way. I didn't want to know what "things" Johnny was

wrapping so I ended our conversation by saying I looked forward to seeing him. As I hung up, I was shocked to find it was true.

\* \* \* \*

It was barely dusk, but it looked like the middle of the night outside. The storm had gotten much worse, and I was moving some candles into the sitting room when I heard someone ring my doorbell. I have a large silver doorknocker. It's a lion's head with a ring hanging from the mouth. Most people enjoy the novelty of it, and prefer to use the knocker. The fact that someone had avoided the silver led me to believe there was a werewolf at my door. I was wrong.

Dracula owned some property about an hour away, though I'd never been there. Surely he must have grown wings to reach me so quickly after sundown. He was wearing a white tunic-style shirt devoid of ruffles, and a tight pair of black pants with an intricate gray dagger design. It was about as close to casual as Dracula ever got in public, and I tried to ignore how good he looked in those pants. When I opened the door and took in this sight, I couldn't deny the thrill that ran through me. But I tried to hide it.

"May I come in?" He spoke softly and his voice seemed to touch me all over at once. That was a loaded question, but I chose to assume he only asked for entry into my house.

"Of course." I stepped aside and watched in fascination as he glided toward my sitting room. He possessed a grace of movement I had not seen before, even on the dance floor. It had been a few weeks since I'd seen Dracula, and though I'd missed him, I wasn't ready to be near him. I was never ready to be in his presence, but I also never wanted to leave. Being close to Dracula is something you have to prepare yourself for. When I say he is gorgeous, I'm not trying to flatter his ego. He is beautiful in a way that falls short of description.

I was disappointed at not getting to see Marco, and still a bit shaken from seeing Peter again. Not only that, but since Marco and I were moving slow, which meant no sex. Even the sound of Johnny's sleepy voice on the phone had turned me on. Don't get me wrong, he's sexy and all, but that was over a long time ago. I don't want Johnny, and I definitely didn't want Peter. But having so many emotional jolts in the last few hours had left me vulnerable, and when the devil knocked at my door, I let him in.

As I entered the sitting room, I found the vampire casually draped over my sofa, with his arm propped across the back. The space beside him looked remarkably inviting, and so did the curve of his thigh.

"You seem ill at ease, my angel. Is anything wrong?"

The more I looked at him, the stronger my craving grew, but strangely, it was for chocolate. No, nothing was wrong. In fact, I couldn't find anything *wrong* with the man, and that was part of the problem. As I watched him, waiting expectantly for my answer, I made a decision. I would feel better if I talked about it, and I was going to talk to Dracula.

"How much time do you have?" I asked.

His expression became serious. "I have all night, if you need me. Come," he said as he reached for me, "Tell me your troubles."

I slipped easily against his side, curling up underneath his arm. Even though I tried to hide it, I had longed for Dracula's embrace. There was a solace in his touch that no amount of meditation could provide. The intoxicating smell of his cologne filled my

lungs as I breathed deeply and started telling him about my day. After a few hours, I had not only told Dracula about seeing Peter, we'd discussed my relationship with Julius, Johnny, Bradley, and Alfred. *And* I'd made the unfortunate mistake of letting it slip that Marco and I weren't having sex. His only reaction to this was to raise his eyebrows, but coming from him, that was a strong reaction most of the time. He had spent years learning how to hide his emotions from people, and he was good at it. Now, even when he wanted to share, it was sometimes difficult. It wasn't that he didn't feel, although to the casual observer, it might seem that way. On the contrary, Dracula felt very deeply. Because he, like myself, was empathic.

Through my touch, I have the ability to feel what other's feel, to see what images these emotions conjure. Thanks to my inherited ability from Mathias Alexander, my great, great, wizard grandfather, I was more than just empathic, it was my strongest psychic ability. Thank God my abilities are associated through touch, and not just walking into a room. Sure, I get some feelings, first impressions, but I'm able to shut the rest off. That took some practice, but not as much as you would think.

Elementary school was difficult. People thought I was just a cry baby up until about the fifth grade. I felt everything going on around me. I remember sitting next to this one kid who had gotten in trouble at school and was dreading going home, because he knew it would be worse. He wasn't crying, but I was. I could feel everything that he was afraid to express, and I sat there and cried for him all day.

At around eleven years old, I learned to shut it off. I finally realized one day that it wasn't my emotions I was feeling. Consequently my grades improved significantly after that. I knew the vampire sitting beside me must have experienced some of the same things as a child, even though that was ancient history by now, because he possessed the same ability.

In the time it had taken me to tell Dracula my entire romantic history, I'd eaten half of a chocolate bar and was about to get up and make hot chocolate when the power went out.

"Shit."

"You do not wish to be alone in the dark with me?" he inquired softly.

I snickered. "It's not that. I was just about to make hot chocolate."

I stood up and began lighting the candles and Dracula sighed heavily. At first I thought it was because we were no longer "alone in the dark." But that wasn't it.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I used to love chocolate." He smiled sadly.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I felt like a jerk. Then I had an idea. I remembered how Alfred was able to experience my memories through touch, as well as how Alek had entered my mind through dream visitation.

"How would you like to taste it again?"

## Chapter Two

The soft candlelight reflected in his eyes reminded me of the night I had spent with Dracula. He was the closest I'd ever come to being able to touch a dream. He was the most surreal and yet the most tangible fantasy I'd ever had. And as I took his hands in mine I tried my best to keep him from my thoughts, and explained what I had in mind.

He listened patiently before asking, "You would do this willingly?"

"What? Share a memory?"

"Allow me into your mind."

"After you've been in my pants, I hardly see it as an intrusion," I teased.

"My angel, I am serious. My mind is not something so easily discarded."

"We were talking about *my* mind, remember?"

"Yes, but to allow me access to your thoughts, you would have the same to mine, if I chose not to block it."

That scared me. I didn't ever want complete access to Dracula's memories.

"But you *will* block it?"

"Of course, of course. I would never deliberately traumatize you. I am just surprised at your willingness to let me in."

The way he said those last words tasted like more than curiosity, and he was talking about more than my mind.

I sighed and said, "Now, I'm going to close my eyes." He smiled wickedly. "I'll be thinking about you," I finished.

I still remembered every detail of how dream visitation was supposed to work, only I'd never tried it completely awake before. Alek and I had been practicing since he had moved in the dungeon. He was The Dream Weaver, after all, and dreaming with him was always a wonderful experience.

So, I followed his instructions and pictured Dracula in complete detail. When I say complete, I mean it. I saw him standing in my bedroom. His back was turned to me, and he was completely naked. He remained one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever beheld, and one of the reasons I was grateful to have eyes. Surely the sight before me was what twenty-twenty vision was meant for. Candles were lit all around, and the light reflected off the many whip scars across his back.

I walked forward to touch him. I could feel the skin beneath my fingertips as if it were real. The scar I touched was slightly raised, just as it was in real life. Then I realized we were not sharing a dream, because I wasn't dreaming. We were not in a memory, because this exact moment had never happened before. We were simply communicating mind to mind, and it was something I had never experienced. What happened with Alek was different. The very thought of Dracula did things to me that the presence of others was not capable of. There was magic in my fingers as I caressed his back once more.

At that moment Dracula turned to face me and I was captured by the deep emerald of his eyes. I moaned as hands caressed my body, but he hadn't moved.

“Why are you naked?” I asked, trying to control myself.

“I am not in control of this vision, my angel. Obviously it is what you wanted to see,” he replied with a smile.

That chapped my ass enough to help me change the scenery. But he was right; I had been looking at what I wanted to see. We were standing in the kitchen next, and I offered him a seat at the table. He was wearing black silk pajama pants with the long flowing robe I had given him when I first brought him home with me a few months ago. He looked even better in the robe than I remembered. The blood-red lining contrasted well with the pale perfection of his skin, and I tried to pull my thoughts back together. I could feel the soft fabric against my face as I imagined crawling inside that robe with him. I wanted to wrap myself around Dracula’s body and caress him with every move. I wanted to become the robe, and for a moment, that’s what happened. At least, those were the sensations I experienced.

When I got a grip on myself again, I was sitting at the table beside him, gasping for breath.

“Well, well,” he purred. “I knew you liked this robe, but I never imagined you envied it.”

Without hesitation I confessed, “I envy anything that touches you on a regular basis. However,” I continued as I finally found some resolve, “I am not here to touch you. I am here to share a different sort of experience.”

I began to imagine the most wonderful chocolate I could remember. On the table appeared a chocolate cream-filled bon bon with a crunchy shell. I removed the golden wrapper and took a bite. As I did this I reached over and took his hand. I focused only on the rich decadent flavor—let it roll across my tongue. I wasn’t sure this would work, but when I heard the vampire moan with delight, I knew I had succeeded.

After we finished the bon bon, he commented with a sigh, “Chocolate has certainly improved over the years.”

“Yes,” I answered. But my mind was no longer on chocolate. The danger of having Dracula in my mind suddenly became very clear to me. He wasn’t doing anything to influence me. He was just sitting there. However, letting down my guard enough to allow him this access had made me more vulnerable to him. Just his nearness became almost overwhelming. It was as if I had let him hypnotize me with his eyes in real life. All I could think about was how much I wanted to touch him.

“I warned you,” he breathed against my ear. “Allowing me such access can be very dangerous.”

He had not moved; however, his voice seemed to float from one ear to the other, tickling along my skin. Alek knew this trick too, but Alek wasn’t this sexy.

“I assure you, I am not trying to seduce you. In fact, I am withholding a great deal of my power. If I were to desire it, I could capture your mind,” he whispered. His voice flowed over me once again and I broke the contact, mentally and physically.

We were once again on the couch in my sitting room, and I was no longer touching Dracula. I looked around and realized by how much the candles had melted that we had been in contact for quite a while.

“Do not be afraid,” he said calmly.

I was already less apprehensive when his voice didn’t try to make love to me, anymore.

“I would never take advantage of your invitation,” he said reasonably. “It takes practice to resist me.” He smiled and just that subtle curve of lips set me on fire.

“Well, I’ll work on it,” I panted.

“Perhaps it is the lack of sex,” he said. After the look I gave him he added, “Or perhaps it is none of my business.”

When I rose from the couch he followed me into the kitchen. My craving for chocolate had been eliminated, but I was dying of thirst. I could feel his eyes on me as I walked toward the refrigerator.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “I really do appreciate what you did. I know it seems a simple thing to be able to taste chocolate, but it is a pleasure I have long been denied.”

I turned back to him as I said, “I thought vampires lost their taste for food. Or, I should say their desire.”

He laughed. “You believe that? We all have things we miss. To some it might be wine, which I was also fond of, to others it might be a nice, rare steak. The point is, we remember what it was like to experience these things. The ones who say how wonderful it is to be vampire and how they do not miss the human element are full of shit.”

Dracula followed me back into the sitting room while I laughed at his comment. Another thought occurred to me then. “Why did you come here tonight?”

I lit a few more candles around the room while I waited for his reply.

“Do I need a reason to see my partner?”

“No,” I answered with a smile, “But you always have one.”

“Yes.” He smiled and it made his eyes sparkle in a different way than his usual wicked grin. “I came to invite you to the opening of my club.”

Dracula had neglected to tell me when he began construction on his nightclub; however, I had heard it on the news. I just assumed he was waiting to surprise me once it was completed. I was right.

“I was wondering when you planned to tell me about that,” I said, as I took a water bottle from the fridge.

“My deepest apologies.” He smiled as he removed a small ivory envelope from his shirt. “I wanted to wait until it was finished before I mentioned it to you. Please do not think I have left you out. Yours is the first invitation I have extended, and the only one I will personally deliver.”

“Thank you,” I said as I took the envelope.

“Will you be coming?”

Another question with a double meaning.

“Yes, I’ll be there. I wouldn’t miss it.”

He smiled and I was once again grateful to have eyes.

“I have another surprise for you,” he said. “But this one I will save for opening night.”

My heart fluttered unpleasantly. I didn’t like waiting for anything. I also didn’t enjoy anticipation of some unknown event. For example, if someone says, “we need to talk,” I practically cringe on cue.

He read my expression. “It is not an unpleasant surprise, my angel,” he said softly. And then he kissed me. His lips were suddenly on mine and I couldn’t refuse him. Honestly, I didn’t want to. His kiss was unexpected and welcome. It was like

being given a present you hadn't expected. Dracula had had years to practice, and his kiss could be considered a work of art. He touched the right places, inspired the correct emotion. It was a dance, just as surely as if we were on a dance floor, and I responded. I let myself enjoy it thoroughly before I pulled away.

"You should go," I whispered.

"Have I done something wrong?"

"It's the wrong time of the month," I lied.

"For whom?" he replied sarcastically.

"Go home, Vlad," I said more firmly.

"As you wish." He bowed slightly and headed for the door.

I followed him, and as he stepped onto the porch I couldn't resist saying, "I'll be thinking about you."

"Be careful that you do not think too hard. You might slip into my mind. My mind is like a comfortable silk robe, easy to get into. But if you are not careful, you cannot untie the belt to remove it."

"Oh, I don't think we'll be removing any belts this evening," I teased.

And with that, I gently closed the door on his smiling face.

I wasn't lying when I said I would be thinking about him. In fact, several hours later, I fell asleep thinking about him. But, I consoled myself by saying that I was only thinking. I would never cheat on Marco. Dracula had initiated the kiss, and that was not my fault. Although, I had enjoyed it. But let's be honest, who wouldn't enjoy a kiss from Dracula?

As I felt myself drifting closer toward theta brain waves, I continued to think about Dracula to avoid thinking about Peter. I didn't want to have sad dreams, and I didn't want to wake Alek and ask him to give me another dream. He had gone to bed before Dracula arrived, saying he didn't feel well, and I wanted to let him rest.

So with visions of vampires dancing in my head, I finally fell asleep. This was a mistake.

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I was looking out over a battlefield. Armies had been sent here to wipe each other from the face of the earth, all in the name of God. I looked now over their massive graveyard. Bodies were piled high as the living continued to fight among themselves. My army had been sent to annihilate these people. Another army rode to meet us, and as we took our place on the battlefield I chose my weapon. Rather than draw my swords, I took a lance in hand. I gave a fierce battle cry, and my army started the charge.

A man rushed me and I ran him through. I could hear his ribs crack as I thrust the lance through his body, hoisted him into the air, and slammed the shaft into the ground, leaving him impaled. It was then I drew my swords. I had never seen swords like mine before. The handles fit perfectly in my hands, and curved around the knuckle of my index fingers. The blade pointed toward my elbow, but was longer by half a foot. It looked like a huge knife held backward, and I had one in each hand. When more soldiers came within range, I tore through them without mercy.

This scene went on for what seemed like years before the field was cleared. All that remained near me were either dead or dying. There were too many dead to know if we'd won the day. The air was filled with the screams of the wounded and the dying. The smell of burned pitch and burning flesh filled the air. But beyond the stench of

battle, there was another smell. Blood. It called to me like a siren's song. I could smell it all around me, and as I wept for the dead, I sought one still alive enough to allow me to feed. I could still come out in the sun, but not on bright days anymore.

There was a massive wound in my chest, and I looked down at my blood-covered hands. If I did not feed soon, I would bleed out. I did not want this unholy place to be my last vision on this earth, but it was about to be somebody's.

At last I stumbled upon someone who was already soon to leave this world. From his armor I guessed him to be one of the Knights Templar. He had two arrows through his chest and a gash across his throat. As I stood over him I heard the whoosh of an arrow only a second before it pierced my neck. There was no more time to decide. I would feed from him now, or I would die.

I reached up and broke the tip off the arrow as I leaned over the wound in his throat. He was young, maybe in his thirties and his eyes were full of fear. "I am sorry," I whispered as I fell upon the wound.

I began to drink deeply, and he whimpered. My heart ached with the horror I was bringing to this poor man, but I had no choice. I lifted up with a roar and removed the rest of the arrow from my throat. The knight gasped as my blood sprayed across him and I bent to finish the job.

My next memory was of rain hitting me in the face. It was the next afternoon, though the storm made it look like night. I had passed out among the dead. I looked to my left as I sat up. I was lying beside the poor knight whose life I had taken to save my own. As I assessed my condition, I saw that my wounds were healed. I felt fine physically, but inside I was dying. I began to weep for the stranger beside me, and while I mourned for this unknown knight, he gasped for breath and sat up.

I watched in horror as he began searching the dead for anything that still drew breath. He was ravenous. I hadn't meant to turn him. I had only ever turned others on purpose before. It had never happened by accident. My blood must have fallen into his mouth, because there had to be an exchange in order to bring someone over.

"No," I cried. "I promised I would never do it again."

I had promised long ago that I would never again curse another living soul to my fate. I watched as he found some poor soldier and began to feed. I closed my eyes against the tearing sounds. The knight was starving, and he was not gentle. When I opened my eyes again, he was looking up at me. He wiped a hand across his blood-covered face as he yelled hoarsely, "What have you done?!"

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I awoke startled and gasping for breath. My hands shook as I threw back the covers and staggered into the bathroom. Visions of the thousands of dead soldiers filled my mind as I reached the toilet just in time. I threw up repeatedly, unable to get the scent of the dead out of my nose. But what haunted me worse than the piles of dead bodies was the look on the knight's face. It wasn't just the pain in his expression that disturbed me; it was the familiarity of his face. I hadn't recognized him until he wiped the blood across his lips. In that moment they were the cherry red I was accustomed to seeing on Mason.

## Chapter Three

Mason was another local vampire who ran an establishment about a twenty-minute drive from my house called The Dungeon. It was a hardcore whips and chains kind of place where lycanthropes as well as vampires got their kicks. I remembered the last time I had seen Mason and started to cry. No wonder he had issues. Since I had known him, I thought Mason strange and frightening. But I wouldn't have wished his fate on anyone.

I cried until I choked and gagged some more. I had known Dracula's past was littered with such events, but I never expected to see one. I never *wanted* to see one. Knowing you've had sex with a former warlord and seeing him in action are two different things. I had even seen him fight before, but not like this. It reminded me of something a friend had once said about werewolves. Knowing you're dating a werewolf is a lot different than seeing them change. For all practical purposes, I had just seen Dracula's beast. I heard a knock at my balcony door and jumped.

Through the thin red curtain I could see Dracula standing in the storm. The rain had stopped and lightning flashed behind him, making his eyes glow for a moment. Ordinarily, I would have found the sight appealing, but tonight it scared the shit out of me. I had just watched him tear men apart and impale them. I couldn't bear for the same hands to touch me. Nevertheless, I couldn't leave him out in the storm. Wait a minute; he's a descendant of The Rainmaker. Power over the storm and the beasts of the field ... yeah, I *could* leave him out there. But I wasn't going to.

I opened the door and stepped back, so I wouldn't have to touch him. It hurt my feelings to avoid him, especially when a part of me desperately needed his comfort.

"My angel," he said, reaching for me.

The look on his face when I stepped out of his reach hurt worse than anything I could remember. Dracula let his hands fall by his sides defeatedly and sat down at the foot of my bed. The mattress creaked with his weight, yet he hardly displaced the sheets. His presence in the room was slight, and yet he filled the place. He was in every corner. He became every shadow. And for a moment, he was my only thought.

"I am sorry," he said softly. "I fell asleep without thinking to block you from my mind. I never meant to hurt you. Please," he whispered, "do not fear me."

"You fell asleep? At night?"

"You never take a nap?" He had a point. "What are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I sobbed. "I'm just so upset. I don't know what to think, or what to feel. That was so horrible. It was the most terrible thing I've ever seen."

"Then surely you felt how much I regretted my actions as well?"

"Yes, but ..."

"Do not revile me as so many others have done. You are the only one who has ever seen inside my mind, besides Mathias." He looked at my face and sighed. "This is the reason I lived so many years alone. No one should be near a monster like me."

He rose to leave and I stopped him. “No, wait.” I touched his shoulder and instantly withdrew my hand. He was wearing the silk robe I had pictured him in earlier, and as he turned back to me, I didn’t even notice how good he looked in it. Honest. I was still too horrified.

“What would you have of me?” he asked softly.

“I don’t know. I think I just want to cry.”

He moved back to the bed and held out his arms to me. “Come then, cry to me.”

\* \* \* \*

Morning came too soon. I had cried myself to sleep in Dracula’s arms and he had left sometime before dawn. I was still upset. I knew he had cursed Mason by accident, and I wasn’t really sure whom I should feel more sympathy for. Thankfully, the power had come back on in the middle of the night. So, that was one less thing I had to worry about. There was only one person I could think of who might be able to give me some answers. I brushed my teeth and decided it was time I had long talk with Mathias.

Part of my great, great, grandfather’s consciousness still existed in the back of my mind. I had inherited it along with his seductive power of legend. I could still contact him through meditation. I took out his journal and rested it beside me on the bed, found a comfortable position and began to breathe deeply. At last I arrived at the place in my mind I had created to speak to Mathias. As I entered what I called “my room” I heard his voice in my head.

“*What have you done?*”

“What have *I* done? I came here to ask you that question.”

Mathias had told me that he had met an incubus only once in his lifetime. He said he had trained this individual for a time. He had “*offered him an alternative to what he had become.*” Suddenly all of Dracula’s seductive talents made perfect sense.

“It was him wasn’t it?”

“*Who?*”

“You know damn well who. You trained him didn’t you? Dracula.”

He gasped at the name. “*So you have met him.*”

“Yes, we’ve met.”

“*I knew this would happen,*” he said after a long pause, “*I just did not remember it happening so soon.*” Mathias could also see the future on command. That was a gift I had not inherited. It only happened in spurts with me.

“Is he dangerous to me?” I asked.

“*He would never purposefully harm you.*”

“That’s not what I asked. Is he dangerous to me?”

Mathias explained to me last summer that, “*through our most intimate of touches, we have the ability to take on the characteristics of our lovers.*” Now, this could be something as simple as liking their favorite foods. It all depends on your level of attachment to the individual, and your own level of ability. He also dropped the bomb on me that the voice of seduction, the ability I had inherited from him, was a form of vampirism. Through use of the voice, I actually fed off the desires of other people. I knew then that that was what Dracula was doing to me every time his voice caressed me.

“You trained him, didn’t you?”

“*Yes.*”

“You taught him to use the voice?”

*“Yes. He was so greatly disturbed by having to repeatedly take the blood of others that I offered him an alternative. Being a wizard himself, he had the ability to learn. Of course he was never as powerful as myself, and he never will be.”* He paused for a moment. *“On the other hand, he has had longer to practice.”*

“Trust me, practice makes perfect.”

I went on to explain to Mathias that what really worried me was if Dracula was an incubus, and the voice was a form of vampirism ... what did that make me after having slept with him?

*“More powerful, I would imagine,”* he answered thoughtfully. *“Have you not noticed any heightening of your ability?”*

As a matter of fact, I had.

“That’s it?”

*“Did you expect to start sucking blood?”* he teased.

“I didn’t know what to expect.”

I told Mathias about slipping accidentally into Dracula’s mind and there was another long pause before he replied, *“So, you let an incubus into your mind. Did you ‘uninvite’ him?”*

“No.”

He sighed, *“Like I said, he would never deliberately harm you, but now he has access to your dreams.”*

“What do you mean exactly?”

*“The victims of an incubus will experience his visit as a dream.”*

I felt a cold chill run through me.

“Mathias?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been dreaming about him for years.”

After a lengthy conversation, Mathias assured me I was in no danger from Dracula, other than the possibility of sharing another disturbing memory. That was bad enough, but what really caught my attention was the *reason* I wasn’t in danger. Of course, I had asked Mathias why he would never harm me. Because let’s be honest, I didn’t believe it was out of the goodness of his heart. His answer was, *“Because he loves you.”*

After talking to Mathias, I decided a hot shower would help me to digest what he had said. I was wrong, but I did feel much better. I chose not to think anymore about what Dracula might feel for me, and focus instead on breakfast. I slipped on a clean pair of pajamas and went downstairs. Since it was supposed to rain all day again, I saw no point in getting dressed. As I reentered the kitchen, I noticed the small ivory envelope Dracula had delivered to me the night before. I put on a pot of coffee and sat down to read it. I picked up the invitation and held it to my nose. After remaining inside his shirt for several hours, it was drenched with his scent. I breathed him in as I pulled out the card and read:

*The original vampire requests the honor of your presence at the opening of his club, Original Sin on Saturday, March the thirteenth at seven o’clock in the evening.*

It was stamped with a red wax seal with the letter D. There was a number at the bottom to RSVP. I put it aside to pour myself some coffee and wondered what I would wear.

I was slicing fresh strawberries when Kat knocked at the door. Kathryn Roberts and I had known each other for five years now. I had rescued her former boyfriend from a pack of werewolves, and we'd been friends ever since. Kat is around five-foot-six, slender, and brunette. For the last month she had also been dating someone new. Marco had sent over a wereleopard to deliver roses to Kat on Valentine's Day with a card signed from the both of us. The wereleopard's name was Judas, and from what I heard from Kat, he was a real wild man in bed. He was also a stripper working his way through college.

They seemed happy enough, but I still didn't think Kat was over her last boyfriend, Charles. Charles Xander was a werewolf. A werewolf who had left the pack to follow Marco's challenger Bade Garren. Although, since I had saved Bade's life about a month ago, I wasn't sure how serious he was about killing Marco, anymore. They had been like brothers once, and they obviously loved each other. I often daydreamed that some sort of peace could exist between them.

Kat came in while I made waffles and informed me happily that my paintings had tripled in value. Before it was common knowledge that I hunted werewolves, my cover story had been that I was an artist. I still loved to paint, but had increasingly less spare time to do it in. Kat is an interior designer, and she sold my paintings in her shop.

She picked up the invitation and sniffed it.

"Oh, my God. What is that wonderful smell?"

"Dracula's cologne. Go on, open it up."

Kat read the invitation out loud and asked, "Are you going?"

"Of course. You're invited too, you know."

"RSVP," she said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, I know what it means, but I always wondered what that stood for exactly."

"Really Sexy Vampires Present." She giggled.

"Close enough," I agreed with a smile.

Then I remembered seeing Peter, and my expression grew serious.

"What's wrong?" Kat asked.

I told her about seeing Peter the day before, and about Marco canceling on me because of tornados. I also told her about Dracula personally delivering the invitation and the dream we had unexpectedly shared last night. I didn't leave any detail out, but Kat isn't squeamish. She didn't bat an eye while I told her about the piles of dead soldiers, and when I mentioned the body parts littering the ground, she just put more syrup on her waffle.

"That's disgusting," she said around a mouthful of fruit.

Of course, if she had actually seen it, it would have been a different story. Kat can listen to anything, but if she had taken in the scene I had, she would have been sick too. She certainly understood why I was so upset.

"That was really sweet of him though, staying with you till you fell asleep."

I didn't comment, mostly because I didn't know what to say. Dracula's concern and compassion had affected me very strongly.

Fortunately for me, Kat saved me from commenting by saying, "So, what do you suppose his surprise is?"

I had no idea, but I enjoyed listening to twenty minutes worth of her wild speculations.

Marco called about an hour after she left. The weather report had been wrong. It had turned into a beautiful clear day, and he was riding down to The Dread Moon, his other club near the beach. He wanted to make up for canceling our plans and asked if I would have lunch with him. I would go streaking in a lightning storm wearing conductive jewelry if Marco asked me to. Naturally, I agreed.

When he said he was riding down, I knew he meant he was coming on his motorcycle. Marco rode a bike modeled after some of the more classic styles, and I got excited, just listening to the engine. I changed into a pair of torn, but comfortable, jeans and a tight t-shirt that proclaimed my love of a certain gothic rock star. I had just laced up my combat boots when I heard him driving up. I took a quick look in the mirror. My hair was about as good as it was going to get, and I didn't feel like putting on make up. I kept my hair in a short spiky cut that was a mix between a pixie and one of those flippy little bobs. I'd let it get kind of shaggy lately, and by the time we rode a while, it would end up looking like a punk rocker with red hair.

I was blessed with good genetics, so the make-up, I didn't sweat; I just put on some lip gloss and slipped the tube in my pocket for later. With sunglasses and jacket in hand, I opened the door just as Marco stepped onto the porch.

He smiled at me, and the world stood still. He was wearing a faded pair of well-fitted jeans and a soft brown t-shirt. It went well with the deep chocolate color of his eyes, and his chestnut brown hair. Marco had also let his hair grow. It hung in straight glossy layers, the longest of which reached to just below his chin. I noticed a light stubble on his cheeks and could tell he hadn't shaved this morning. That was alright. I loved the scruffy look, and like those tight jeans, Marco wore it well.

For a moment Marco didn't say anything. He didn't have to. He didn't need flowery prose, or eloquent sentiment. All he needed to do was smile his come on smile, and simply look in my direction.

"Hello, Red," his rough sexy voice purred as he moved closer.

He bent to kiss me and I met him halfway. The full moon was less than a week away, and Marco's werewolf pheromones were working overtime. He smelled even better than Dracula's expensive cologne. He growled seductively as he pressed me back against the door and kissed me more thoroughly.

Touching Marco that day did something to me I hadn't expected. Sure, it turned me on, but I didn't just feel a tingle in all the right places. What I felt was warmer, and located a little closer to my heart.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked as he pulled back with a smile.

I slipped on my short leather jacket; however, Marco always ran a slight temperature. He grew hotter the closer he got to transformation, and the day was only mildly cool. I ran my hands over the sculpted muscles of his bare arms as I snuggled close behind him.

"Marco, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure, Red, tell me what's on your mind."

I'm not sure why, but I felt compelled to tell Marco about seeing Peter. He knew who he was to me, and why the incident would have bothered me. I also told him I would be attending the opening of Original Sin on Saturday night. Saturday was the full moon, and Marco didn't mind. Especially since I would be with Kat. He also didn't seem to mind me talking to Dracula as much since we were partners. I suppose he had

accepted that some contact was necessary if you were going to work with someone. He wouldn't have taken so kindly to the idea of him holding me while I cried myself to sleep last night, so I kept that part to myself.

As we drove, I happened to give a description of Peter. This was something I had never done before, and as I did so Marco pulled to the side of the dirt road we were on and stopped.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Say that again.”

I described Peter again, and Marco looked stricken.

## Chapter Four

“How many years has it been since you saw Peter? I mean, actually had contact with him?” he asked.

“Not since that night ....” I trailed off. Marco knew which night I was talking about. It was the night Peter had called me a monster.

“I don’t know how to tell you this,” Marco sighed.

My heart was pounding with the dread of bad news as Marco climbed off the bike and turned to me. I threw one leg over and turned to face him. He held out his hands, and I understood he meant for me to read his mind. Whatever it was, it was bad enough that he couldn’t find the words. I would have to see for myself.

I took Marco’s hands and found momentary comfort in their reassuring warmth as I opened my mind. Blocking away my own thoughts, I plunged into his memory. Almost instantly I knew why he was so upset. He knew who Peter was because Peter had called and asked permission to enter his territory. That was customary among alpha werewolves.

I broke the contact suddenly and Marco said, “I’m sorry, Red. I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“It’s alright, you didn’t know,” I replied, staring at the trees behind Marco and not seeing a one of them.

I couldn’t seem to comprehend that the man who had called me a monster so long ago had become one as well. Irony is a funny thing some times. I suppose I should have considered he got what he had coming, but I didn’t. I felt sorry for Peter. To my surprise, I didn’t cry. I didn’t even feel the urge to. Marco held me to him, and I rested my head against his flat stomach. He smelled of leather and fur, and comfort. I squeezed him a little tighter.

“Will you be alright?” he asked softly.

I nodded. “Any idea why he wanted to come here?”

“He just said he wanted to visit his home town again. It sounded reasonable to me. He didn’t seem to have any ulterior motives.”

“Fuck it,” I said suddenly, “let’s have lunch.”

“Red, are you sure? I understand if you want to go back. I had no idea who he was, or I would have told you.”

“I know you would,” I said as I hugged him tight once more. “And yes, I’m sure. I’m starving.”

We drove thirty minutes out of town to Kat’s favorite restaurant. When we arrived she was standing in line outside waiting for a table. Judas was with her. This would be my first opportunity to meet him, although I recognized him instantly from her description.

He was about five-foot-eight with long glossy, black hair and very well-put together. I would guess him to be in his mid-twenties. He had a genuine smile, and I could tell by the way he looked at Marco that he respected him. This immediately put

Judas in my good graces. Judas was the only one of his kind to have been discovered so far, and Marco had let him into the pack against numerous complaints. He had been injured helping Marco's wolves, and he felt he owed Judas his protection. I think Marco suffered from a hero complex, but I couldn't afford to cast stones. After all, I'd met most of my friends by rescuing them from werewolves.

Kat introduced me to Judas before turning a gleaming smile to Marco. "And of course, you've met," she said.

Marco inclined his head regally, but couldn't seem to prevent the slight grin.

Kat jumped all over and yelled, "Son of a bitch!"

"Well," Marco snickered. "I've never had quite that effect before."

"It's not you wolfman, it's the pager. Our table is ready," Kat said, waving a device covered in flashing lights in front of Marco's face.

I heard Judas whisper, "You call him wolfman?" He seemed impressed.

"He's a friend of mine," Kat replied with a shrug.

"Shall we?" Marco smiled, putting an arm around me and Kat.

We were taken to a booth beside the bar. Once everyone was seated, I asked Marco, "Baby, will you order for me? I've got to go to the restroom."

The request was not unusual in itself. However when I usually called someone sugar or baby, I was insulting them in some way. Everyone who knew me knew I had a way of turning endearments like this into insults. This was the first time I had used such a term for Marco, and I did so minus the sarcasm. The moment was not lost on Kat, or Marco. He turned his wolfish grin my way, and I nearly peed my pants.

I had barely zipped my jeans before I heard the door to the ladies room open again. I knew it was Kat even before she spoke.

"Baby, huh?"

"Do you have to pee Kat, or are you just being nosy?"

"Oh, come down off your high horse," she said with a laugh. "Or should I say your werewolf?"

"Fuck you," I said, but my words lacked conviction.

I couldn't wipe off the grin as I began to wash my hands. I was trying hard not to laugh at what she'd just said.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" she persisted.

"No, Kat. Honestly. It just sort of slipped."

She smiled and it wasn't devious or nosy, it warmed my heart. Kat was really happy for me, and it showed.

"Come on then," she sighed. "I'm starving."

When we returned, Kat slid into place beside Judas, facing the isle. Marco stood up and I scooted across the seat near the wall. The move was subtle, but it was a show of his dominance, and protection. There was a time when it would have pissed me off, like him insisting on sleeping between me and the door. But now it made me smile. I found I was very much enjoying Marco's protection, and couldn't believe I had avoided it for so long.

"I ordered you a salad," he said, as he casually touched my thigh.

His hand was warm, and seemed to burn me through my jeans. I smiled my approval, but when I looked at Kat she seemed angry. Judas hadn't known what to order for her, and the look on her face said she would have been pissed if it was a salad.

“He’s not suggesting that I lose weight, Kat. I like the salads here,” I explained.

The crease in her forehead relaxed, and when the waitress came back, she ordered a burger and fries. I laughed, but shook my head at Marco when his expression told me he wanted to know what was so funny. I knew Kat well enough to know why she had ordered the fattening food. She had been burning off enough calories that she could afford to eat what she wanted. I winked at her, and she blushed.

When they brought the food I saw that Marco had ordered his usual rare steak, and Judas had gotten a salad like mine.

“I don’t want to bloat,” he explained. “I’ve got a show tonight.”

He worked at a place down the street from Club Red known as The Package Store. Despite the name, it was fairly upscale. Still, I could barely fight the urge to laugh every time someone mentioned the place.

“So, Judas, what are you going to school for?” I asked, trying to make polite conversation.

“I want to be a veterinarian.”

I tried not to laugh, and instead nearly choked. Surely I wasn’t the only one who found the idea of a wereleopard becoming a vet, funny? The tears in Marco’s eyes as he patted my back answered my question.

“Alright, Red?” he asked, as he kept fighting to keep the corners of his mouth from turning up.

I just nodded. I didn’t trust myself to speak.

As the conversation turned to questions about Marco’s clubs, and small talk, I found I couldn’t focus enough to pay attention. The only thing that seemed real to me in the whole room was Marco’s leg pressed against mine. I fiddled idly with what was left of my salad while I ran my hand along his inner thigh. I thought back over all the years we had spent as enemies and realized I had wanted to touch his inner thigh for a very long time. I closed my eyes for a moment, enjoying the way his hot flesh burned me through the fabric.

Marco’s voice never wavered. He kept on talking as if I wasn’t groping him underneath the table. Then I moved my hand higher, and he growled in spite of himself. It was a soft sexy sound, but it was definitely not human, and other people turned and stared. Kat gave me a look that clearly said, “What did you do?” And Judas just looked afraid. But Marco was grinning from ear to ear, and pinched my side playfully causing me to move my hand.

In a moment the normal buzz of the restaurant returned, and I put my hand back. He raised an eyebrow as he looked at me, and I raised one right back. I wanted to touch him, and that was exactly what I was going to do. My look said, “What are you going to do about it?” The smile he gave me said, “Not a damn thing.”

Just when things were going so good, on our way out we ran into Peter. Literally, he nearly knocked me down. I wasn’t sure how to react. I knew him instantly and just stood there in mute shock. I had forgotten what it felt like to be in his presence and having that familiar feeling mingled with the presence of an alpha werewolf was not pleasant. It felt positively unsettling.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” he began. “*Lilith*. Oh, my God.” Then he caught sight of Marco and averted his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Marco answered. He looked down at me to be sure it really was

alright. I nodded.

Peter smiled at me and asked, "Do you have just a minute?"

My heart was pounding, but I wasn't afraid. In fact, I wasn't excited either. I tried to figure out my reaction as we walked out onto the sidewalk while Kat, Judas and Marco stepped out into the parking lot.

"I don't actually have anything to say," he confessed. His blue eyes sparkled, just like they always did and his hair was still the same light blond. Peter was only a few inches taller than me, about Kat's height. I had often fantasized about what it would be like to stand face to face with Peter again. Sometimes I thought of slapping him for what he had said to me. Other times, I wanted to just throw my arms around him and cry. But I didn't do either one of those things. I didn't want to. Thinking about Peter all those years was completely different than actually standing beside him again. Because I didn't want to be standing beside him anymore, I wanted to be across the parking lot standing beside Marco, and talking to Kat. I smiled at him as I realized, I didn't even want to be there. I felt free.

"I heard you and Amy got divorced," I said. But I mentioned it out of concern, not spite.

"Yeah," he smiled sheepishly. "What can I say, Lil? She wasn't you."

"No one ever will be," I said and smiled brightly.

I left Peter with a smile and nearly ran across the parking lot to Marco. I wanted to fling my arms around him and shout the good news, "I'm free! I'm not in love with Peter anymore!" But I didn't. I knew when I looked at Peter that I still cared very much for him. But that love had changed over the years. It had become the deep affection you felt for your friends and family. I still loved him, but more along the lines of how I loved Kat instead of how I loved ... anyone else.

I took Marco's hand, and let some of what I was feeling pass to him through my touch. I wanted to rip off his clothes in the middle of the parking lot, and I didn't even try to hide my enthusiasm. He wrapped up the conversation quickly and drove faster than he should on the way home. Oh yeah, he got the message alright.

He barely put the bike in park in front of my steps before he turned to me with a hungry growl and pulled me to my feet. He snatched off my jacket as he ran his hands in a hot trail up my arms. When he reached my shoulders, Marco pulled me against him. The heat of his body burned me through our thin shirts, and my nipples hardened against him. Somehow we had gotten up the steps, and I began to unbuckle his belt. He lifted me against the door, and I wrapped myself around him. He growled again, and I squeezed him tighter.

I'm not sure how long this kiss lasted, but I had never experienced anything quite like it. Marco didn't kiss me with the practiced ease of Dracula's technique. However, he was definitely skilled. He kissed me with a passion I had found lacking in the vampire. Marco kissed me with the hunger of an animal long denied satisfaction. He was starving, and he was hungry for me.

Before I knew what had happened, the door was open and I hit the ground hard. Marco fell on top of me. He hadn't had time to brace himself, and his six-foot-two frame nearly flattened me.

I groaned as I looked up to find Alek looking startled and embarrassed. His hair was between a medium and dark shade of blond, with silvery gray just barely visible

around the temples. This hair stood out at haphazard angles, letting me know he had been asleep. Alek is also tall, around six foot one. He looked down his long nearly hooked nose and smiled abashedly.

“I’m so terribly sorry,” he drawled smoothly in his thick British accent. “I thought someone was knocking at the door.”

He reached out a hand and helped to pull Marco to his feet, then offered a hand to me. I smiled at him and Alek averted his eyes and blushed. He was definitely not a prude. In fact, I had never seen him blush before. He must have been imagining what we were doing against the door.

“It’s alright,” Marco said, placing a hand on the wizard’s shoulder. “I really should get going.”

He smiled at me in a way that said he wasn’t angry, it was just bad timing.

“I’ve got some business to take care of at The Dread Moon. I’ll call you about next weekend?”

Even in front of Alek, the only response I could think of was to kiss him. It was as close as Marco had ever come to being invited through my front door, but it was only by a few feet. He smiled and closed the door behind him. This may not have seemed strange, but all of the doorknobs in my house are made of solid silver. I had never seen a werewolf powerful enough to be able to touch them without pain. My friend Luther was his second in command, and even he never directly touched my doorknobs. He always used his shirt to open the doors, like you would to avoid getting shocked by static electricity. I’d even caught him going around the house with a pot holder before.

I was impressed, to say the least.

“You want some tea?” Alek asked.

“Sure.”

I followed him into the kitchen, his long blue robe swishing in his wake. The nightshirt he wore matched the dark blue, and it complemented his hair nicely. Alek wasn’t unattractive by any means, but I was more concerned about his health than the bit of his nice legs being revealed.

“How are you feeling?” I asked softly, reaching out to touch his arm as I passed him.

He had gone to bed early the night before. He’d been sneezing all day, and I was afraid he was catching a cold.

“I’m fine. Overslept today though,” he said, yawning.

It was one o’clock.

“I would say so,” I answered with a smile.

“I took some allergy medicine and passed out,” he explained.

I snickered. “A wizard took an over the counter allergy medicine?”

He shrugged. “Worked didn’t it?”

“I suppose so,” I smiled.

Alek smoothed his disheveled hair and smiled back at me. “How do I look?”

I was used to his teasing personality and knew he was only harassing me because he could.

“Like you should get ready to answer the door.”

“What?”

His confusion was charming. Ms. Wilson was on her way up the steps at that

very moment, and so excited about asking me to her annual tea party that her thoughts broadcasted like a radio tower.

## Chapter Five

When we heard a knock at the door, Alek jumped.

“How did you do that?” he asked.

“I didn’t do anything. Will you let Ms. Wilson in please?”

He gave me a long penetrating stare as he made his way reluctantly to the front door. He was either shameless, or he’d forgotten the fact that he was wearing only a thin silk nightshirt and a robe. I was betting on a combination of the two.

I heard her excited voice as he led her through the foyer into the kitchen. She was positively beaming at Alek. That bastard he was charming her. Not the way a vampire could with his eyes, but simply with his personality. Before coming to live with me, he’d been in theatre for years. If anyone could put on a good show, it was Alek. I certainly wasn’t immune to Alek’s charms, but being his friend did give me some defense. When I saw the way she smiled up at him, I wondered if my defense was all it was cracked up to be.

He introduced himself, and bowed to kiss her hand. Ms. Wilson, whom I had known all my life actually giggled like a little girl. She was in her sixties with silvery hair and a nice figure for a woman her age. To be honest, she had a nice figure for a woman *any* age. She was a true southern belle, and her tea parties were something not to be missed. Everyone went to catch up on the latest gossip, while she flitted from table to table, doing the same thing. In spite of her nosiness, Ms. Wilson had a charm of her own, and I enjoyed seeing her. She and Alfred had never gotten along, and she seemed very pleased at the fact that he hadn’t answered the door. He thought she was a nosy old bat, and she thought he was an over-opinionated Italian. They were both right.

“Would you like to stay for tea?” Alek asked smoothly.

He was actually flirting with her! I tried to control my expression. But then I reminded myself that they were close to the same age. Alek only *looked* twenty years younger.

“Oh, I couldn’t,” she said, beaming. “I just came by to extend an invitation to my tea party.”

She was flirting back! I thought I might be sick ... and jealous. I shook my head against the thought and began looking for some tea bags. Ms. Wilson, to her credit, left Alek where he stood and approached me. She placed the invitation on the bar while I rummaged in the cabinet.

“Is Dracula around?” she asked.

The question startled me so that I dropped the box of English tea on the floor. As far as Alek was concerned, that was practically an insult against the Queen. She bent to pick up the box and handed it to me with a smile.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just assumed that with all the tabloid pictures of you two together that you had some association with one another outside of work. Or won’t the werewolf allow it?”

“He allows it,” I said carefully.

Ms. Wilson must have seen the irritation in my look. She quickly began to explain that being the tolerant soul she was, she had the brilliant idea to invite Dracula to her tea party.

“See, I think it would be a great way to show we accept his kind. You know, extend a little hospitality?”

I couldn’t help smiling at her as I asked, “This wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that he’s one of the sexiest men to ever walk the face of the earth?”

She blushed. Surprise, surprise.

“Well, maybe just a little. Don’t you think it’s a good idea, dear? Or do you think he wouldn’t be interested?”

“On the contrary, I think he would be delighted.”

Dracula never missed an opportunity for good press coverage. Not since so many vampires wanted to be able to live in the open. He figured the more harmless he looked, the easier it would be for others trying to just exist in peace. My, how the mighty had fallen. I wasn’t sure what would make someone go from a warlord to being the poster boy for vampire rights, but it must be something powerful. The only place Dracula felt more at home than on a battlefield was in the bedroom. How I suddenly knew that, I had no idea. I tried not to think about it as I informed Ms. Wilson that he would be over after dark if she wanted to come back and invite him personally. She was tickled pink, literally. She blushed all the way out the door.

I also noticed as I read her invitation that she had chosen to have her party at dusk. She had really thought this through. While I dipped my tea bag idly, I thought about Alek sitting quietly across the table from me. Alek and I were about as close as I was to Kat, so we could sit in silence comfortably. But there was something I found I wanted to know all of the sudden. “How come you never married?”

He took a sip of tea as he replied silkily, “Why?”

“What do you mean, why? It’s a simple question.”

“You see me flirt with a little old lady and you suddenly think of why I might be single.” He smiled at me before taking another sip of tea. He was deliberately trying to provoke me.

“Don’t be an asshole, Alek.”

“I’ve got no problem looking at the same woman every day,” he said with a sigh. “But I get nervous at the thought of being legally obligated to be there.”

“Fair enough.” I shrugged and added another lump of sugar to my tea.

Alek had turned sixty years old in February, but you couldn’t tell it. Of course, wizards aged even slower than the rest of the Terran population, whose average life span was around two hundred and fifty years. He would be doing good to pass for forty on a bad day. A really bad day.

“She seemed awfully interested in your vampire,” he commented as his pouty lips pursed in thought.

“Yes, she did, and he’s not my vampire.”

Alek looked at me as if I were a little slow in the head.

“Whatever you say.”

Alek was famous on planet Terra for defeating a powerful dark wizard some twenty years ago. He had spent the last forty years hiding out in London where he’d made a good living at writing and directing plays. He even owned a very successful

theater, which he had left in the hands of his “capable assistant.” Currently he was working on a new play, and I left him to it while I went to train.

It had been a while since I’d had a good workout, and after the energy I didn’t get to burn off with Marco, I needed one. I had just worked up a really good sweat when Kat walked in.

“Something wrong?” she asked.

She took in my sweaty appearance with a glance. I had been giving a seventy pound punching bag some serious hell, and it was swinging nearly off its hinges. I reached out and stopped it with one hand.

“No, I’m fine,” I lied.

She sat on the floor while I continued, and she turned off my music. She asked what I thought of Judas, and while I told her my good impression, she asked about Peter. I had been trying really hard not to think about seeing him today. I told Kat the whole story, not just the brief conversation, but about him being a werewolf and everything. Being my best friend, Kat knew the history between me and Peter. She was shocked.

“That bastard, he had it coming. It must have been awful for you,” she said sympathetically. “It was bad enough to have your first time turn on you, but then to have things end up like this ... I say it’s good enough for him.”

“Thanks for the sympathy, Kat, but Peter wasn’t my first time.”

“You were having sex *before* fifteen?!”

“No,” I laughed, as I took off my hand wraps. “Julius was my first time,” I said, smiling with the memory.

“The gorgeous man with the wings?!” Kat had only ever heard my description of Julius, but that was enough. “You had sex for the very first time with a man with *wings*, and you never thought to mention this?!” After a pouting pause she asked, “Well, how was it?”

I laughed till my stomach hurt. “It was good, Kat, it was really good.”

Then something seemed to dawn on her. “So, you never actually had sex with Peter?”

“No,” I said sadly. “I didn’t need to. I loved Peter in a way that went beyond physical attraction. He could just smile at me, and it made my day. His absence did more for me than other’s presence.”

To my surprise, Kat’s eyes filled with tears.

“I’m sorry, Kat, are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” Kat sniffed, as she got up and looked for some tissue. I pointed her toward the clean towel on the weight bench. “It’s just that I saw Charles the other day, and I’ve got PMS,” she wept.

“Trust me, I understand. Did he see you, did you speak?”

She just shook her head.

“I never called him baby, though,” she said with a half hearted smile while we made our way up the hall to the kitchen. “You didn’t even call Alfred baby.” I felt my face droop at the mention of his name. “Oh, Lilith, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned him.”

“It’s okay.” I tried to give her a reassuring smile, but failed miserably.

“Do you ever hear from him?”

I took her upstairs and showed Kat the letter he had written me a month ago on

Valentine's Day. She started crying again, and so did I. After a good heart to heart about all of the misery we had experienced, and some chocolate, Kat was on her way.

I told her I still had to wash my hair before Dracula came over. He wanted to see a classic vampire movie, the one where they do that long drawn out interview, and I had promised to watch it with him. Besides, I'd seen it a dozen times. What was one more?

"Does Marco know about this?" she asked skeptically.

"You think I would lie to him? As long as Alek or someone else is around, he's okay with it," I assured her.

As soon as Kat left, I jumped in the shower. While I washed my hair I found myself mentally going through my entire wardrobe, and I hated myself for it. All the same, I wanted to look good when Dracula came over. I had told Kat the truth, Marco was okay with him coming over occasionally. Dracula was very good at finding legitimate sounding reasons to come by my house, but I knew he was just making excuses to be near me. But then again, I wasn't exactly complaining. He was enough eye candy to put you into a diabetic shock. There is, after all, a big difference in admiring a work of art, and taking the painting off the wall.

This was how I rationalized it to myself as I selected a pair of comfortable jeans and an emerald green shirt. The shirt looked like something out of Alek's closet instead of mine. It was a tunic which reached to mid-thigh on me. It was also very thin, and a brilliant shade of green. I thought it really brought out the color in my hair.

After unlocking the balcony doors I went down to the kitchen. Alek said he may or may not join us. I didn't see him around, but I helped myself to a bottle of wine he had enchanted. Dracula couldn't enjoy it, but I could. It may have been selfish to drink it in front of him, but if I was going to look at him any more this week, I needed a drink. I was falling pretty hard for Marco, but that did not mean you could put steak underneath my nose when I was starving. I was a descendant of The Seducer, after all.

As I walked back into the foyer there was a knock at the door. I looked at the clock. Ms. Wilson was right on time, but Dracula wasn't. Almost as soon as I thought he was late, I heard him closing my balcony doors upstairs. I stood corrected. I heard him opening my bedroom door while I went to let Ms. Wilson in.

Ms. Wilson's smile could have lit up my entire front yard, but it wasn't directed at me. I could tell Dracula was descending the stairs behind me, not because of the look on her face, but from the fluttering in my heart. As the vampire reached my side he smiled at her, and I could practically hear her heart leap into her throat. I also noticed that Dracula and I matched. He was wearing an emerald green tunic and a pair of comfortable-looking black pants that I knew were cotton, because he had worn them before, and I had touched them. I closed my eyes against the memory of the soft fabric underneath my hands and the firm flesh I knew to be beneath the thin cotton.

"Miss Betty, it has been a long time," he said in his smooth sultry voice.

He bent to kiss her hand and I thought Ms. Wilson might hit the floor.

"You know each other?" I was stunned.

"Yes," he replied. Dracula smiled at me and my heart leapt as if by command.

"I'm afraid the years have been kinder to you," she said, patting her gray hair.

"You do yourself a grave injustice, my dear," he purred.

Betty Wilson proceeded to invite him to her tea party. I watched as he listened patiently and told her he would be delighted. He thanked her for her consideration in

hosting the event at dusk. She thanked him for being kind to an old woman.

“I would never abuse the elderly,” he said as he winked at her.

“Oh, you,” she scoffed. “It was lovely to see you again.” She beamed as he showed her to the door. “Thank you,” she said quietly to me. I understood that Ms. Wilson was grateful for more than just being able to speak to Dracula, but I couldn’t for the life of me imagine what.

## Chapter Six

“I knew her lover,” he said in answer to my unvoiced question.

Dracula turned back toward me and I asked, “Ms. Wilson was involved with a vampire?”

“A very long time ago,” he said softly. “His name was Eric, and they were in love,” he said as he put his arm around me and led me back to the sitting room.

“What happened?”

“He was attacked by a lynch mob. I snatched Betty out of the house before they found her. No one knew she was there.”

“You saved her life.”

“She did not think so at first. She would have died with him if I had not restrained her.”

The look on his face told me just how hard it was to hold Ms. Wilson back while her true love died. I felt my eyes filling with tears.

“Do not cry, my angel. It is ancient history now,” he whispered, lifting a hand to wipe my tears. However, he stopped just short of contact.

“You don’t understand,” I sniffed. “Ms. Wilson never married. I asked her about it when I was a little girl and she said the man she loved had died at war. She said that if she couldn’t have the one she loved, there was no one else she wanted.” Now I was crying in earnest as he hugged me to him.

“You do have a soft heart.”

But this was not spoken as an insult. Even with my ability to block out other’s emotions, I usually felt enough to imagine what they were feeling, and sometimes my imagination got the better of me. I remembered all the times I had felt that Ms. Wilson was lonely. Most of these memories were from when I was a child. I’d even asked her before and she scoffed at the very idea. But now I knew her words were just bravado and she’d spent her whole life missing someone who would never again rise from the dead. I felt like my own heart had been broken.

He stroked the hair back from my face, and I realized that this was the first time Dracula had directly touched my skin since our bad dream the night before. I pulled away, and it hurt his feelings. Why me? Why did I have to have the ability to know this? You wouldn’t think that a centuries-old vampire could have his feelings hurt, but somehow I managed it.

“Vlad, I’m sorry,” I whispered. “It’s going to take a little time for me to move beyond that dream.”

“I understand,” he said softly.

The shame of it was, he really did understand, but it still hurt his feelings. I watched as he made himself comfortable on the loveseat in the corner. My sofa, which is much larger, sits in front of the fireplace. There’s more room to sit apart on the sofa. However, with the loveseat in front of the television, I had little choice except to be near him.

Dracula noticed my hesitation. “I will not bite.” He smiled while I retrieved my wine glass. When I still hesitated he stretched out his arms and called softly, “Come—these arms have longed for you.”

Who could refuse such a request? And truth be told, I had longed for his embrace. I knew the instant he touched me that I had nothing to fear from him. Not just because he’d said so or even because Mathias had said so. But because I knew I would never know pain by Dracula’s hands. I snuggled up underneath his arm and handed him the remote. I was barefoot, and curled my feet underneath me. I looked down his long legs and saw he had also removed his shoes. I really liked Dracula’s feet. He must get a pedicure on a regular basis. I snickered at the thought of a bad-ass vampire getting a pedicure. He looked at me questioningly, and I took a sip of wine to avoid telling him what was so funny.

“I have no idea how to work this,” he said, handing me back the remote.

“Is that possible? A man who doesn’t know how to work a remote control? Holy shit,” I laughed.

“Show me,” he said eagerly, and I did.

Once we started the movie I watched him just as attentively as he watched the screen. Not even the hot vampires in the movie could distract me from Dracula. I’m sorry, but there was only one man I found more interesting than Dracula, and he wasn’t there. He seemed to greatly enjoy the number of things the story got right. He also equally enjoyed pointing out where they were wrong, but complemented their sense of style.

By the time the movie was over, I had had enough of Alek’s enchanted wine that I was resting my head in Dracula’s lap. I also hadn’t even noticed Alek was sitting in the chair by the window. When I got up to go to the bathroom, I jumped all over. Alek laughed, and Dracula caught my empty wine glass.

As I left Alek to snicker and made my way to the bathroom, I found that not only was I feeling good, I was stinking drunk. With the way I metabolize alcohol, it had been a very long time since I had been drunk. When I walked back past Dracula sitting on the loveseat, I decided I was very much enjoying it. I also found that my mouth was a little dry and went toward the kitchen to get a glass of water.

As I entered the kitchen, Alek appeared behind me.

“Stop sneaking up on me,” I snapped.

“I’m not. You’re just too drunk to pay attention,” he teased.

He held up a fresh bottle of wine and popped the cork.

“Why are you opening another bottle?” I asked.

“Because, darling, you drank the other one,” he drawled.

“The whole bottle?”

I was shocked. Dracula had kept refilling my glass every time I passed it to him. That son of a bitch, he was trying to get me drunk.

Alek just smiled sarcastically as he read the label, “They should give this stuff a serious warning label. Something like: Strong enough for a wizard, but made for a werewolf.”

I laughed louder than I should, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“You want some more?” he asked. I wrinkled my nose and he laughed at me.

“Come on,” he said, leading me back like an excited child. “Let’s watch something

else.”

And we did. The three of us had ourselves a regular little movie marathon. Well, they did. I was too drunk to pay much attention. As it turns out, Alek loves westerns, and believe it or not, Dracula had never heard of spaghetti westerns. They even took turns practicing squinting their eyes at each other. He was utterly fascinated. When he asked me if I wanted anything to eat or drink, I shook my head and discovered I was utterly wasted.

When I returned for the second time from the bathroom, Dracula was laying back against the arm of the loveseat with his legs stretched across the place where I had been sitting. Without hesitation I spread his long legs and crawled between them. I used his inner thigh for a pillow, and fell asleep.

“Did you notice this?” his voice woke me about an hour later.

“What?”

I looked up to see he was reading Ms. Wilson’s invitation more thoroughly.

“Her party is on April twenty-eighth. Two days after your birthday.”

“How did you know my birthday?” I asked groggily.

“I know many things about you,” he said, smiling warmly. “We have similar abilities, you and I. Or perhaps you forget how much of your flesh has touched mine.”

He had only to mention our night together and my mind was flooded with images. I saw his lovely face, hovering above mine once more. His hair spilled about his shoulders like a dark curtain and his eyes glowed like emerald fire in the darkness. Suddenly the smell of his cologne was mingled with sweat. I could taste the salty tang of his glistening skin as I licked my lips. I remembered everything. Not that I could forget. But I remembered it now as if it had happened all over again ... and all he had to do was mention it.

This was both unnerving and pleasurable at the same time. Even though I now belonged to Marco, a part of my soul would always belong to Dracula. I would keep the memory of that night safe and hold it tight against my heart on cold nights.

“You’re not so easily forgotten,” I purred as I pulled myself higher up his body to rest my face against his chest. I was still lying very intimately between his legs, and had forgotten Alek entirely. “Oh, my goodness,” I sighed. “Did I just say that out loud?”

“Yes,” he replied with a wicked grin. “Do not worry; the wizard is asleep.”

“No I’m not, you scoundrel,” Alek laughed. “Trying to take advantage of a defenseless woman! Fear not, fair maiden,” he announced bravely, “I shall save you.”

Alek stood up with one hand raised high and immediately went sprawling over the footstool in front of him. His robe flew up over his head and his butt was turned up toward us.

“Holy shit, you’re drunk,” I said, laughing as the wizard finally got to his feet.

Dracula threw back his head and laughed. It was a wonderful, genuine sound, devoid of magic. And for a moment, I got a glimpse of the man he used to be.

“Calm yourself, wizard. I have no intention of compromising anyone’s honor,” he said, his eyes still sparkling with laughter. “Besides, that would violate my agreement with the werewolf.”

That got my attention. “You mean Marco? What agreement?”

“I have agreed that I will not touch you, as long as you are his. However, should you come to me willingly, he will not seek revenge.”

“When the fuck was anybody going to tell me about this? You bargain for me like I’m a piece of meat, and *neither* of you thinks to mention it.”

“I am sorry, my angel, but it never came up.”

“No, that’s the problem with you, it *stays* up.”

“I assure you, I have behaved myself,” he said very seriously.

I could see the challenge in his eyes, and was determined to prove him wrong. I caressed the front of his pants shamelessly, and was shocked to find he wasn’t even aroused. Considering my reaction to the memories he had sent my way, I didn’t know how he managed it.

“See,” he said. “In complete control. I will honor our agreement.”

“This doesn’t count as touching me?” I asked sarcastically.

“No, my angel, *you* are touching me. There were no specifications about that.”

I removed my hand, but Dracula didn’t remove his smile.

Alek staggered into the kitchen with a mumbled, “Anyone want coffee?”

I was already beginning to sober up, but decided to take him up on the offer anyway. Alek never drank coffee. The situation would have been funnier if I hadn’t been brooding over Marco and Dracula bargaining for me behind my back.

“Do not be angry,” Dracula whispered over my shoulder. “He felt he had to set some boundaries.” He added with a sigh, “I do not blame him. If only he knew what I thought when I look at you, he would have set more.”

While Alek made coffee, I told him and Dracula both about the new addition to the H.A.V.O.C. team, Johnny.

“He should be here by next week,” I said as Alek handed me a cup.

“Yes, I’ve heard of him,” the wizard commented thoughtfully through his drunken fog. “He’s supposed to be really good.”

“What will you wear to my club?” Dracula asked as if the subject had never changed. I just looked at him and he continued, “I would like to see you in velvet.”

“Is that all you ever think about?” Alek spat sarcastically.

Dracula touched his hand lightly, “No, but it is a popular subject with you.”

“Everybody stop reading my bloody mind,” the wizard snarled.

“Is this the same Johnny you dated?” Dracula asked, looking back toward me.

“Yes.”

He didn’t comment further, but I could tell he made a mental note of the fact. We all talked a little while longer before Dracula walked me upstairs.

When Alek headed for the dungeon I asked, “You trust him to go upstairs with me?”

He just snorted and opened the door to the dungeon stairs. The coffee hadn’t done Alek much good.

“I will tuck you in.” The vampire smiled, as he placed his hand on my elbow.

And that’s what he did. Dracula waited until I changed clothes, (in the bathroom out of his sight) and turned down the covers for me. I had a new comforter, but it was still mainly red with intricate gold embroidery. As a matter of fact, it matched Marco’s bed quite nicely. My sheets were gold, and the satin felt smooth against my face.

Dracula pulled the covers up over my shoulder as he whispered, “I will send my car for you on Saturday.” He kissed me on the forehead, and I was asleep before he left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Friday morning, Kat and I started shopping bright and early. I tried to pretend I wasn't excited about finding an outfit to impress the vampire, but it was a flimsy act. Besides, Kat knew me enough to know better. We were both excited, and didn't even try to hide it after trying on a few outfits. With each new dress I found, my heart fluttered in a way which was positively shameful. Not because of the dress, but the thought of Dracula's reaction. I was now shopping for something purely to match his tastes. I almost stopped myself, but then I realized that his tastes were also my tastes.

Luther went along with us, which made the outing even more fun. Luther and I had grown up together. In the years we were apart, I had become a werewolf Hunter, and he had become a werewolf. Strangely enough, this had not affected our friendship in the slightest. I stepped out of the dressing room of an expensive shop and looked in his direction. Luther was sitting on a couch inside the large dressing area waiting to tell me how I looked. His long white blond hair was pulled back in a tight braid, and he was wearing jeans and a blue t-shirt in place of his usual leather or vinyl. That was the way he dressed for work. He helped Marco run Club Red sometimes, and he was his second in command since Bade had turned traitor. Luther was over six feet tall, and looked like a wet dream, but when he smiled, he was still my Luther, and I couldn't for the life of me get past that.

"Oh, *yeah*," he said, smiling appreciatively. His look wasn't hard to read. Luther had made it known that he found me attractive. However, he had also made it known that he loved me, and wouldn't trade my friendship for the world. Seeing as how, I was dating his boss, the biggest, baddest alpha werewolf in the country, that was as far as things went.

The dress I was wearing was white. It was long and sheer, and touched the floor. The straps were practically nonexistent, and it dipped low in the back with a dramatic draping of fabric over my butt.

"Now, what look are we going for?" he asked.

"I want to look sexy but not slutty."

"How about you?" he asked Kat, who had just stepped out wearing a short red dress.

"Same thing, I guess," she said as she examined her butt in the mirror.

"Well," he said with a grin, "you're gonna need to change, cause that dress screams 'fuck me.'"

"Maybe that's what I wanted it to say," she snarled as she stepped over and whacked Luther in the head playfully. She sounded mad, but her heart obviously wasn't in the attempted assault. She didn't even muss his hair.

He just laughed, "It's going to take more than that to hurt a werewolf."

She sulked off to find another dress and I turned to look in the mirror. I saw Luther approaching me, and didn't object when he put his hands on my bare shoulders.

"You're a vision," he said softly.

"Thanks," I said, touching his hand. "But I was thinking something black ... something velvet."

He growled, and I was surprised to find myself reacting almost as strongly as I would have to Marco. Wasn't I just telling myself that things could not go further with Luther? I'm pretty sure that's what I'd decided.

“That sounds nice. You know, Marco sent me,” he added.

“I figured as much.”

“But I would have come anyway. I am your protector in his absence.”

While Luther continued to touch my shoulder I realized he was becoming a lot of things in Marco’s absence. How did this happen? Maybe Dracula was right, too long without sex. Since I had come into my new powers from Mathias, and enhanced those abilities from sleeping with Dracula, I was definitely not the sexual camel I used to be. You know, store a hump for later? Now I was more like a sexual predator, in the sense that I was practically tracking it by scent.

“I’ll go look for something else for you,” Luther volunteered.

“Thank you.”

As I spoke Luther gasped in response to my voice, and his sudden overture made more sense. I needed to have sex so bad, my powers were beginning to sort of leak out. It reminded me of a dam about to break. I had been unconsciously using the voice of seduction on Luther, and even though it was a subdued version of the voice, it had obviously had an effect.

## Chapter Seven

Luther returned with the most beautiful black velvet dress I could have imagined. It was a classic two-piece style fit for the red carpet.

“It’s perfect,” I said, almost in a whisper.

“And I got this,” he added suggestively.

Luther held up a piece of lingerie so skimpy I wasn’t actually sure what was supposed to go where. And I wasn’t about to ask for his suggestions.

“*Luther*,” I scolded.

“I’m sure Dracula would appreciate this one,” he said as he lifted the dress in one hand, “but I’m leaning more toward this one.” His smile was scandalous as he held up the lingerie. And exactly how did *he* know I was shopping with Dracula in mind? I suppose I was more transparent than I’d thought.

“Luther, I’m sorry.”

I went on to explain to him as briefly as possible what had been happening. He knew all about my powers, but had never experienced them before. I was trying to explain as quickly as possible before Kat got back with more dresses.

“It’s alright,” he assured me. “Really. Do you have any idea where your voice touches me when you speak?”

I blushed, and he laughed.

As I looked out of the dressing room at Kat, I realized that my powers were affecting her too. She wasn’t attracted to women, so it was just making Kat horny in general. She was picking out the sluttiest dresses in the place. I felt awful.

“Shit,” I said, taking the dress from him. “Help me make sure Kat doesn’t end up on the street corner instead of Original Sin, please.” He tried to hand me the lingerie, too, as he followed me through the door. I pushed him back out with a laugh.

The skirt was ankle-length and form-fitting until it reached my knees where it fanned out in the classic mermaid style. The strapless top fit like a corset, just covering the top of my hips. There were gathers in the fabric down the top which kept it from looking, or fitting too tight. I looked positively elegant.

Luther and Kat unanimously approved of my decision and helped me to find a scarf to match. One side was a deep-wine taffeta, the other was black velvet. Kat ended up with a surprisingly classy ensemble. It was an ankle-length satin gown in a pale shade of gold. The gown was strapless, and underneath the breasts, there was a black velvet bow.

With that out of the way, we were off to look for shoes, and Luther came along just to touch my feet.

\* \* \* \*

Driving home late that afternoon, I was so horny I could have bit through my steering wheel. Not that it would have done any good. Luther had taken off in the direction of Club Red, so I couldn’t attack him. Marco had a meeting with my uncle Aldan, back on Terra. Aldan Medwin was the eldest member of the wizard council, one

of the governing bodies of planet Terra. He was also my great, great, uncle. Today, he was just another reason I couldn't get my hands on Marco.

Calling Dracula was out of the question, even though I'm sure he would have been more than happy to help me with my problem. I needed the kind of relief that batteries could not bring. I had to stop outside the house to catch my breath. My heart was racing, and I'd actually started to sweat. My mind was filled with images similar to the first time I had touched Dracula. But I soon realized this wasn't his doing, it was mine. After all, we shared a similar power and mine was beginning to run unchecked.

I remembered Vlad telling me that if a vampire denied his longing for blood, eventually the thirst would take over. Once that happened, there would be no choice. The vampire would become an animal, acting purely on instinct until their bloodlust was sated. Could this be what was happening to me? Would my lust for sex take over like the thirst? I knew for sure that my powers were beginning to leak. What would happen if I lost control again like I had with Dracula? I had to get a grip, at least until I could speak with Mathias again ... or get my hands on Marco. I took a deep breath and tried to steady myself.

As I walked through the door, I caught sight of Alek and, whatever control I had left, began to slip. He was wearing a pair of loose-fitting jeans with the knees torn out. The tunic he wore was a pale faded blue, and it hung open to reveal his chest. His straw-colored hair was tousled and wild as usual, and he wasn't wearing any shoes. Shit, I liked feet lately. I wanted to touch Alek's feet, and any other part of him that would hold still long enough.

"Lilith!"

He jumped at my approach, and I realized I had been moving quietly, like an animal stalking its prey.

"Hello, Alek," I said softly, taking another step forward. When he didn't retreat, my heart skipped eagerly.

He moaned when I spoke before asking, "What have you done?"

"Nothing," I answered, and my voice was no longer my own. It was deep and throaty, the kind of voice you used behind closed doors. "That's the problem," I continued. "I need to do something, Alek, and I have some things I would like to do to you."

I felt a burning sensation behind my eyes, like when you're running a high fever, and knew they had turned wolf amber. I could feel The Seducer's power rising inside of me, eagerly anticipating whatever it was I was about to do. I hadn't decided yet what I wanted to do to Alek. But I would start with just a touch.

"Do you want me to call Marco?" he panted.

"Marco is on Terra," I purred. "Come here, Alek."

He moved closer, but I could tell he was trying to fight it. He was almost within reach. I stretched my hand toward him, and he took another step.

"Fuck," he gasped. "I never knew it felt like this."

"What else would you like to feel?" I asked, and my voice sounded positively sinful. I hadn't known my powers were this strong. Alek was a powerful wizard and he was not able to fight me. Or did he just not want to?

"Oh, my God," he moaned. "Don't do this to me, Lilith. I can't resist. Please, you don't really want me."

“That’s not entirely true, but I know you want *me*. Let me feed off your desire, Alek. Let me quench my thirst, and I will let you be.”

“I have a solution,” he gasped.

“Keep talking.”

“You have to stop,” he said, “or I will never be able to do it. Stop talking, and try to think about something else.”

“I don’t think I can,” I admitted.

Without warning Alek blurted out, “A room full of naked ninety-year-old men!” I shrieked.

“That did it,” he said with a nod. “Now listen to me, but do not speak. Have you ever heard of the come hither?”

I laughed, and the magic was gone from my voice. “You’re going to put the come hither on me? Isn’t that just an expression?”

“No,” he said seriously, and his pouty lips twitched. “The come hither is a spell. It is the one thing I ever learned from *The Seducer* that may prove useful.” I raised an eyebrow and he continued. “It is the art of bringing orgasm with only a whisper.”

“What in the world would you say to do that?”

Well, I asked for it. Alek leaned in close, and I smelled his cologne. It was subtle and soft, and sexy. I had decided before that Alek just smelled the way a sexy wizard was supposed to smell. His lips brushed my ear as he pressed his face against mine, and I shivered. He began to speak to me in a language I could not understand, but my body understood and responded accordingly.

My back arched, and Alek held me to him as he continued to whisper in my ear. His voice became more urgent, and my knees buckled. He held me tighter, and spoke more quickly. My heart beat faster. I could feel the tension I had fought all day building in my body, but it was more than that. It was the tension I had fought for over a month. He spoke of things I could not have known, but my body knew. He reasoned with my mind in a way that made my flesh cooperate, and before I knew it, I was clinging to Alek and screaming incoherently. Relief flooded my body, and with this rush it felt like the tension had poured from me like water.

I moaned throatily before saying, “I have no idea what you said, but we should have this discussion more often.”

He collapsed on the sofa beside me as he said silkily, “I can talk all night.”

“Alek, you saved me,” I sighed.

“You’re welcome. Besides, I knew you would regret it in the morning. Please, don’t take this as rejection,” he said as he patted my thigh.

I was pleased to find that the touch of his hand didn’t make any more sparks fly. As I rested my head on a pillow at the opposite end of the couch I said with a yawn, “I really don’t. I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

I snuggled further down against the pillows and Alek laughed, “I see I haven’t lost my touch.”

“Maybe not,” I said, “but practice makes perfect.”

Alek covered me up with a thick golden blanket and moved to the loveseat to watch television. “You should be good for a week or so,” he said. “Given your demonstration of restraint thus far.”

The next thing I knew, he was sitting beside me brushing the hair back from my

face. "Are you alright? I can't believe you're still asleep."

I blinked a few times and breathed in the aroma of vanilla-flavored coffee. I absolutely love vanilla coffee. Not the cheap stuff where the flavor is added as an afterthought, but the flavored beans, I even grind them myself. I smiled at Alek. He didn't like coffee, so I knew he had made it for me.

"What's for breakfast?" I asked as I stretched catlike down the length of the sofa.

"You expect me to bloody-well do everything around here, don't you?" he teased.

"Make yourself useful, wizard," I said as I stood up and snapped my fingers.

"Careful," he taunted, "or I'll make you disappear."

"Well, some things would have definitely disappeared last night if you hadn't stopped me," I said provocatively. "And one of them would have been you, if Marco ever found out."

"Death by enraged werewolf is really not how I want to go," he said as he entered the kitchen.

Alek and I cooked breakfast and were seated at the table before I asked, "What did you say to me last night?"

The wizard's honey-brown eyes were full of mischief as he answered, "Ancient things, secret things, not spoken of since the beginning of time. I spoke to the animal within you, just as lust calls to the beast within us all."

"Just like a damn wizard," I said, shaking my head. "Never a straight answer."

"Would you like a gay one?" he asked with a grin.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and I was deeply in Alek's debt for keeping me from not only molesting him, but every man in sight. When Kat arrived I was still getting ready. She helped me into my dress, and I made sure my hair was acceptable. I decided to do something different with it. Instead of the usual wildness, where it tipped outward on every shaggy end, I had it smoothed down. Only the bottom layer flipped upward at the base of my neck, and I had made a neat little swirl toward each cheek bone with a thin bit of hair on each side. My long bangs were combed down neatly, parting on the left side to point downward in wispy layers around my eyes.

"Wow," Kat said, "You look like a movie star."

Kat looked like movie star material herself. The gold of her gown really seemed to bring out the undertones in her skin, and her brunette curls sparkled in a neat coiffure atop her head. We had ended up buying the exact same shoes, the only difference was the size, and we hoped no one noticed. They had a rounded toe, with thin straps around the ankle that finished in a small bow over the heel. Of course, they were black to match my dress, and the velvet bow on hers.

Downstairs Alek assured me he would be along later, and Kat and I stepped out onto the porch. The weather was still unseasonably cool, and the cold wind howled across the porch. I wrapped the scarf around my shoulders with the wine-colored taffeta on the outside, so that the warm velvet could be next to my skin. Kat just rubbed her arms furiously and looked around for our ride.

"I could have sworn I heard a car," I said.

"Let's go back inside," she said through chattering teeth.

Before we could turn around, we caught sight of headlights down the long drive. In a matter of minutes, we were staring at a shiny black luxury car. It reeked of money and suited the vampire perfectly. It somehow made me think of his cologne.

“Wow,” Kat said softly.

Oh, yeah. I was impressed. But what else would you expect Dracula to drive? Another tall dark vampire got out and opened the back door.

“Ladies, if you please.” He bowed gracefully.

His dark hair was cut close, and when he smiled his deep blue eyes sparkled. He looked like he was in his forties when he was embraced. He had an even thicker British accent than Alek, and an even brighter smile than Elijah. What a wonderful combination.

Kat and I both slid in the backseat and watched as he went around the car.

“Who’s that?” Kat asked.

I shrugged. When he got in, I felt I was breaking some sort of protocol, but I slid forward on the seat and extended my hand anyway.

“Lilith Mercury,” I said in way of introduction.

He seemed very pleased to be noticed as he answered, “Reginald Grant.”

“Can I call you Reggie?” I smiled.

“Honey, you can call me anything you want.” He returned my smile, and flashed his fangs.

After that we rode in silence, and it seemed like no time at all before we were pulling up in front of the club. It was almost the same distance from my house as The Dread Moon, but in a slightly northwest direction. There was a black awning out front, which partially covered the lush red carpet that reached to the end of the walkway. The building was enormous and looked like a two-story castle, complete with ramparts and one tall tower. Dracula had mentioned to me that he had had the structure built many years ago, and the past month’s work had been mainly renovation. That made sense, because the work-of-art I was looking at could not have been accomplished in a month. Just above the awning were huge red letters in an intricate font which read: Original Sin. Beside this was a large red apple.

All of the sudden, my heart jumped and I felt like I couldn’t breathe.

“Reggie, how do I look?” I asked, smoothing down my skirt nervously.

“Marvelous,” he said, drawing out the word to make it twice as long.

I took Kat by the hand and found hers to be just as cold as mine. She was nervous, too. Even though I didn’t want her to be uncomfortable, it was a slight comfort to know I wasn’t alone in my nervousness. As I opened myself up a little more to what Kat was feeling I changed my analysis, she was terrified.

“I’ve never seen so many reporters and photographers in my life,” she whined. Then she turned on the seat. “Reggie, how do *I* look?”

“Smashing,” the vampire answered with a grin.

I was sitting closest to the door, and had just touched the handle when I looked up again. Dracula was sweeping down the carpet toward us with a grace and fluidity of motion that made it look as if he were floating. His feet were definitely touching the ground, but he moved with a stillness which made him seem taller somehow. Dracula was already tall, but the effect was interesting. He was wearing snug black pants and a vest with black and dark wine-colored diagonal stripes. A large ruby hung around his neck. I noticed it was held in place by a thick black ribbon rather than a chain, and it reached to the middle of his chest. The long black coat he wore was velvet, and it swept the floor by a few feet behind him. His knee-high boots reflected the lights of the many flashing cameras, and as he opened my door, I noticed the inside of his coat was the same

color as the taffeta on my scarf. We matched just as completely as if it had been planned, and I wasn't entirely sure it hadn't.

"My angel," he said softly, as he offered me his hand.

I touched him and my knees nearly buckled. Immediately I felt him reel in his power. "Sorry," he whispered for my ears only, "I was switched on for the crowd."

"You can switch on for me," Kat said, smiling as he helped her from the car also.

"Patience," he said seductively, "You will get your thrill tonight."

Dracula put an arm around us both and smiled for the cameras as we turned to face the crowd. As we walked he asked, "Why are you wearing the same shoes?"

## Chapter Eight

Kat and I exchanged a look, and just laughed. If anyone was going to notice the shoes, it was Dracula. I think it might have been his fault that I'd paid so much attention to feet lately.

The crowd was held back by a thick velvet rope, and several large vampire bouncers. I'm sure Dracula had some werewolves working for him, but with it being the full moon, it was all vampires on staff tonight.

When we got closer to the door I saw Lola in the crowd. Lola and I went to school together. We had never seen eye to eye, and not just because she was shorter than me. In the last year she had gone from working at the local video store to reporting dirt for several magazines and the local paper. She had been the source of many less than flattering articles and photographs of me. Dracula sensed my tension and looked sharply in the direction of its source. Just as Lola opened her mouth to speak, no doubt to shout some insult, he flicked his wrist in her direction, and she began to choke. I had no idea what he did, but it was brilliant.

I beamed at him, I couldn't help myself. We were only a few feet from the door when a familiar but skeptical voice said, "Don't tell me you're turning into fang bait?"

The voice belonged to Elijah Jasper, my friend and local police officer. He looked even more appealing than usual. His dark blond hair was trimmed neatly, but still long enough to have style, and his blue eyes sparkled enough to light up the sidewalk, even without the red neon sign. Elijah is only a few inches taller than me, so when I stepped over to hug him I didn't have to look up to say, "Well, if you're not fang bait, then what are you doing here?"

'Fang bait' had become the term for those who deliberately sought the company of vampires, and Original Sin was sure to make them to go into heat.

Dracula leaned in close to me and whispered, "Original Sin has a no press, no law enforcement rule." I reached over and took Elijah's hand in way of response. "Only him," he said to the two enormous vampires who were blocking the door. The bouncers parted like the Red Sea, and we stepped inside.

The inside of the building was even more impressive than the outside. It was an authentic castle, right down to the lush tapestries hanging from the walls. There was a small antechamber with columns, which separated it from the rest of the large room. Another good-looking male vampire was greeting guests at the door. Beside him was a large basket of polished red apples. The floors were made of a really dark wood that I had never seen before. Dracula informed me it was called Bloodwood, and it was throughout the entire castle. As we took a step down into the main room, I noticed a staircase to my right, also lined with red carpet. He said this led to the VIP area.

I looked around the massive room and was completely speechless. The entire room was turned slightly to the left. There was a massive scattering of small round tables all covered with black satin table cloths, and I turned toward the large stage in the corner of the room. The enormous blood-red curtains of the stage were drawn back to reveal a

magnificent garden, and a grand piano. There was another tantalizing blond vampire playing music softly as guests entered and found their seats. The tables which lined the walls were surrounded by padded wrap around booths. They looked to be covered in black leather with silver studs. In front of the stage there was an empty space of floor just large enough for a few people to dance if they wanted to. In the middle of each table was a small glass with three red roses.

This was all very impressive, but not nearly as alluring as the sight that stepped right in front of me. I found myself looking up at the angelic face of Bade Garren. Bade is around six-foot-four, and possesses the most impressive set of muscles I've ever seen. His ethereal golden hair was so polished it seemed to glow underneath the dim lights, and it just touched the tops of his shoulders.

He was wearing a pair of the tightest black pants I could have imagined. The shirt he wore was tucked in, but hung open to the waist, displaying more of his lovely body. There were ruffles around the collar and down the front in place of buttons, and ruffles at the wrist, as well. Kat, who had never seen Bade before, just stood and stared open-mouthed at his beauty. But I knew the beast that lurked just underneath the surface, and wasn't so easily taken in. Bade was Marco's challenger for the leadership of the pack, and though neither of them had actually decided to fight for the title, it was inevitable if a peace could not be reached. This made him still technically my enemy, but the look he gave me was definitely friendly.

"Bade, what are you doing here?"

"Well, it's good to see you too, love," he replied in his thick Australian accent.

"You know what I mean."

"Oh, you mean since it's A.W.O.L.?"

"A.W.O.L.?"

"Yeah, full moon, All Werewolves On the Loose," he said with a smile.

Dracula, who was still standing beside me with his hand on my lower back, began to explain. "Bade works for me." I looked a question at him and he continued, "Part time, anyway."

"What does he do exactly?" I asked.

"I'm the on the menu," Bade replied. "For the vampires at least," he said quickly after the look I gave him. "You see, I like to be bitten, and alpha werewolf is quite the delicacy."

"You're on the menu?" I repeated sarcastically.

"That's right, love. I'm The Red Light Special."

"We've got to stop meeting like this," I said. Even as I spoke I could feel the smile reaching my eyes. Why did I suddenly have warm, fuzzy feelings for Bade? He winked at me, then and I decided I didn't care enough to analyze it right now. Whatever the cause, it felt good to return his smile.

"At least this time we've got clothes on," he teased. His pale blue eyes gleamed with mischief as he extended his big hand to Kat. "The names Bade Garren." He smiled. "And who might you be?"

She took his hand but seemed beyond speech. Seeing as how Bade was one of the most gorgeous men I'd ever laid eyes on, I couldn't blame her. However, I felt I should intervene.

"This is my friend Kathryn Roberts," I said as I leaned in close. It must have

looked like I was hugging him, or coping a feel, but in a voice so soft only he could hear I whispered, "If you touch her, I'll kill you."

I pulled back to find him, smiling. As he released Kat's hand, I took a step away from Dracula and moved closer to the werewolf. I ran my hands inside the open front of his shirt, and caressed his chest. The sensation was much more pleasurable than I had remembered. The last time Bade and I had any sort of contact, someone had driven a large wooden pole through the right side of his chest. It had been the first time I'd used my powers to heal anyone other than myself. I had felt his desire then, and I could feel it now as I touched him. Desire coursed through his veins, running hot just like his blood.

Up until this moment I had felt slightly threatened by Bade. I knew that he wanted to hurt me, but in a good way. Now, as I stood there with my hands inside his shirt, I was nearly overcome. He was so warm and firm underneath my hands. I could feel his muscles shifting with each breath as I moved my hands to touch his sides. His breathing grew faster and I fought the urge to press my lips against his chest. I could tell people were starting to watch us, but I didn't care. I was no longer frightened of Bade. As a low growl escaped my lips I wondered if *he* should fear *me*.

"I see you finished healing," I said softly as I moved my hand over the left side of his chest to find his silver nipple ring. Bade always wore a silver stud through his left nipple, and I had bitten it off the first time we met.

I'm not sure what came over me when I touched him. It could have been the full moon and the fact that he's an alpha werewolf. It could have been the fact that I'd gone so long without sex. Maybe it was just that I got hornier around the full moon also, but most likely, it was just Bade.

I leaned in closer and breathed in his scent as I rubbed my face from his stomach to the middle of his chest. That was as far as I could reach, even in heels. He moaned as I continued to rub my face over the fine blond hairs on his chest, and when I flicked my tongue over his nipple ring, he wasn't the only one who gasped.

I pulled back and smiled shamelessly at an ancient vampire sitting to our right. He didn't look ancient, but there was something about him that told me otherwise.

"It's awfully good to see you, Bade," I purred in my best bedroom voice.

He growled in response and another vampire asked Dracula, "Is this the kind of things we can look forward to here?" It was the gypsy-looking vampire I had met about a month ago. Her name was Annabel, and you could hear the hunger in her voice.

Dracula only smiled at her as I turned back to Bade.

"I'll only be here for a few more hours," he said breathlessly.

"Why?"

"That's how long I've got before the beast overtakes me."

"Oh," I hesitated, not sure how to respond.

He growled softly. It was a deep rumbling sound that made me shiver. "What I meant to say was that I've only got a few more hours. Shall we make the most of them?"

That was by far the most tempting offer I'd had in a while. Of course, Dracula was always making overtures, but he was much more subtle. Something about the way Bade spoke to me gave me pause. His directness was almost as sexy as his outfit.

"I think not," I sighed as I pressed a kiss to his warm flesh once more, and took a step back. So much for demonstrating restraint. At least I hadn't taken him up on his offer, but I was loathed to remove my hands from his body.

Dracula smiled as he took me by the arm and led Kat and I to our table. He seated us near the front, directly facing the stage. I noticed as he pulled out my chair that there was a sign saying the table was reserved. Elijah pulled out a chair for Kat, and took a seat between us.

“That was an impressive display,” Dracula whispered softly against my ear. “Too long,” he said as if he was scolding me, and I knew what he meant. He was right, even with Alek’s help the night before, it had been too long since I had enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh.

Kat knew what was up with me, so she didn’t give me the strange looks that Elijah did once we were seated. I didn’t know how to even begin explaining what had just happened between Bade and I, so I didn’t bother trying. The first time Elijah and I met Bade, he’d had us kidnapped. The second time, he saw that the werewolf was after Bade’s grievous chest injury. He also happened to be naked in the front seat of my car at the time. I still wasn’t quite sure how we’d gone from trying to kill one another to trying to fight the urge to molest each other on sight. How could I explain what I didn’t understand?

“What would you like to drink?” Dracula asked us all.

I picked up the menu and snickered. At the bottom of Original Sin’s extensive drink menu was listed “The Red Light Special.” Bade was *literally* on the menu.

“Too many choices,” Kat said.

“May I recommend the Busted Cherry?” Dracula offered with a sarcastic grin.

“Bastard,” Kat said, but she agreed to try the drink.

“I’ll have a Tryst,” Elijah said.

“I’d like some Forbidden Fruit,” I purred as I caressed his thigh. Dracula was standing entirely too close to me to remain unmolested.

“Tie me to the bedpost,” Bade said as he pulled up a chair on my other side.

“Excuse me?” Kat said.

“What? It’s a drink, read the menu,” he said.

“Oh.” Kat blushed dark enough to match the red roses on our table.

“I will have someone bring them over,” the vampire answered with a smile.

I watched the way he moved so gracefully through the crowd and sighed. It was a damn shame I couldn’t do all the things I wanted to Dracula. I wanted Marco, but the more I acquired of The Seducer’s powers, the more I wanted Dracula, too ... and Bade.

“Yeah, he looks great,” Kat said, looking back at Dracula. “How tight are those pants? Yikes.”

“I envy his clothes,” I said vaguely and she stared at me.

“What are you talking about?”

“Dracula. I envy his clothes, because they get to touch him all night long.”

While Dracula continued to greet the crowd, I finished my drink and ordered a glass of red wine. I knew the wonderful scent coming from Bade was just werewolf pheromones working overtime, but I didn’t care. I had taken so many deep breaths I was beginning to feel dizzy. He was sitting close enough that I could feel the heat radiating from his body, and all I wanted to do was tackle him right there in the floor.

“Why have you never told me about him?” Kat whispered while Bade was busy talking to Elijah.

“I did, I’ve told you about Bade.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t tell me he was built like a Greek god.”

“He can hear you.” I smiled.

It does no good to whisper in front of a werewolf. Before Kat could fully realize how embarrassing the moment was, Dracula stepped onto the empty floor in front of the stage. The lights dimmed, except for a soft spotlight, which illuminated his face, and the small candles flickered on the tables.

The moment he spoke, I knew he was more than just taught by The Seducer. Mathias had shared with me that at one point he was unsure if he would ever have an heir to his power. During that time, I was certain he had trained Dracula as his heir.

“You have all come here tonight looking for something, expecting, searching. Hoping that you will find what you seek. For some it is a smile, a touch, a caress.” With his last words, I felt hands roam over me, caressing me, loving me. I heard Bade gasp, and Kat moaned as he continued. “Yet others wait for a word, a hint of love. You have all come here in search of seduction. Seduction is a journey.” His voice seemed to brush past me, through the audience, whispering, touching, seducing us all. “I can take you where you want to go.” And with those words I could tell, they were already there.

When he was finished, my breathing had grown harsh, and many people in the audience seemed to be beyond speech or reason. What he had just done was amazing. It was also in complete violation of statute four of the laws of vampiric tolerance. “Those possessing the ability to hypnotize either with their voice or their gaze shall not do so on unwilling individuals. Use of such abilities in public can carry punishments ranging from fines to death depending on the severity of the circumstances.”

No wonder there was a no press, no law enforcement rule. He planned to break the law on a regular basis. He had also just broken the law in front of Elijah, and I was furious, not because of what he had done, but because he might be punished for it.

As he approached my table I stood up and said in an undertone, “We need to talk.”

He placed his hand on my elbow and led me through the crowd as those who were capable of thought gave him a standing ovation. It sounded like an entire band was onstage behind us, and people were getting up, I assumed to dance.

We walked back through the antechamber and to the left down a long corridor lit by electric torches. At the end of the hall was a massive door that looked like it belonged more on a vault. Above the door I saw a golden plaque which read: “The candlelight reflected in your eyes seems appropriate, for I’ve always seen the devil in you. My polished red apple, my original sin. You manage to entice me with your charming grin.”

It was the poem I had written after spending the night with him.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To my office.”

He opened the massive door, and led me down another hall. The door we stopped at this time looked to be made of the same Bloodwood as the floors, and was fashioned in the style you would expect to find in a dungeon. There was a large bookshelf to the left as we stepped inside. It was covered with many thick volumes, just like the shelves in Marco’s office. Dracula’s desk was made of a black wood I had never seen before, but it was beautiful. His chair was massive, looking more like a throne with black leather padding. There was also a sofa in his office, which sat along the right wall. It was black, and covered with red pillows.

I had brought my wine glass with me and I took a sip as I walked to the front of his desk and propped against it, facing him. He looked as if it hurt to watch me drink the wine that he could not taste. However, when he spoke, it was not the subject I'd had in mind.

## Chapter Nine

“Tell me, my angel, how is it that you have never had a taste of your own medicine?” he asked softly.

“What do you mean?”

“I know that you have loved,” he said as he gazed at me intently, “but you have never been seduced.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I laughed silkily. “We’ve all been seduced.”

“You think so? Do you really believe that any of the men you have been with were capable of seduction?”

“Are you insulting my choices, or just trying to make a point?”

He smiled, a curve of sultry lips and a flash of fang. “I realize that there is no love lost between your werewolf and myself ... but I was hoping that between you and I, perhaps some could be found.”

I sat the glass down and my fingers trembled slightly. If he came on to me now, I wasn’t sure I could resist. I was weakened by my own desire and by the speech he had just given to the crowd. If he truly loved me like Mathias had claimed, he wouldn’t ruin my chances with Marco. I had no choice but to trust him.

“What are you saying?” I asked shakily.

“I am saying that with your permission, I would like to seduce you.”

“Vlad, you don’t ask permission to seduce someone.”

“With powers such as mine, I thought it best.”

“I’m not sure that you can seduce me. Your power has never affected me like everyone else.”

He looked at me for several moments. He remained so silent, so still, that he could have been mistaken for a very life-like statue.

“Then you must let me in,” his voice was like velvet, but it only made me shiver.

“How?”

“Are you saying that I have your permission to proceed?”

“This far, yes.”

“And how far shall I go?” he asked softly.

“I’ll let you know.”

Vlad moved closer to me as if he were gliding across the floor. He walked, but the movement was so fluid, so graceful that he appeared to once again glide. He reached out to me and I hesitated.

“You must trust me,” he whispered.

In one glance he seemed to know my thoughts. He looked down at his hands as if he could still see centuries of blood upon them.

“Do not fear the things these hands have done, or ever try to find the soul behind these eyes.” His voice grew softer as he spoke. “I have enough control to block you from my mind. From the parts that you recoil from.”

I looked up into his dark, emerald eyes and couldn’t understand why I would

recoil from any of him.

“Let me in,” his voice rolled over me like a caress.

“So there is some truth to the legend.”

“What legend?”

“You can’t come in unless you’re invited.”

“To your mind, yes. But you would be surprised what I take as an invitation.”

He placed his hands on my bare shoulders. His hands were strong and warm, and not at all like a monster. He felt like a man. A man that I trusted. I took a deep breath and let down my guard.

“That is better,” he sighed.

“There are people outside; if I scream someone will come.”

“What if you scream when you come?”

I opened my mouth to protest, but it was too late. The man of my dreams was once again inside my mind.

“Relax,” he whispered, and I relaxed.

My body obeyed his command like a well-trained dog, but my mind was still aware. Vlad cradled my face in his hands as he said, “Look at me. See that no cruelty awaits you in my eyes.” Something in his eyes took hold of me. I was frightened, but then he said, “I have not the power, nor the desire to steal your soul.”

“Then what would you take?” I gasped.

“Nothing.” The word sounded empty as it fell from his lips. “I would take nothing. But I will always accept what is freely given.”

I gave him a chance. Vlad began to speak to me in languages I did not understand. But words were not necessary because I felt what he was saying. His voice flowed over and through me like molten honey: hot, sweet, and decadent. In some ways, his voice was better than sex. His words touched me in places his hands had never been. I was drowning in him, but I no longer cared. I let the power of his voice roll over me as if I were being washed out with the tide.

“Come to me,” he whispered, and his eyes were before me. There was nothing except the lush green of his eyes. Like paradise, an oasis. A garden full of life, a second Eden. “Come to me,” he commanded, and I obeyed. He brought me, with his voice, to a full-out screaming, back-breaking climax.

For several moments I did nothing but gasp for air as if every breath would be my last. I remembered the way the stage was decorated, the lush garden I had seen in his eyes, and the apples. Not to mention the name of the club.

“You realize Eden was only paradise because God was in it?” I panted.

“Yes. Well, we are not exactly on speaking terms.”

I’m not sure how I got there, but I was reclining on his couch. I ran my hands over the soft fabric; it was suede. I realized then how very close to me Dracula was. One of my hands seemed to move of its own accord to touch his arm. I caressed the fabric of his coat, all the while imagining the flesh beneath. I knew then that I would always crave Dracula. It didn’t matter who else I was with or who I loved. I could not be apart from him long. It was a little scary. But even at the thought of being afraid, I wanted him to hold me. I really had to try to get over wanting to run to him for comfort.

“I always wanted to do that to you,” he sighed.

“I always wanted someone to dance with,” I confessed. I’m not sure what made

me say this, but it was true. Alfred didn't dance, and it was one of my favorite things to do. I knew every move from every classic dance by heart. I couldn't remember the last time I'd done a little dirty dancing.

"Careful what you wish for," he scolded seductively. "The Seducer always had a way of attaining the desires of his heart."

That sounded positively ominous. Dracula handed me a red silk handkerchief, and I dabbed at my face and neck. We waited for the flush on my cheeks to subside before facing the crowd again. As we made our way up the hall I said softly, "Thank you."

He had managed to significantly calm my libido, even more than Alek's spell. But even the powers of the original vampire could not keep me satisfied for long. I hungered for the flesh of an alpha male werewolf, and there was nothing else that would satisfy me. It's sort of like having a craving for pizza and eating fruit instead. You know you'll end up eating both, because you aren't satisfied after the first. Might as well have what you really wanted the first time.

We reentered the room and people stopped to look at him. I couldn't blame them. His beauty made the other men look like they suffered from some sort of deformity. He was lust made flesh, desire personified, and when he went to introduce me to someone, I hardly noticed the other man at all.

"This is Eden," he said, indicating the tall, blond vampire who had been playing the piano earlier.

Eden was tall and lovely. His hair was closely cropped, and he had a natural tan, because I knew he couldn't go out in the sun. His eyes were green, and his smile was contagious. However, at the time I barely noticed him. We exchanged pleasantries briefly, and Dracula whispered something to him I couldn't hear.

"You broke the law," I said to Vlad as Eden went back toward the band.

"Worry not, my angel, the cop's memory will be erased before he leaves," he said casually as if it were a completely normal thing to erase someone's memory.

"You're going to erase his memory?" That really upset me.

"Not like in a science fiction novel," he patiently assured me. "He will remember the evening, just not the part where I seduced the crowd."

"Oh." I still didn't like the idea, but I didn't push the subject. "You said you had a surprise for me."

"You remembered." He smiled, and I saw the face I knew would haunt my dreams tonight.

"I have started a new venture," he said as he took me by the arm and led me back toward the table. Alek had arrived, and pulled up another chair between Elijah and Bade. We were already sitting elbow to elbow when Dracula seated himself between me and Alek. This forced me closer to Bade, and without realizing what I was doing, I rested my arm against his thigh the way I did Marco. His pants were silk. Alek greeted me and filled me in on how wonderful the band was, but I really wasn't hearing him. My mind and my hand were almost completely in Bade's pants. He was Marco's enemy, but he smelled so good, and I couldn't stop touching him. Dracula was the only one who noticed other than Bade, and he seemed to understand.

As I caressed Bade's inner thigh, Dracula and Alek informed me they had been working on a joint business venture. The building across the parking lot was a theatre,

and Dracula had purchased it a month ago. He was starting an acting group to “promote cooperation among monsters,” called The Bleeding Heart.

“So, that’s what you’ve been working on in the dungeon?” I asked Alek.

“Yes,” he confessed. “Our first production will be *Romeo and Juliet*.”

“When will you start?” I asked, as my hand roamed further up Bade’s thigh into territory I didn’t need to explore. But until he protested, I didn’t plan to stop. A few months ago I would never have thought to find myself here, in a club owned by Dracula, groping Marco’s challenger. If I thought about the situation too much I might go crazy. So I decided to stop thinking and focus instead on what was beneath my hand.

“We’ve already had our first casting call,” Dracula announced with a proud smile.

“And?”

“We were overwhelmed with actors, and actresses. Both vampire and lycanthrope. Many had been shunned by the acting community after they came out of the coffin, or confessed to being a werewolf. They were thrilled with the opportunity to do what they love with people who would understand them.” He paused before taking my hand and saying, “I would very much enjoy it if you would participate.” When I just smiled in response, he said, “Luther is already scheduled to play Romeo.”

“Really?” I laughed. That didn’t surprise me. Luther and I had been in drama together in high school. As a matter of fact, we had starred in *Romeo and Juliet* together. Dracula told me that Luther had shared this with him, and requested that I reprise the role.

“Won’t people say it isn’t fair if you just give Juliet to me? I haven’t even auditioned.”

“Do you still remember the role?”

“By heart,” I replied softly.

Dracula kissed my hand and my sharp intake of breath caused Alek to look at me more closely. I think he knew his spell had been a much more temporary fix than either of us had expected.

“Then we will worry about the audition later. By the way, I have something in mind for you too,” Dracula said as he winked at Bade. The vampire turned back to me, still holding the hand that wasn’t stroking Bade and said, “I have a special project in mind for you, my angel. It is something very dear to my heart.” He paused to caress the back of my hand lightly before saying, “You have time to think about this, of course, a couple of months.”

“What is it?”

“I plan to perform a story Alek has written. It is based on *The Phantom of the Opera*.”

My pulse raced at the prospect of seeing Dracula as The Phantom, because I knew without being told that it would be him. I also knew what he was hinting at. I had played Christine when I was fifteen, shortly before I was attacked. It was one of my fondest memories.

“Luther will play Raoul,” he said. “He tells me this is the part he played before.”

“It is.” I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Will you be my Christine?” he purred. “Allow me to proclaim to the world how much I adore you. Let them think it is acting. Whatever they think, I know that with you and I on stage, it would be magic.”

I only smiled in way of a reply, but we both knew I would say yes. How could I refuse? The way his eyes sparkled gave me some indication of what was in store, and I could hardly wait.

“Let’s dance,” Bade growled against my ear. As he did this he moved my hand the last few inches up his thigh. I would like to say that I snatched my hand away in shock. But the truth is I squeezed and growled in response. For quite some time now I had known what was underneath Bade’s clothes, and I’d never wanted to see it again more than I did right now. He took hold of my hand and helped me to my feet. As he did this, Dracula let my other hand slide away from him reluctantly. My fingertips trailed down his long fingers and, the instant I ceased to touch him, I felt lost.

About the time we stood up a tall young African American man walked up onstage with the band and began to sing. He had a voice that would have rivaled some of the greatest blues singers. He began to sing, and I instantly recognized the song. It’s one of my favorite oldies, and I knew Dracula must have arranged this. Well, the song at least. He had nothing to do with the look Bade was giving me as he led me onto the floor.

There were other couples dancing, but I felt like we were alone as he pulled me near. The man onstage was singing about how much his arms longed to hold someone and, as he spoke, Bade wrapped his arms around me. No one had ever held me quite the same way before.

“I didn’t know you could dance,” I sighed and pressed against him, breathing in his scent.

“You don’t know a lot of things about me, love,” he growled.

The growl in his voice had become unpreventable, and I knew he must leave soon before he started to change. I thought it would be awkward to dance with someone so much taller than me, but with my three inch heels, it really wasn’t. Bade was graceful in a way I would not have expected from his large frame. He moved with poise and precision and, I had to admit, it made me think differently of him. I’d spent so many years without a dance partner, and now it seemed they were everywhere I looked.

His big hand on my back brought me close until I was pressed very firmly against his thigh. The heat of his flesh burned me through our clothes, as I laid my head against his chest. It felt like I was supposed to be there and that worried me.

“Bade,” I said softly, my face rubbing lightly across his bare skin.

“What is it, love?”

“What’s wrong with me?”

He laughed softly. “Nothing. You’re an alpha, even if you don’t transform. It’s perfectly normal to want to touch me.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Are you kidding me? Marco might have something to say about it, though.”

I was suddenly terrified that someone would run to Marco with the story of how I had groped Bade underneath the table.

“I didn’t mean to, Bade. Really. I just can’t seem to control myself. I know the difference in right and wrong, but my body won’t listen.”

“Easy,” he said soothingly as he stroked my hair. “What you’re experiencing is normal. How many full moons have you ever spent with an alpha werewolf?”

“You mean actually in the same room?”

I looked up at him and he nodded.

“None.”

“Then you’re not used to the sensation. It does get easier to fight, but not much,” he said with a wink. “Besides, no one saw except Dracula, and he’s not talking. He’s got his own agenda.”

I sighed wearily and he asked, “You really care about Marco, don’t you?”

I looked up again and found Bade’s pale blue eyes to be very serious. He was one of the few werewolves whose eyes never changed with the rest of them. Marco could control whether or not his eyes changed, but Bade’s just never did.

“Yes, I do,” I said, and I meant it with all my heart.

Just the mention of his name made my heart skip a beat. No matter how good Bade smelled, or how good Dracula looked, I belonged to Marco.

“Why would you ask me that?”

“It’s something I needed to know,” he said.

Bade bent down and kissed me. His lips were soft and warm. He tasted of lime juice and rum. The drink he had ordered was called Tie me to the Bedpost, and that was beginning to sound like a wonderful idea. My senses stirred in a way that had nothing to do with my heart, and everything to do with the man pressed against me.

## Chapter Ten

“I should go,” he whispered against my lips.

I ran my hand over his chest, and could tell Bade was hairier than just a minute before. The change was near. He had taken a risk staying so long just to dance with me.

“Thank you for the dance.” I smiled up at him and he winked.

“Thank you for groping me,” he said with an evil grin.

“You’re awful.”

“I assure you, I’m completely tame in your hands,” he growled as we walked back to the table.

“He’s mad that trusts the tameness of a wolf,” I quoted.

“King Lear,” Bade said softly.

I was impressed. Bade had managed to change my opinion of him twice in one night, both for the better. Bade leaned over the table and said to everyone, “If you’ll excuse me, nature calls.”

Kat turned to watch him walk out the door. I already had a nice view from where I was sitting. Dracula turned to me and said, “I can dance, too, remember?”

Even if his smile was pleasant, I knew jealousy when I saw it.

“That’s nice,” I said, “but I didn’t come here to watch you jiggle your goodies.”

“I did,” Kat snickered, and I knew she was drunk.

“I’ve got something you can jiggle,” Alek replied, and I knew he was, too.

He took Kat by the hand, and Elijah just laughed as they went to dance. It was obvious they had no interest in each other, but both of them enjoyed flirting too much to admit it.

“Come on,” I said to Dracula. “I’m not going to be outdone by a drunk and a wizard.”

Dracula danced like he did everything else, masterfully. However, dancing with him did not inspire the same heat it had with Bade. He wasn’t lacking any passion, but there was a coolness about him, a detachment I hadn’t sensed before.

“What’s with you?” I asked. He raised an eyebrow, and I said, “I can sense your withdrawal from me. What have I done?”

“Nothing. But dancing, as you know, is an expression of the soul. I see no point in giving myself to you entirely, when you are not ready to do the same.”

He was right. What he said made perfect sense. But still, I felt like I had lost something. And when I looked into his eyes I knew it wasn’t something I was prepared to lose. I just didn’t know what to do to go about keeping it. As he swept me around the floor, I looked over at a booth in the far corner. The vampire seated there was being approached by a scantily clad young woman. I watched as she sat in his lap and revealed her throat.

“Is that allowed?” I asked Dracula nervously as the vampire sunk his teeth into her neck.

“Yes. That is what he ordered,” he explained.

Dracula spun me around again as I asked incredulously, “He ordered a woman? Where is *that* on the menu?”

“The Bloody Mary,” he said, smiling at the horrified look on my face.

“So, Bade is The Red Light Special, and that woman is The Bloody Mary?”

“Not just one woman,” he corrected. “We have many who take turns.”

“You actually hired someone to do this?”

“There is a waiting list for the job.”

As he spun me around once more, I noticed the ring he was wearing. It had an intricate dragon’s crest across the top, and when I touched it admiringly he explained, “It was my grandfather’s.”

Dracula had inherited his grandfather’s wizard powers, just as I had from my great, great grandfather. His ancestor was known as The Rainmaker and had passed along to Vlad power over the storm and the beasts of the field.

I danced away the rest of the evening with Dracula, but my mind kept drifting to Marco, and quite by accident, to Bade. Opening night was a huge success, and I went home bone tired. Reginald drove Kat home, since she was too drunk to take her car from my house, and I climbed the stairs wearily. How was I ever going to get to sleep? Even as tired as I was I couldn’t stop thinking. Marco was first in my thoughts, immediately followed by Dracula and Bade. I thought about pouring myself something else to drink, but that would only work for a short while.

After a long hot shower I decided a sleeping pill was in order, but with my metabolism, I ended up taking three.

\* \* \* \*

I was sitting on the porch Monday morning with Kat, Luther, and Alek when a sleek black sports car pulled up in front of the steps. I knew without being told it was Johnny’s car; I recognized his style. As soon as he walked around the car I could tell he was dressed to kill. Literally. He was dressed for hunting. Johnny wore solid black. Tight jeans clung to his long, lean frame, and his long-sleeved shirt was rolled up to his forearms. His dark hair was shoulder length and he ran a hand through it as he approached. He was also wearing a leather vest which normally contained extra clips for the silver guns slung low on his hips. Johnny Angel was a gunslinger, the best there’s ever been. I’d never seen anybody outshoot Johnny, or for that manner outsmart him.

Kat and I were sitting in the swing, drinking coffee. Alek was propped against one of the large columns, and Luther was sitting on the steps. Everyone stopped to watch the long, lanky man in black approach. Johnny also wore gloves, and dark sunglasses. These were items he seldom removed. Having known him intimately, I knew why, but didn’t find that necessary for introduction.

“Everybody, this is Johnny Angel,” I said as I walked over to the steps.

“That’s right,” he said with a wicked smile. “And thanks to Lilith here, I also answer to Sex Machine, or Oh My God.” He smiled at Kat as he added, “But you can call me Johnny, or Your Royal Sexiness.”

“You haven’t changed,” I laughed.

Kat seemed to be too shocked to respond, but Luther and Alek just laughed while I introduced each of them.

“What an asshole,” Kat said to me as we all walked back in the house.

We were planning a cookout, and Luther and Alek started getting out all of the

meat that needed to marinate for the next few hours. Kat said she was going to work for a while and would be back around noon. She was going to check on her new assistant, Mary.

Mary Jasper is Elijah's little sister. She was two years younger than him, with long blond hair and green eyes. She had been working for Kat for a few months now. Kat had also opened up a small café next door to her shop called The Pussykat Café. It had been fairly successful so far, and she was going to need to hire more help soon.

In the time it took for Kat to excuse herself, Johnny had taken off his gun belt and placed it over the arm of the sofa. Then he went straight for the fridge. The sound his boots made as he walked across my floor brought back a lot of memories, most of them happy ones.

"Where's the rum? And I don't mean the cheap shit. The captain and I have an appointment." He looked at his watch. "Our ship should be setting sail in about an hour."

And here I thought I hadn't picked up anything from Johnny. His love for rum had obviously been one of the habits I had acquired from our contact.

I handed him the bottle of spiced rum and started chopping peppers for the kabobs that we would be making shortly. Johnny's lips curled into a smile as he walked past me toward the other end of the kitchen. Obviously he was still familiar with where I kept things.

"What have you been up to Johnny?" I asked softly.

He found a glass in the cabinet and took off his gloves, tossing them onto the counter. I could tell Luther noticed his black nails, but he didn't comment. That was wise.

"I've been in Texas, as you know, near the border," he said.

"What were you doing there?"

"Cleaning out a Mexican vampire nest," he replied casually.

"Johnny, that's illegal! And it's not a job for The Hunters."

He hadn't even been back in my life for five minutes, and he'd already managed to piss me off.

"I wasn't there in my official capacity," he said. He smiled more broadly this time and I sighed involuntarily. He had the sexiest set of lips this side of Dracula, and the effect was not lost on me.

"These were real scum, not like the other stuff coming out of the coffin nowadays," he explained, waving his glass as he spoke.

"I would be careful how I chose my words if I were you," Alek said coolly. "You *do* know who her new partner is, don't you?"

"Yes, wizard, I do," Johnny said haughtily. "As a matter of fact, I look forward to meeting this 'original vampire.'"

"Behave, Johnny," I sighed as I got up to look for more red peppers.

"As usual, sweetheart, you try to take the fun out of everything."

"No, Johnny, as usual, I'm trying to keep you alive."

To my surprise, the cookout was not a disaster. We all ate way too much, while Johnny drank too much, and went to the guest room to lie down.

"Is he an alcoholic?" Kat asked.

"No. He's always this way after a tough mission," I told her.

“If it bothers him to kill people, why is he in this business?” she asked.

“Good question. I think he likes to think it doesn’t bother him, but I know different. I’ve seen him shoot people without batting an eye, then cry over their grave.”

“What a fucking nut job,” she said around a thick bite of steak.

No matter what she said, Kat couldn’t hide from me. She was being so mean because she thought Johnny was sexy. The fact that she found a jerk like him attractive was enough to chap her ass most thoroughly. And the fact that he knew it was enough to make Johnny tease her even worse. Kat was always over at my house and Johnny would be staying with me, at least for a while. This meant I would be forced to listen to them. What exactly had I gotten myself into?

\* \* \* \*

Marco and I had a date that night. Yes, I know it was a Monday night, but we were both in desperate need of physical contact. I even volunteered to drive to his apartment instead of him picking me up. We weren’t going *anywhere*. He didn’t want to take any chances on being interrupted this time, and I was in complete agreement. We were both more than ready to consummate our relationship. It was definitely time. Not only was I eager to get my hands on Marco, I was eager to get back some semblance of control over myself. I was certain that once we were together I could get my libido back under control, not to mention my hands.

He told me he had something special in mind, and I was so excited I had to go to the bathroom three times before I left the house. My pulse was running a marathon as I walked across the parking lot to Club Red. Marco greeted me at the door.

“Hello, Red,” he growled in his deep sexy voice.

Marco had long ago turned wearing jeans into an art form. The pair he was wearing revealed every curve of his body without being too tight. He was wearing a thin, white t-shirt, and the ridges of his abs were evident underneath the tight material. All thoughts of Dracula were banished by the sight of him and if anyone had asked me, at that moment I couldn’t have remembered Bade’s name. All I could think of was Marco, and I licked my lips in anticipation. Still, I felt I needed to make something clear.

“Just because I drove up here, this is not a booty call—”

Before I could finish my sentence, he was on me. I was overwhelmed. I had wanted Marco for so long, I was beyond words. My hands ran hungrily over his body, and I was very disappointed when he pulled back.

“I would have come to you,” he panted. He pulled me through the door as he said, “I don’t want to just jump straight into bed, if that’s alright with you?” My disappointment must have been obvious. He flashed me that wolfish grin. “Don’t worry, Red. I plan to end up there. But getting there is half the fun,” he said with a wink.

As we made our way upstairs to his office, he told me, “All of my calls are being forwarded to Luther; he’s also been instructed to bar the door unless it’s an emergency.” He removed *Call of the Wild* from his bookshelf and pressed the indentation behind it. The hidden door to his apartment was opened. “I have nowhere to be,” he growled sexily, “and only one thing to do.”

“Oh, Marco,” I sighed as I pulled him down to kiss me again.

He growled again, and it vibrated softly against my lips. It was somewhere between inhuman and a wildman, and it was sexy as hell.

“I know you don’t have a lot of patience,” he said, “but there will be foreplay

tonight.” I opened my mouth to protest, and he stopped me with a finger against my lips, “Oh yes, there will be foreplay.”

“What did you have in mind?” I asked as we reached the top of the stairs.

The top of the staircase opened directly into Marco’s living room. It was a large loft-style apartment covering nearly the entire space with one expansive room. There was a half-wall divider, which separated the kitchen and a massive dungeon style door at the far end.

The faded, reddish brown brick of the walls went nicely with the well preserved planks of the floor. The color scheme matched the red and gold of his office ... and his bedroom. Marco had expensive tastes, and his furniture reflected it, right down to the lush, red drapes pulled shut over the windows. Tall, iron candle holders were scattered about, including a few candelabras—all holding cream-colored candles, whose soft light filled the room. The fireplace near the entrance was along the same wall as the hearth in his office. It was made of the same brick as the walls, and in front of the fireplace was an empty patch of floor. Marco’s favorite red-velvet throw was in front of the fire, along with a bottle of wine, and an old record player. The weather was still cool, and his apartment was drafty, so the fire was a pleasant surprise.

The space near the fireplace had a long dark leather sofa draped with a cream blanket that looked to be made of fur. I grinned as I realized his furniture matched all of mine. In place of a matching chair, there was a massive scattering of faded red-and-gold pillows, which I noticed he had moved aside to clear the floor.

I watched as Marco put on one of the records from the stack on the floor. When he turned to me the fire dancing in his eyes was not just a reflection of the hearth. Marco wanted this as much as I did, maybe more.

“Dance with me,” he whispered.

I took the hand he offered, and shuddered at that simple touch. The record he had selected was old and I knew it by heart. Marco also had an appreciation for the classics. I’d discovered this when I told him how much I loved the music of the 1950’s and 60’s. It was the song they played when Bade and I had danced a few nights ago.

He pulled me near and whispered, “I know every word of this song by heart.”

The smile I gave him was only a half hearted effort, because my mind was no longer capable of responding normally. As I moved against Marco’s body, instinct and memory took over. We moved through the dance just as smoothly as if it had been choreographed. I ran my hand across his shoulders as I walked behind him, stroking his firm backside before I faced him again.

My hands which had been resting around his waist began to pull up his shirt. Even though the full moon had passed Saturday, he was hot to the touch, hotter than his normal temperature. Maybe Marco just ran a higher temperature when he was horny?

I slid my hands reverently up his sides, taking pleasure in the feel of his body beneath my hands. As I pressed kisses across his broad chest, Marco began to pull up my shirt. He moaned as he began to kiss his way up my body from the top of my jeans, all the way back to my lips. As Marco leaned forward I licked across the pulse in his throat before taking the skin gently between my teeth. I had waited so long for this moment that I was nearly in tears as I began to unbutton his jeans.

“Enough foreplay,” he growled, and unfastened my bra.

“Marco,” I panted as I fought with the button fly on his pants. “There’s

something I've been meaning to tell you."

"What is it, Red?" He asked patiently as his hands roamed over my bare back.

"Marco, I—"

"*Don't kill me!*" Luther's voice suddenly yelled from the stairs.

Marco nearly dropped me, and we both turned toward the intrusion. Luther was prostrate on the floor still begging Marco to spare his life for the interruption. I thought this was a little bit much until I looked at Marco's face again.

## Chapter Eleven

The wolf king was positively livid. If I were Luther, I would have run while I could still move. I refasten my bra as Marco stalked menacingly toward him.

“What is it, Luther?” he growled through gritted teeth. “Make it good.”

“Elijah called, they’ve got his sister.”

Some of the tension seemed to melt from Marco’s face, and I had to sit down.

“Who?” we asked together.

“He didn’t say. He didn’t know,” Luther stammered. “He said it was someone who was challenging you. They said they would make an example of his sister if you didn’t show up to accept.”

“Where is Elijah?” Marco asked. The anger was still in his voice, but it was no longer directed at Luther.

“He’s on his way.”

“*Shit*,” Marco growled. “Red, I’m sorry. I have no choice,” he said helplessly.

Marco pulled back on his shirt so forcefully I was surprised it didn’t rip.

“I’m going too,” I said, snatching on the rest of my clothes. “Elijah is my friend.” Then I added more to myself than anyone else, “I wonder if Bade knows.”

Marco looked to me questioningly, and Luther lifted his head from the floor. His expression said clearly that he couldn’t *believe* I had mentioned Bade in front of Marco.

“Bade wouldn’t do this,” I said with complete conviction.

Marco seemed to think this over for a moment, and nodded his agreement. We jumped in Marco’s car and rode in complete silence. The only sound was when Luther told us to turn left or right. Elijah had passed on the directions that were given to him and I was amazed that Luther could remember them all. Not that he was stupid or anything, but I don’t know if I could have remembered under the circumstances. After what seemed like a long drive, we arrived downtown at an abandoned warehouse.

“Stay close to me,” Marco said as he took a step in front of me. “Keep her safe,” he told Luther.

At this command, Luther stepped close to me, and Marco kicked in the door. As soon as we walked in I heard Mary whimper.

“Lilith,” she moaned, and my head snapped in her direction.

I wished I hadn’t looked. For a moment, I regretted the sight before me so much that I almost wished I was blind. Peter had her long, blond hair wrapped tightly around his fist, and she was crying. Elijah was being held by another, larger werewolf to Peter’s right. There were a total of seven werewolves standing behind him, and none of them looked friendly.

“I’m here,” Marco said. “Now give us the girl.”

His voice was strong, and the underlying threat was clear. Peter flung Mary at me without warning, and I fell to the ground as I spun to catch her. In the time it took me to sit up, he had Elijah by the throat.

“No!” I screamed. “You leave him alone!”

Mary and I stood up and Luther held her against his chest as she began to sob uncontrollably. They had obviously roughed her up, but at a glance I couldn't tell how much. She could at least stand on her own and that was a good sign.

"I really didn't want to do this in front of you," Peter said to me. "But since you chose to follow him, I guess that can't be avoided."

He jerked Elijah's head back so hard I thought for a second he had broken his neck. I took a step forward, and Marco held out his arm to stop me.

"My name is Peter Davenport, and I challenge you Marco Barak, for the honored title of *lupinus regalis* of the Canis Romulus clan."

"I accept," Marco growled.

Without warning Peter bit into Elijah's throat. It was cruel and uncalled for, and I suddenly saw *red*. I felt the rage overtaking me and knew I was about to lose control. Mary screamed, and I roared with anger.

"I'll kill you!" I yelled, as Luther grabbed me around the waist to restrain me.

I could tell it took everything he had to hold me and I'd probably have bruises around my waist. But Luther refused to let go.

"Let him go!" Marco ordered.

Almost as soon as Marco spoke Peter's wolves were upon us. Luther was out of his skin in the blink of an eye, and began to attack the large brown wolf who charged us. Marco's hands were already formed into massive claws, though that was the only part of his body that changed as he slashed his way through the advancing werewolves. I pushed Mary behind me and extended my claws. I could feel my eyes bleeding to werewolf amber, and I bared my teeth at the oncoming wolves.

A massive werewolf with reddish fur leaped at me and I hit the floor, ripping loose his genitalia as I went. His roar of agony was all I had hoped for. I paused a moment before tearing out his throat. If they had raped Mary, which was my suspicion, they were getting off easy.

When I looked up Marco was covered in blood, and four werewolves lay dead at his feet. Luther had killed two, I had taken down one, and Peter had escaped. Elijah's startled cough seemed to tear at my heart as Marco ran to him. His hands were already back to normal, and I started running to him while he took Elijah's head in his hands.

"Keep her away," Marco ordered.

Luther who was also in human form again held me against his chest. This time, I didn't fight him. In fact, I held on to him to keep from falling. Something in Marco's voice frightened me enough to keep my distance. What had been done to my poor Elijah that was so bad I couldn't look? For a moment my heart stopped and I couldn't breathe.

"It's bad," Marco said quietly. "Take them home, and call me an ambulance," he said to Luther.

We stepped outside while Luther got his cell phone and a spare pair of jeans out of Marco's car, his other clothes had been completely shredded when he changed. He placed the call while he turned his back to us and snatched on the pants. I knew he wasn't calling the hospital. The werewolves and other various shapeshifters, who had turned up thanks to Dr. Bill Williams, had their own clinic. The doctor who runs the place is a werewolf, and so is his brother who is a nurse practitioner. But no one knew what they really were, either; it would have ruined them. They ran the clinic in a large metal building on the back of several acres of private property. I knew this was where he

would take Elijah. If the media got wind of what had just happened, all of Marco's hard work to prove werewolves weren't necessarily monsters would be down the drain.

I tried not to think of the other reasons he might prefer to take him there as I opened the door and sat down in the passenger seat. Mary had already crawled in the back and was staring blankly ahead. I really didn't know what to say to her. My shock was mostly due to a new and horrific realization: if I ever saw Peter again, I would have to kill him. He was now officially a rogue werewolf, and even if Marco didn't finish him off, I would have to. It had now become my job.

Luther waited until the ambulance arrived a few minutes later before he got behind the wheel. He reached over and took my hand, but there was nothing he could say. Mary had stopped crying and, as long as she was quiet, I wasn't going to say something stupid like, "Are you okay?" and make her start crying again. Of course she wasn't okay. On the other hand, she didn't seem to be mortally wounded either.

We took her to Kat's house which is about a thirty-minute drive from mine. Luther had called ahead, so Kat knew we were coming. She met us on the porch, and started crying as soon as she saw Mary.

"Oh, my God. What did they do to you?" she asked.

Kat took Mary in her arms and cried even harder.

"It's not so bad," Mary said bravely.

"Did they...?" Kat couldn't finish the question that had been on my mind ever since I saw Mary's torn clothes and battered face.

"No," Mary answered. "They were going to, but Elijah stopped them."

Just speaking his name was enough to cause tears to start streaming down her face again.

I was crying, too, when I asked, "Were you scratched, or bitten?"

"I don't think so." She shook her head.

"I hate to do this now, Mary, but we should really go inside and check to be sure."

Luther waited on the porch while Kat and I took Mary in the bathroom and stripped her. She stood underneath the shower while we turned her from side to side. With some of the dirt and blood washed away, I was finally convinced that Mary had not been contaminated. However, I still recommended she get a blood test as soon as she felt able to drive to the clinic. We both knew that what I really meant was to wait until they had pieced Elijah back together enough that she could stand to look at him. She was badly beaten, but she would be alright.

While Mary finished taking a shower, I went with Kat to get her something to wear, and told her what had happened. Kat cried like someone had broken her heart.

"Lilith, I'm so sorry," she wept. I knew she was talking about Peter. "And poor Elijah," she sobbed. "Let me get it all out now, I don't want to cry any more than I have to in front of Mary." I appreciated Kat for being strong for Mary's sake. Someone had to, and right then, it couldn't be me.

When I stepped back out onto the porch, Luther was just closing his phone.

"I called Bade," he said.

I hadn't known he had Bade's number. "Why?"

"I thought he should know," Luther said quietly. I knew he was too fiercely loyal to Marco for him to be plotting behind his back, so there had to be some other reason he was calling. Courtesy?

Luther ran a hand through his disheveled hair and sighed heavily. It had been braided neatly until the fight broke out. I wasn't going to ask all of the questions that came to mind, but after a minute he started talking.

"If he cheats and wins, because that's the only way that little shit could defeat Marco ...." Luther paused. "I told Bade so he could take him out. I might kill Peter myself if he hurts Marco, or I'll die trying," he growled. "That was the plan, anyway, if anything ever happened to Marco, Bade was supposed to take over. Then he went and fucked things up, and now *I'm* the one who will be in charge if Marco dies. That is, if he dies without being killed by a challenger."

"You mean accidental death?" I asked softly. It was difficult to discuss Marco's death. But these were things I needed to know.

"Yes. I'm fine with being his second," Luther said. "But I don't want to lead the pack, Lilith. *Ever.*"

"What did Bade say?" I asked as I walked over and put an arm around Luther's bare waist. He was warm to the touch, in spite of the early evening breeze. It did me good to touch Luther. It was more than just the comfort of being near Marco's pack members; it was the comfort of being near my oldest friend.

He put his arm around me and answered, "All he asked was if you were alright."

For some strange reason that brought more tears to my eyes and I looked toward the ground so Luther wouldn't see.

"He didn't ask about Marco?" I questioned, trying to keep the emotion from my voice.

"I'd already told him Marco was fine," he sighed. "He remembered Elijah though, said he would go check on him tomorrow."

"Peter's so fucking stupid," I burst out suddenly. "Not only did he go and challenge Marco, but he attacked a friend of mine. A cop; *he attacked a fucking cop!*" I began to pace the porch. "He's lost his mind," I rambled. "I'll have to kill him now," I said. "*Me*, Luther, not Bade, or anyone else. If he kills Marco, *I'll* have to kill him. Not only to avenge Marco ... but because it's my job. I hate my fucking job," I wailed as I sat down on the steps.

The porch creaked as he moved toward the steps. Luther sat beside me and hugged me to him again. After a minute he said, "How's Mary?"

"She'll be alright. I recommended a blood test, but I'm sure she wasn't contaminated."

"Good," he said. "Since Mary's staying here, I'll spend the night with you, if you want me to."

"Alright, but why did you say it like that?"

"Well," he sighed, "The two people most in need of comfort right now are you and Mary, Elijah is beyond my help. Mary's staying with Kat, so I'll comfort you any way I can."

I crawled onto his lap, and Luther started carrying me to the car.

"I love you, Luther," I cried against his shoulder, "I really do."

When we got home, Alek was at the theatre with Dracula, but Johnny was sitting at the kitchen table making himself a salad.

"You alright, sweetheart," he said, getting quickly to his feet.

He took in both our disheveled appearances and asked, "Did someone die?"

I wiped more involuntary tears as Luther sat down and started telling Johnny the story.

Johnny turned to me very seriously and said, "You need me to take care of this, you say the word. You know I'm reliable. I'll cut this bastard down, and no one will be the wiser. You're wolfman's challenger will just magically disappear." He snapped his fingers to emphasize the point.

"Thanks, Johnny," I said, placing my hand on his shoulder. "But I have to let Marco fight his own battles. Besides, I'm sure he can handle Peter one on one."

"But you don't think Peter will fight fair." It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"Right. Even if he does, I'm not sure I can watch it."

"Who said you have to watch it?" Johnny asked.

"I'll be with Marco when this happens. I'm on his side, and I should show it."

Johnny only nodded like he understood and Luther said, "There's really nothing we can do."

But I remembered something I did needed to do. I got up from the table and called Dracula. I told him what had happened and he assured me he would make the report to my father, the commander. After I informed him of everyone's condition he said softly, "And what about you, my angel?"

"What?" My brain wasn't working right at the moment.

"No offense to anyone involved, but you have left out what I most wanted to hear. Are you alright?" he asked gently.

"Yes," I whispered. "But Elijah ..." My words trailed off and the vampire whispered words of comfort to me in a language I didn't understand. I knew he was using his powers to soothe me and I opened myself up to him. I needed to get a grip.

When I reentered the room, Johnny had removed his sunglasses to wipe his eyes, and Luther was just starting at him. He was obviously startled by Johnny's appearance, but now was not the time to focus on that.

"I know something we can do," Johnny said, going to the fridge. "We can get drunk."

"That won't solve anything," I protested weakly.

"No," he agreed, "not a damn thing, but it will keep you from thinking about it all until we get word of how your friend is doing."

"Well, if we're going to do this, let's do it right," Luther said.

Alek had enchanted a fresh batch of wine, making it strong enough to affect a werewolf like someone with a normal metabolism. Luther took down the bottle and poured us both a drink. I looked underneath the counter and took out another bottle of rum.

"You've been holding out on me," Johnny accused.

"No, sugar, this one is too strong for you," I told him as I sat the bottle on the counter.

Johnny raised an eyebrow and gave me a skeptical look. It had to hit like a sledgehammer to the face to be too strong for him and I knew it.

I love rum, and I'd had Alek magically spike a bottle just for me. I downed a few shots before I realized how filthy I was. Luther and I were both covered in dirt and blood. Yuk, it wasn't even my blood.

“I’m taking a shower,” I announced. “I’ll be back.” I pointed at Johnny. “Don’t drink my rum.”

“I’m coming with you,” Luther said.

Johnny gave us both the look this time, but he didn’t say a word.

When I stood up, the alcohol and my elevated blood pressure were nearly too much for me. Luther helped me up the stairs while I fought the dizziness. As soon as we were in the bedroom I started to strip. I didn’t even care if Luther watched, but when I stepped in the shower he followed me, and he was naked.

“You’re going to take a shower with me?” I asked, turning to face him.

“Come on, Lilith, I’ve seen it all before. I’m worried. I’m upset about what happened, about what I saw ...” he trailed off, and I wrapped my arms around him.

“It’s alright, Luther, you can stay.”

Werewolves are comforted by being near each other, just like natural wolves. They also recover faster when they sleep next to another lycanthrope. I’m close enough to meeting that description that Luther felt safe with me. I understood. Holding onto him underneath the water helped to settle my nerves too. We were both too upset to pay much attention to the fact that we were pressed together naked in the shower. With my hands against his bare back, I knew Luther was plagued by the same thought that was in my mind: Is Elijah going to live?

## Chapter Twelve

We washed in silence, and when I started to notice how good he looked, I figured it was time to get out. Luther wrapped a towel around his waist and began running a comb through his long pale blond hair. I went to the closet and found something for us to put on. I slipped into a pair of black silk pajamas and handed Luther one of my larger robes. It was also black silk, reached to my ankles, and tied around me with room left over. It hung open enough to reveal part of his chest, and reached to the backs of his knees, but at least he wasn't naked.

We were walking down the stairs when the doorbell rang. Johnny answered it, without the sunglasses.

Marco didn't even flinch. "Hello, Johnny," he said casually.

"Marco." Johnny nodded. "Won't you come in?"

"I can't stay," he sighed. I was close enough now that he reached for my hand and pulled me out on the porch. Luther and Johnny stayed inside and closed the door.

"How do you know Johnny?" I couldn't resist asking, because I knew I hadn't introduced them.

"I met him through Jeremiah," he answered quickly. "And before you say anything, I know you dated, and I'm assuming he's here to join H.A.V.O.C."

"Yes," I was surprised. I also wanted to know how exactly it was that a werewolf had introduced him to Johnny, but now was not the time. "How do you know we dated?"

"Because Johnny likes to drink," he said with a smile, "and Johnny likes to talk."

I noticed Marco hadn't had a chance to wash up yet and was about to offer to let him come in and take a shower when he said again, "I can't stay. Elijah is in critical condition." I had known as much, but my chest hurt when Marco confirmed my fears. He took my hand and said as gently as possible, "Lilith, he may not make it through the night."

"What did he—" my voice broke and I tried again, "What did Peter do to him while I wasn't looking?"

Marco only shook his head, which meant I didn't want to know. He was right to keep me away; I probably couldn't bear to know what was done to my poor Elijah.

"If he survives," Marco began, and I stifled a sob with my hand. "If he survives," he repeated, "he will turn."

I started to gag and Marco helped me to the edge of the porch where I threw up on the azaleas.

"Marco I'm sorry," I cried as I wiped my mouth with a tissue he pulled from his pocket. "It's all my fault." I knew what I had said didn't make any sense. I just felt like it was my fault because there was nothing I could do to stop it or make it any better.

"No it's not, Red," he said, bending down to rub my back. "You couldn't have stopped this."

"When will you have to fight Peter?" I asked soberly.

"At the next full moon—that's how it works. I name the place, and the challenger

gets to name the form we fight in.”

“Form?” This was all very new to me, and I didn’t understand.

“Human, half-human, werewolf, or completely wolf,” he explained.

“Oh.”

“The only problem with that is, I never become fully wolf anymore.”

I remembered seeing his friend Sam, who was leader of another pack, in wolf form. He looked like a regular wolf, only about three times as large.

“Why?” I asked.

“I’ve become strong enough that the beast never fully overtakes me anymore.”

“So, what I saw at Kat’s party ....”

“Is as bad as it gets,” he finished.

He had come to Kat’s last Halloween party as The Big Bad Wolf, and he didn’t need a costume.

“Will you be alright?” he asked, still rubbing my back. “I’ve got to get going. I’m going to stay with Elijah until he stabilizes or ....”

He didn’t have to say it; he was staying until he stabilized, or until he died.

I promised him I would be fine. It wasn’t true, but Marco had enough on his mind without having to worry about me.

“I’ll be back,” he said, “you’ll know more as soon as I do.”

When I walked back in Luther and Johnny looked anxious. I told them what Marco had said. Luther looked close to tears, and Johnny looked close to murder. I walked to the half-bath underneath the stairs and used some mouth wash before returning to the kitchen.

“I’ve done you a favor,” Johnny said. When I sat down he continued, “I know that only Peter asked for permission to enter the territory, but he couldn’t challenge Marco without a small following of his own. Other people will know who is here without the wolf king’s permission.”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“I called in some favors.”

“You put out a hit on Peter’s entire pack?”

“You got it.” He smiled sadistically.

I sprang from my seat and kissed him on the mouth. He tasted like rum; it was just like old times. Alek returned within the hour, and he brought Dracula with him.

“I was supposed to rehearse tonight,” Luther mumbled when he saw them.

Dracula had decided he would watch Luther and I practice the lines, and that would count as an audition. Well, that was actually my suggestion and he went along with it. His idea of an audition had been, “Come to dinner with me.”

Alek was just as upset as the rest of us and said he was going down to the dungeon. I understood he just needed to be alone. Dracula walked over and sat down between me and Luther. We all sat there in silence, passing the bottles back and forth to refill our glasses. There was nothing else we could do. Dracula must have felt even more helpless than us because he couldn’t even drink. He finally went to watch television in the other room. By this time, Johnny and I were sitting closer together and just passing the bottle instead of worrying with a glass.

When I returned from the bathroom for the third time I heard him say to Luther, “That robe really doesn’t look good on you.”

“I don’t give an ass’s rat,” Luther mumbled drunkenly.

Before he could reply, Johnny passed out face down on the kitchen table.

“Come on.” I took Luther by the hand. “We’re going to bed. You too,” I said to Dracula.

\* \* \* \*

I don’t even remember walking up the stairs, but I awoke so tightly pressed between Luther and Dracula that I could barely breathe. For a moment, I just enjoyed the warmth and protection of their combined embrace. Then I remembered what had happened the day before and got up. I made sure the curtains were closed, and Dracula was out of any direct sunlight before getting dressed. I went immediately to the clinic. I could no longer wait on Marco to tell me, I had to know, I had to see.

A very tall, thin man with gray hair met me at the door. He introduced himself as Dr. Sinclair, and showed me back to where they had Elijah. He said Marco had gone downstairs to shower, but would be back up shortly. I assumed they had a basement level, because the building I had entered had only one visible floor.

I looked down the long row of neatly made beds and found Elijah all the way on the end. His area was sectioned off with curtains. I took a deep breath and pulled them open. I knew immediately that had been a mistake. There wasn’t a part of Elijah’s body that wasn’t bandaged. They had tubes and wires hooked up to his left arm, and it was covered up in a way that made me think they must have had to sew it back on.

Only his eyes were visible, and they were closed when I walked around to his right side.

“Oh, Eli,” I whispered, and started to cry.

I leaned over Elijah and rested my head against his chest as I began to say, “You can’t die. I can’t imagine living a day without your smile to look forward to. A world without your smile would be too dark a place for me. Please God,” I wept, “don’t take the sun from my life.”

I cried harder than I think I’ve ever cried in my life as I begged God to spare Elijah’s life. He didn’t deserve this. I would have given my own life to save him, and I told God so.

While I cried Elijah lifted his right hand and placed it on my head.

“Sssh,” he said through bandaged lips.

“Oh, Elijah,” I sniffed. “I’m so sorry.”

He just shook his head as if to say, “It wasn’t your fault.”

His once beautiful blue eyes were horribly bloodshot and there wasn’t a spot of skin around them that wasn’t black. I knew that if Elijah was awake enough to communicate with me, then he was awake enough to realize he would survive ... as a werewolf.

“I’ve already started to heal,” he mumbled through the tight bandages on his face. “I’ll be alright.”

“You’ll be a werewolf,” I said softly, as I sat down beside him. “Elijah ... I don’t know what to say.”

“I’ll be alright,” he repeated.

At least all of the horrible injuries that were bandaged out of my sight would heal. When I looked at him again, he would be the same adorable Elijah, only ... he wouldn’t be the same.

“How’s Mary?” he asked.

“She’s fine,” I assured him. “She spent the night with Kat.”

“Is she ... like me?”

“No,” I said, and started to cry again.

I told him we killed all the other werewolves in the room the day before, and that Johnny had put out a hit on Peter’s entire pack.

“You will be avenged,” I said vehemently. “If I have to take it out of his hide, I swear to you, you will be avenged.”

He touched my face lightly and whispered, “You sound just like Marco.”

I kissed the palm of his hand, which was the only thing other than his eyes that wasn’t covered in bandages.

“Is it still attached?” he asked, rolling his eyes toward his left arm.

“Yes,” I assured him. “It’s still attached. You could grow it back now,” I said hopefully, “even if it wasn’t.”

“Good morning, Red,” Marco said softly from behind me, and I jumped.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I’m sorry, I just didn’t hear you.”

He had changed into a pair of scrubs and his hair was still wet.

“I see he’s awake,” Marco said with a smile as he walked toward Elijah’s bed.

“You mean he hasn’t been awake before?”

Marco shook his head. “If I had to pick a first sight, I’d pick you too. I look like shit.”

I laughed weakly and went back to kissing the palm of Elijah’s hand.

Marco stepped closer and put his hand on my shoulder as he said, “Red, I know how you feel about Peter, but—”

“No, Marco. You mean how I used to feel. Peter crossed the line. Whatever needs to be done, I’m with you one hundred percent. He will die,” I said to Elijah, “if not by Marco’s hand, then by my own.” I pressed my cold hand against the palm of his as I said, “These hands will see to it that you are avenged. If by my blood or theirs I can protect you, so help me God, you will not be hurt again.”

Elijah’s eyes filled with tears as he whispered, “Thank you.”

Marco took me by the hand, and we left Elijah to rest. Dr. Sinclair assured us he wasn’t in any pain. He had been given a werewolf dose of morphine.

Once we were outside Marco asked, “You’ll really stand by and watch while I kill your first love? I know what he’s done is unforgivable, but you don’t have to watch.”

“I’m with you,” I said. “I promised Elijah he wouldn’t be hurt anymore, and I meant it. They all have to be killed, or he still faces that risk, and so does your whole pack.”

“You would fight for my pack?” he asked softly.

“No, Marco not for them ... for you.”

He kissed me softly and said, “I’ll stay with him for a few more days, then if you’ll have me, I’ll come by and visit you.”

It felt wonderful to think that in a few days this part of the nightmare would be behind us, and I could spend some time with Marco.

I kissed him again, and walked back toward my car. We didn’t say goodbye. Marco just stood outside the door to the clinic and watched me until I was out of sight.

His eyes said more to me than any words ever could. If I was willing to fight for Marco, then he was willing to die for me. As I looked into his eyes, there was no doubt about that.

On my way back I realized that I had been initially attracted to Elijah because he reminded me of Peter, and I felt sick. How could he do this to an innocent man? He was no longer the person I had known. Peter was really and truly a monster. He had become everything he'd accused me of being ... and so much more. How could I have ever seen his face when I looked at Elijah? Thinking back I understood that they were nothing alike and I'd take Elijah in a heartbeat. Even over the man I thought Peter was.

When I got home I heard gunfire and ran toward the sound. I found Johnny out behind the garden shed, using some old cans for target practice. He was fast, faster than anything I would have thought humanly possible. But then again, Johnny wasn't exactly human.

He smiled and tipped his black cowboy hat in my direction as I approached.

"Doesn't your head hurt?" I asked as he adjusted his gun belt over his faded jeans.

"Yeah, mostly where I hit it on the table. How's your friend?"

I told Johnny about Elijah while he reloaded his silver six-shooters. I had just gotten to the part about promising revenge when several werewolves leapt out of the bushes and sprang toward me. I didn't have to do anything. I was standing behind Johnny, and he had taken them all down before I could blink.

"Well, that's ...." He paused and counted the bodies before saying, "ten more you won't have to worry about."

"Are you sure they're dead?"

"Silver tipped," he said, spinning the guns and reholstering them with practiced ease, "Right in the fucking head."

Johnny normally carried a different set of custom-made semi-automatic pistols that held ten silver rounds per clip, but I remembered how much he liked to practice with the old guns, and smiled my appreciation.

"You still got that incinerator?" he asked as he kicked one of the bodies.

"Yes."

"I'll drag Luther's ass out here to help me then."

"He's still asleep? It's after ten o'clock."

"I think you forgot how much he drank," Johnny said. His voice was full of sarcasm, and so was his smile.

On our way back around the house he asked, "So, how was your friend, emotionally? I remember you used to wake up in the middle of the night crying. I'd hate to see anyone else go through that."

"As I recall, you always found a way to soothe me," I teased.

"That I did," he replied with a grin.

"But to answer your question, I think he'll be alright. Elijah has always been very positive about things. He was upset, sure, but he was mostly worried about his sister."

"You sure they didn't rape her?"

"I'm sure."

If they had, I'm not sure who would have been the worst punishment for them, me or Johnny. He had a particularly strong hatred for rapists. I shared with him how I had ripped the genitalia off of the big werewolf the day before, and it seemed to make his

morning.

## Chapter Thirteen

He adjusted his little, round sunglasses, and we went back inside to get Luther. When we walked in my bedroom Luther and Dracula were snuggled together even more tightly than before I had left. Since Dracula did not move in his “sleep,” I knew Luther had hugged up to him. I had made the unfortunate mistake the night before of sharing with Johnny how Luther reacted to Dracula at first. The way he responded to the sound of the vampire’s voice made him think he might be gay. I knew by the look on his face that Johnny was about to exploit the situation.

Johnny walked over and smiled down at Luther as he said, “Well, aren’t you two just the picture of gayness?” He grabbed Luther by the ankles and unceremoniously yanked him into the floor. “Rise and shine, Romeo.”

“You son of a bitch,” Luther said, but he didn’t say it very loud. He sat on the floor and cradled his head in his hands. “Oh, no,” he whined. “I didn’t think it was possible. I haven’t felt like this in years.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, kneeling down beside him.

“I’ve got a hangover.”

“Well, I’ll be damned. I didn’t think that was possible for a werewolf. But you did drink a shitload of that enchanted wine last night,” Johnny pointed out.

“Thank you for reminding me,” Luther drawled sarcastically. “I should be alright in a few hours,” he said as I helped him to his feet.

I followed Luther into the bathroom where he splashed some water on his face. I knew the instant he remembered what had happened by the look on his face. “How’s Elijah?” he asked.

“He’ll live,” I said. “I already went to see him this morning.”

I told Luther what I knew of the extent of his injuries and that he seemed to be as calm as anyone could be who just found out they’re a werewolf.

“I figured he’d take that well if he survived. Elijah’s a survivor, and that’s what he’ll do.” He got quiet for a minute before adding, “I tried to kill myself when I found out.”

“I remember you telling me.”

“Marco stopped me. If it weren’t for him, I’d be dead by now,” he said sadly.

“And I would have never seen you again. I owe him a lot.”

“We both do,” I said, walking over to where Luther stood by the sink.

I wrapped my arms around him and rubbed my face across his chest. I could hear his heart beating beneath my ear. I thought of how I might feel if I lost Luther, and my chest felt tight.

“I’m really glad you didn’t kill yourself,” I said softly.

“Me too,” Luther whispered as he hugged me tightly.

We walked back into the bedroom to find Johnny snuggled up with Dracula face-to-face.

“I’ll admit, he is gorgeous,” he taunted, “But Luther, I really don’t see the

appeal.”

He leapt from the bed before Luther could carry through with some form of assault. Poor Vlad, wait till I tell him what these sick people do while he’s asleep.

“Leave him alone,” I scolded Johnny with a laugh, “both of them. Especially him.” I pointed to Dracula while I pulled the covers back over his shoulder. “How would you like it if a couple of homophobes made gay jokes about you while you were sleeping?”

“I’m not a homophobe,” they said together, then looked at each other like “yeah, right.”

“Besides, when I fell asleep, you were in the middle,” Luther reminded me suggestively.

“Really?” Johnny said as he turned to me, “Do tell.”

Since Johnny and I had always been honest with each other, even when the truth sucked, I told him why Luther had slept with me. Johnny had never known the full extent of my changes, because at the time we dated about four years ago, *I* hadn’t known.

“So, you’re close enough to being a full fledged werewolf that being next to pack members soothes you?” he asked as we started taking out ingredients for breakfast.

“Yeah, about half actually. At least that’s how Marco explained it.”

“Well,” Johnny replied with a shrug, “I knew you had acquired their metabolism. Have you ever been able to skip breakfast?”

“Not for long, not without getting sick. That’s something werewolves and I definitely have in common.”

Werewolves have such a fast metabolism that they have to eat regularly. Except with them, they wouldn’t just get sick like I did; it would make it harder for them to control the change in a weakened physical state. It was particularly important for new werewolves to eat at least three meals a day.

“I still want to know how you two know each other,” I insisted.

Johnny just grinned mischievously. “You’ll probably want to wait until Marco’s around to tell his side of the story. Don’t worry. It’s entertaining to say the least.”

“I’m sure it is,” I said sarcastically. “And probably illegal,” I added in an undertone that only Luther heard.

Aside from being the best gunslinger to ever live, Johnny made one of the best omelets in the world. In fact, when he agreed to come, I bought ingredients in anticipation of him cooking for me again. Alfred was a good cook, no matter what the occasion, but breakfast was really Johnny’s thing. He planned to start looking for a house soon, instead of as he put it “bumming” off of me. But I didn’t really want Johnny to go. Ever since I had lost Alfred, I found it comforting to surround myself with familiar faces, and Johnny’s was a face I had missed. I didn’t miss our relationship, I just missed him.

You couldn’t help but like Johnny. Sure, he was an asshole, but he was honest. If he didn’t like something, he told you. There was no guess work with him, and I liked that. I liked not having to wonder if he would shoot me in the back, or sign my death warrant the way Alfred had done. We’d had a good thing once, and now Johnny was one of the most loyal friends you could ask for. Granted, if you got shot, he might leave you behind and save his own ass, but at least you wouldn’t have to wonder if he got the job done when they took you out. Johnny always got the job done, no matter what the cost.

When he said he was reliable, he wasn't kidding. But I could sense a change in Johnny. Maybe the days of leaving a fallen comrade behind were gone. Whatever it was, it felt positive.

Johnny put an omelet in front of me positively oozing with cheese and bacon. I smiled my appreciation as I took the fork he offered me, as well.

"I thought you didn't like meat this early in the morning?" Luther said.

He was right, I normally preferred fruit.

"I've always made an exception for Johnny," I taunted.

"Oh, really?" Luther laughed.

"Believe it," Johnny said suggestively.

While Luther and I washed dishes Johnny went out to check the mail. I had forgotten it for the past few days and he returned with his denim shirt full of letters. He dumped them on the table.

"Holy shit."

"Yeah, I'm gonna have to get a P.O. Box or something. This is ridiculous."

"What are they?" he asked.

"Fan mail," I said sarcastically. "Would you be a dear and sort out my *real* mail please?"

He began to rummage through the pile. "Do you know anybody named ..." He rattled off several unfamiliar names and I told him to feel free to open them.

"Dear Ms. Mercury," Johnny read, "Eat shit and die."

"Not another one," I said disgustedly. "Same bitch," I commented after reading the signature.

"Can I respond to this one?" Johnny asked.

"No, you can't," I laughed.

I took the letter from him and tossed it in the trash. Besides, knowing him like I did I was sure Johnny had already made a mental note of her name. I wouldn't be surprised if that's the last letter I ever received from her.

He picked up another one and read as if his brain had been fried with peroxide, "Dear Lilith, I think it's so totally cool that you're nailing a werewolf. Ohmygosh, what's it like?"

Luther and I just laughed.

"Do you ever write back?" he asked.

"No."

He picked up another letter, scanned it and said, "Oh, gross."

"What is it?"

"Some old man trying to pick you up."

"Nasty," I said at the same time Luther started drying his hands and said, "I want to read it."

Johnny picked up another letter and read, "Dear Ms. Mercury, I've seen you on television, and in the papers, and I must say you have one of the most luscious sets of lips I've ever seen. I have often imagined them wrapped around my—"

"Johnny! What are you reading?"

"It's from Marco," he said, laughing.

"You guys are sick," I said, snatching the letter and whacking Johnny over the head.

“Hey, I didn’t write it,” he protested.

I briefly scanned the number of obscenities Marco had listed and had to admit, it sounded like fun. I slipped the note in my back pocket while Luther pulled out a letter with red paper and black ink.

“That will be a Dracula letter,” I said.

“How can you tell?”

I shrugged and he began to read, “Dear Ms. Mercury, Would you please pass along my warmest regards to Dracula? I’m afraid I have nothing new or exciting to say, I just think he’s hot as fuck.”

We all doubled over laughing and Luther repeated, “Pass along my warmest regards.”

“You just did,” a smooth deep voice said from the doorway.

Dracula glided into the room like some sort of royalty, carefully avoiding the beams of sunlight streaming through the window.

“We weren’t properly introduced,” Johnny said as he stood up and offered his hand to the vampire, “Johnny Angel.”

Dracula inclined his head regally as they exchanged greetings.

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the day and night passed with considerably less tension than the night before. Kat called to tell me Mary was doing much better. She said Marco had sent over Dr. Sinclair to take a blood sample. He thought Elijah was still in too bad a condition for her to see. Marco and Kat were both afraid that Mary would blame herself. They were probably right. The more he healed before she saw him, the better. They had, however, assured her he would live.

Marco called early the next morning and asked if he could come by. It was only six o’clock, but I was more than ready to see him. Luther and Alek were planning to rehearse that day, Dracula had gone home, and Johnny was going out house shopping. As I shared this with Marco I told him, “I’ve got nowhere else to be, and only one thing to do.”

He laughed silkily and replied, “Well, Elijah’s much better so I’m just getting in the way here.”

He had gone home late the night before, changed clothes, and drove his motorcycle back. When he arrived thirty minutes later, I was ready. The weather was warming gradually, but it was still cool, so I put on a jacket over my thin t-shirt and jeans.

“How much better is he?” I asked as I met Marco at the top of the steps and hugged him.

“He can sit up. He can’t use the arm yet, but it won’t be long.”

“Marco, I can’t thank you enough for how you’ve handled this.”

“You love him,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

I saw no reason to lie about it. I did love Elijah. He had never looked at me like a monster, and I would always love him for that. As I took Marco’s hand I could feel him wondering if I would react the same way if he was ever hurt.

I touched the side of his handsome face as I promised, “Hell would bar its gates against the fury I will unleash if anyone ever hurts you.”

He smiled, and the world was a better place. I knew I would never find another man like Marco, and at that moment, I couldn't imagine ever wanting to look. He was everything I would ever need. He was kind and compassionate; he defended the helpless, and protected the weak. He was a knight in shining armor, just as sure as if he'd ridden in on a white horse. I hit the floor, right then and there, and I bounced. Not literally, but I knew then I had fallen, and I had hit hard. As my friend Richard might say, I was way far gone for Marco.

"Let's ride," he said as he pulled me down the steps.

We took a tour of not only my property, but rode all the way to Kat's house where he personally delivered the results of Mary's blood test. She was clean, and she was overjoyed to hear how much Elijah had improved, even if he was a werewolf. She thanked me so much for saving her that I nearly started crying again. Mary, who healed at a human pace, still looked terrible. But her spirits were high, and there was a lot to be said for that. Marco had even sent over some pack members to run Kat's shop so she could stay at home with Mary until she healed.

The day had started out beautiful, but on our way back storm clouds began to form. I touched Marco's arm and sensed something different than I had expected. After what had happened with Peter, he was worried that I would be afraid of him now. Two men I had loved had now turned on me, one much more seriously than the other, and he was afraid I would expect the same thing from him. I pressed my face against his back to keep from crying, because I knew as I opened myself up more that Marco would have died the other day to save me. It was a price he went there willing to pay if he had to. He loved me without doubt, and I would never have to question his loyalty.

When we pulled back up, I made some tea and brought it out to where he sat on the porch. There are two white wicker chairs on the right side of my porch with a small matching table between. We sat there and talked and managed to just relax for a while. Believe it or not, The Big Bad Wolf likes blueberry tea.

As we sat there on the front porch talking, the storm was quickly approaching. So far, taking it slow was working for us. But as I looked at him I knew I had reached my limit. Marco was beyond a doubt the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. Alfred was handsome and well built. Dracula was enchanting with his near-perfect, unearthly beauty. But Marco had a sexiness all of his own to which they paled in comparison. Everything about Marco was exactly as it should be. There was no part of him that did not appear as strong and masculine as the rest. My muscles began to tighten in response to his nearness, and I felt my fingers grip the wicker chair arm in response to the sensation. Marco must have seen me stiffen and misunderstood the reasoning behind it. He rose quickly. "I should go," he said as he walked down the steps.

"Wait." I grabbed his hand.

He looked dangerous as he glanced back at me. His eyes seemed to glow in the growing darkness. He had been so careful not to cross the line. Marco had been nothing if not patient with me, and the need he had managed to hide was now evident in his eyes. "Do you really want me to stay?" His rough sexy voice had already begun to deepen with the change. He was close to the bottom of the steps and I was near the middle. This made our height almost even. We both knew what would happen if he stayed. There was no point in pretending otherwise, not this time.

## Chapter Fourteen

“Yes,” I whispered.

He turned back and stood still as if afraid to touch me. Rain began falling softly as I stood staring at him. How tempting he was. He looked like he’d stepped out of a wet dream and into my front yard. Every muscle in my stomach jumped at the sight of him. I was tired of playing games. I wanted to know all there was to know about Marco. I wanted to be a part of him. Relationships are always a risk, but I knew in that moment, this was a risk I was willing to take. Even if things turned out like they had with Alfred, I would rather live with a broken heart, than to never know what it was like to be with Marco.

I removed my jacket and tossed it into a chair behind me. I stepped toward him and watched in fascination as his shirt began to cling to every ridge and curve of his body as the rain saturated the thin cotton. The sight made me tremble.

“Don’t be afraid to touch me,” he whispered softly.

“I don’t know where to start.” It was true. As often as I had been near Marco, somehow I knew there was no going back this time. Things would change after these tender moments, and I didn’t want to make a wrong move.

He smiled down at me kindly, his dark eyes still glowed, but with an intensity and tenderness the wolf was not capable of. He fought back the beast in order to show me the man. I knew by the look in his eyes that Marco loved me.

“You can start by doing with your hands what you just did to me with your eyes,” he breathed.

Almost reverently I ran my hands over the muscles of his arms. I knew that once I kissed him, I wouldn’t be able to stop. Standing on tip toe, I pressed a soft kiss against his lips. At first Marco did not move, and then he began to melt against me. The gentle touch of his lips set me on fire. I felt I would be consumed at any moment by the flames that licked at my body. The cold rain was forgotten as he embraced me, and I fell into the arms of the man who had so often consumed my thoughts. Since the first moment I saw Marco, I had wanted him. At last he would be mine. I didn’t just want his body, I wanted *him*. I wanted all that Marco had to give, whether it be fast or slow, hard or gentle. I wanted all of him.

He growled softly, a deep rumbling sound that vibrated along my skin. My knees began to buckle beneath me, though to be honest, I was surprised they had held up for so long. Marco pressed me against him, hard but not crushing. I kissed a drop of rain as it ran down his throat. My hands ached to touch the hot wet skin that I knew lay just beneath his clothes. I began to pull his shirt out of his pants. When I grew frustrated, he snatched it over his head and smiled at me, flinging the wet shirt onto the porch. His smile warmed me to my toes. I had never in my life seen tenderness combined with such a fierce hunger. That was it. I couldn’t take any more. I had to have this man *now*.

My hands seemed to have a mind of their own as I ran them up the wet skin of his chest. Suddenly I remembered the first time I had seen him outside my house standing in

the rain, watching me. That day seemed so long ago, but the memory of what I wanted to do to him was very near. I kissed him with a hunger like I'd never felt before. His hands roamed over my back as he held me. I could feel through his wet jeans that he was just as excited as I was. He grabbed me suddenly and carried me onto the porch, setting me beside the door. To his disappointment, it was locked.

"Let me in," he growled.

Only once before, I had invited Marco in, but at the time he was unable to stay. There were many reasons I had never let Marco in my house, and what was about to happen was one of them.

Before I could retrieve my jacket to find the key, he kicked the door down.

One minute I was over his shoulder, the next I was sprawled on the rug in the hallway in front of the open door. The storm raged outside as he ripped my wet t-shirt from my body along with my bra. I looked up into the golden eyes of a wolf and knew a moment of fear.

He stopped.

Marco must have seen my fear. He scooped me up. "Your room is upstairs, right?" he growled softly. I pointed him in the right direction, and he carried me to the bedroom at the top of the stairs. He kicked off his wet boots by the door and moved toward the foot of the bed. The muscles along his back rippled and flexed beneath the skin as he knelt at my feet and removed my boots, as well.

He looked up at me from his knees and I ran my fingers through his wet hair, staring in fascination at his glowing amber eyes. He seemed to be waiting for some gesture from me before he would continue. I unbuckled my belt. Without hesitation, Marco placed his hands around my hips, sliding his warm fingers into the waist of my pants. He slid the wet fabric down my body, licking the water from my thighs as he went.

I stepped out of the pants and he cast them aside. His warm hands ran up my body as his mouth roamed over my stomach and up to my breasts. "*This is the most of me Marco has ever touched,*" I thought as my mind raced excitedly. My breath caught as his hot lips wrapped around one nipple. Having Marco near me was so much better than any of the fantasies that had kept me company all these years. He bit down, tugging gently on the soft flesh and I cried out.

"Do you want me to stop?" he growled.

"No," I panted. "But don't torture me."

"What do you want?"

"Let me see you," I said, my voice filled with desire.

I lay back across the bed and watched hungrily as he began to peel himself from the wet jeans to reveal a magnificent physique. Just as I had suspected, there were no tan lines. The edges of a tattoo could be seen just above the muscular curve of each hip bone. I had often wondered what the rest of Marco's tattoo looked like, but I would have to examine that later. His body was a vision of masculine perfection. Marco's size had always seemed a bit imposing. But without the clothes, he was closer to impressive. I was thrilled by the sight of him. As a matter of fact, nothing thrilled me quite the way looking at Marco did. Though some parts were more noteworthy than others, all of him was beautiful.

Marco crawled up from the foot of the bed, moving with a grace that only an

animal of prey can possess. He hovered above me.

“My, what big ... muscles you have.”

“Do I frighten you?” he asked.

I looked up into his amber wolf eyes and said, “Not any more.”

I pulled him down toward me, wrapped myself around him, and found that he felt even larger than he looked. I had held Marco before, but never like this. Never with the realization that I was about to have the mysteries of his body revealed to me at long last. Touching Marco was a fantasy all its own. He was hard where I was soft, rough where I was smooth. He felt like a man should feel, and I loved it. His skin was so hot that I thought he would burn me into the mattress as he pressed himself against me. He kissed me slowly as he moved his thigh between mine. I felt his leg move over mine, his foot brush across my ankle, his hand on my hip.

I trembled again as he pressed a soft kiss against my throat. “Don’t worry. I give good love, Red.”

I moaned and arched my body against him. “Let’s have it then, Marco. I’ve waited a long time.”

He kissed me again and I felt a slight smile curl his lips at my comment. I gasped as he took me at my word. He was big, much bigger than I had anticipated and it took a few minutes for me to take him fully. My imagination, though very active, had done him a great disservice. I felt my eyes close and he whispered, “No, Red. Don’t close your eyes and run to Alfred or Dracula, or anyone else.” He kissed me softly as he breathed against my lips, “Look at me when I make love to you.”

Marco cradled my head in his hands, holding me gently while he kissed me. His touch was gentle, but fierce. He touched me with a passion that would no longer be denied as he fought to keep the beast at bay. As he moved against me, I lost all track of time. I forgot who I was or where. He went faster and I screamed, clawing at his back, writhing and arching beneath him like a wild thing captured. I heard him growl near my ear, sending chills down my spine.

He withdrew suddenly. Before I could complain he took hold of my thighs and pulled me to him. “Bring it here,” he growled seductively as he began to lap at my flesh with that amazingly long tongue of his.

The feel of his mouth pressed against me was too much. I tried to maintain some control, tried not to see Marco’s dark head between my thighs. I wanted to wait, wanted to prolong the wonderful feeling spreading throughout my body. I could not stop my climax. For a moment the world did not exist. I was blind and deaf. I screamed, feeling only his hair between my fingers and his tongue as I arched against him. Then I heard my own breathing, and began to see, though not clearly. Marco kissed my forehead and asked if I was alright. I nodded, but I couldn’t speak. I looked up into his eyes and down the length of our bodies.

“Holy shit,” I panted.

“Something wrong, Red?” He smiled wickedly.

“It’s bigger!”

He only smiled wider in response to my astonishment. “How?”

“Do you remember that day when we were attacked by the snake man on a dirt road about a month ago?” he asked as he kissed my cheek.

“Of course.” How could I forget? Marco had been forced to kill one of the

professors that Richard worked with. The dean of the department, to be exact.

“Do you remember how only my hands transformed?” I felt him smile against my throat as he rubbed his impressively large appendage against me.

Then reality began to dawn. “You mean to tell me that you can transform your dick?! *Just your dick?*” I stared in amazement.

“Is that a complaint, Red?”

“Holy shit,” I repeated. “I don’t know if I can take it.” Marco was already large. He didn’t need any help.

“I’ll be gentle,” he whispered. “I promise, Red. I won’t hurt you.”

Marco smiled down at me as he asked, “Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

He began to enter me slowly and I gasped. Oh my. I was excited, but I was also very afraid. Marco reached underneath me as he sat up and pulled me onto his lap. I could feel my muscles stretching to their limit as I slid down his length.

“Relax,” he whispered against my lips. “You were made for me,” he said softly. “You can take it.” I slid down further and he growled, “You’re mine, Red, and I want you to have all of me.” But as he thrust into me we both realized there simply was nowhere else for him to go. He rocked slowly back and forth, gently working me up to taking more.

I wanted Marco more than I’d ever wanted anything in my life. All the nights I’d fallen asleep thinking about him, my mind consumed with things that I could only imagine, it all came back to me. It came to me with the knowledge that I would no longer have to wonder what it felt like to be with Marco. I threw him back on the bed with a growl. A slow pace was all well and good, but I needed something more. I leaned over Marco as I ground my hips against him. I moved in small circles, slowly increasing my pace. I ran my hand up through the back of his hair and pulled it tight. He growled in response. I looked deeply into his amber eyes as I said, “I want as much of you as possible inside of me when you come.”

Orgasm took me by surprise. I pulled his hair harder as I wrapped myself around him. I felt his body tense as Marco cried out with a mixture of pleasure and pain. For a moment I couldn’t see straight. Marco didn’t move, but I felt the steady rhythm of his heart beneath my ear.

“You may be big,” I panted, “but you’re not bad.”

He laughed at my obvious pun and settled back on the pillows, motioning for me to join him. I curled up under his arm, against his right side.

“I’m really sorry about your door,” he said.

“I’m just glad you didn’t blow it down,” I snickered.

“That’s not funny,” Marco said, but he was smiling. “Besides, why should you be afraid to sleep with the front door open, when you’ve already got the wolfman in your bed?”

“Good question,” I answered. “Are you saying that I’m safe with you?” I asked.

“Always,” he said. “You have always been mine to protect.”

He kissed my forehead softly as I rubbed the hair across his chest.

He looked at me and grinned. “Do you think you could stand to take a shower?”

“I don’t know how I’m even carrying on a conversation,” I sighed.

“Well, now you can tell Kat that I’m not bad, but I am a big wolf, and I still don’t

see anything wrong with a little huffing and puffing now and then.”

I laughed softly, and felt the last of my energy fade. It was like I had been given the world’s strongest tranquilizer.

“Oh, my God,” I whispered.

“Are you alright?” His voice was soft and concerned as he rolled to his side to face me.

“I feel so weak.”

“It’s called satisfaction,” he said with a smile as he brushed the hair back from my forehead. “We’ve had this conversation before, remember?”

It felt like I couldn’t breathe deeply enough.

“It’s alright, Red.” Marco cradled me against his chest. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

I just shook my head. I would probably be sore, but I wasn’t permanently injured.

“Don’t feel bad,” he whispered, “It took all I could do just to roll over.”

I felt myself smile before drifting off to sleep in his arms.

\* \* \* \*

I awoke to the sound of the shower running. I rolled to my back to look at the clock. I had been asleep for two hours, and the storm still raged outside. The sheets were still warm beside me. Marco hadn’t been up long. As the memories from a few hours before flooded over me, I could no longer deny what I felt for Marco. My heart fluttered with the realization. I had been so afraid of admitting to what I felt, especially after what had happened with Alfred. If I couldn’t trust Alfred, then who could I trust?

As I entered the bathroom and smelled his familiar scent, I knew the answer.

Marco. I could always trust Marco. He had never tried to hide from me. I walked around the wall of river rock that separates my walk-in shower from the rest of the room and watched as he stood underneath the water. His back was turned to me, and I finally got a good look at his tattoo. It was a sort of tribal pattern that spread over his lower back. It started at the tailbone, and curved up and around his waist, reaching around the muscles of his hip bones, like a vine but with sharper curves. Steam rose from his skin where the water touched him as Marco threw back his head to wash his face. My legs carried me unsteadily toward him. Marco must have known I was there, because he didn’t move as I wrapped my arms around his waist.

## Chapter Fifteen

With a heavy sigh I pressed my face against his back. He turned in my arms, and my face now rested against his chest. The warmth of his smile made the steaming water appear cold in comparison. His eyes seemed softer, his whole appearance more alive. Love looked good on Marco.

“What’s wrong, Red?” he asked softly, misunderstanding the reason for my silence.

The feelings that rose within me were too much to deny. I was overcome. There comes a point when one can no longer fight. I was afraid to give up my control, yet I longed to be conquered. I surrendered.

“I love you,” I said softly, as I began to kiss his chest. “I love you like I’ve never loved anyone or any thing in my entire life.” I ran my hands over his body as I spoke, kissing him everywhere, deliberately avoiding his face. If I looked into his eyes, I would lose my nerve, and Marco needed to hear what I had to say as much as I needed to say it. I slid down his body, reverently caressing the curve of his hip as I kissed where my hands had been. “Beyond anything I could ever have imagined, I love you.” My voice grew hoarse and fierce as I looked up at him from my knees. “I would fight for you. I would die for you. I swear to you, you will never want for love as long as there is breath in my body.” My voice shook, as I said, “My love, my king.”

Hot tears slid down my cheeks as Marco got down on his knees to face me. He took my face between his hands. No matter what he felt, Marco’s eyes always gave him away, and now they were filled with tears. “Are you sure, Red?”

“I’ve never been more sure,” I said, nearly choking on the words.

“In that case, my queen never bows to me,” he said softly. “But if you would love the man, then you must see the beast.” I started to object and he stopped me. “You need to know what I am capable of before you agree to this, Red.”

His eyes, still fresh with tears began to turn amber. I tried not to be, but I was afraid, and it showed. “Don’t be afraid of me, Red. You never have anything to fear from me.” With these words, tears spilled from his amber eyes, and then he kissed me. My body was already weakened, and with that kiss, so was my heart. “I love you,” he sighed, his breath warm against my lips. “I have always loved you. I would never deliberately frighten you, Red. But this is something you need to see.”

Marco kissed me hungrily, and I felt his teeth lengthening into fangs. He held me to him tightly as he took me down with a growl. With my back flat against the tile, Marco held my hands above my head, and I fought with my fear. Part of me knew Marco would never hurt me, but the other part wanted to run from the beast in my shower. He spread my legs with his thighs, still holding my hands above my head. I could feel his hands lengthening into claws where they touched my arms, could hear the bones breaking and reforming. Where his face was pressed against mine, I felt the tips of Marco’s ears grow pointed as his long wolf tongue licked my ear. I whimpered, and he growled as he pressed himself against me. “Don’t scream, Red. It will only provoke me.”

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. The animal in my shower still smelled like Marco, and when I closed my eyes, I knew it was him. My heartbeat began to slow, and reason fought its way to the surface. Marco wasn't trying to frighten me; he was trying to prepare me. He needed to know that I could handle both sides, and that my fear of the beast wouldn't keep me from the man. "Marco," I said softly. He released my wrists to run his long werewolf fingers through my hair. I breathed in his scent again, and reminded myself that this was Marco I held and not a monster. I wrapped my arms around him and kissed his face. He pulled back to look down at me. His hair was wild, and longer, it blended with the sideburns that had just appeared on his face. His eyes glowed a frightening amber, and the hair on his body seemed to have thickened, though he was still obviously Marco.

"Can you love me like this?" he said. His voice was already beginning to deepen, and it made my heart beat faster, but not with fear.

"I already do," I said.

With a growl, Marco lifted me from the floor and slammed me against the wall with a force that should have hurt. I looked at him then, and realized that I was no longer afraid. He paused, pinning me to the wall with his body as if waiting for me to run screaming. But I didn't run. I felt something rise within me in response to him. For lack of a better word, Marco brought out the animal in me. I kissed his lips softly, feeling his fangs. When he didn't pull away, I deepened the kiss, and all hell broke loose. Whatever restraint Marco had was broken. In one move he was inside of me, impaling me against the wall. The growl that escaped his lips was no longer human, but neither was the desire that I felt. "Yes," I said fiercely. "Harder." Marco kissed me again, as he slammed into me, holding me against the wall with the force of his thrust. I felt my eyes turn as I looked at him. "Is that all you've got?"

Marco laughed as he licked across my lips. "What did you have in mind?"

"Don't hold back," I said.

And he didn't. The beast that Marco had kept so well contained was unleashed in my shower that afternoon. He growled and I screamed. He pounded me into the tile with the force of his thrusts and I welcomed him. I welcomed the force that he needed to release, the power in his body, and the fierceness in his kiss. I raked my nails mercilessly across his back.

"Is that all you've got?" he growled.

I wrapped my legs more tightly around him and pushed off the wall with one hand, meeting his every thrust. I would not be outdone. Marco gave me all he had, and I realized with a feeling of triumph, I could take it. And that's exactly what I did. I took it until I couldn't take any more. I screamed until I lost my voice, and I raked his back with my nails until he bled. I lost myself in the complete experience of Marco. If normal sex was like rain, then Marco was a hurricane. I became an animal, clawing and biting, writhing and demanding. I demanded every last ounce of his strength, and Marco gave it.

I felt the hot sensual power begin to flow through me as I placed both my hands against his back. I knew that if I didn't draw some strength from Marco, I might collapse. I kissed his lips, and felt his desire. It flowed through his body, like water. I pulled that desire to me. As his passion flowed into me through his lips, I felt myself begin to strengthen. I felt a tightness begin to work its way up my spine and all throughout my body. I knew that if I wasn't careful, I could drain Marco entirely. But I

couldn't seem to stop, didn't want to stop. He tasted different than Alfred, or Dracula. He tasted like Bade, only better. His desire was rich and sweet, like honey, hot and warm like a fire. In that moment I knew why Dracula preferred to feed from werewolves. Their desire was stronger. The fierceness of the beast made their passion greater. The animal that would scare most away, made him suddenly all the more appealing.

Release broke over my body like a wave, and I clung to him. I felt Marco's body stiffen, and heard the howl of the wolf, ringing against my shower walls. I blacked out.

When I came to, I was unharmed. I blinked up into the water falling down on my face. I wasn't scratched. I wasn't sore. I looked beside me and saw Marco on the floor and my heart stopped.

"Oh, my God."

I jumped on him, straddling his waist, and pressing my ear against his chest. He wasn't breathing. "Marco." I started doing CPR. "Oh, my God, I've killed him," I cried. After a few agonizing moments, Marco gasped for air and sat up, throwing me from him with the movement.

"Are you alright?" I asked frantically.

He just breathed for a few minutes, unable to do anything else. His eyes were normal once again, along with the rest of him. Finally, he drew one slow shaky breath and said, "And here I was afraid of hurting *you*."

"I didn't mean to," I said anxiously, as I crawled onto his lap. "Marco, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

"Sshh," he said. He held me to him, but not as tightly as before. "It's alright." His voice was weak, and it frightened me. Nothing about Marco had ever been weak before. "It's alright," he repeated.

"No, Marco, it's not alright. *I almost killed you*." I began to shake all over with the horror of what I'd nearly done.

"Almost doesn't count." He smiled faintly. "Besides, I wasn't completely unprepared."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mathias warned me."

I pulled back from him. I wasn't sure what to think, but I wasn't just shaking with fear anymore.

"What do you mean Mathias warned you?"

"Well, we did have a year together before I gave the journal to you. He told me a lot of things."

Marco was the one who found my great, great grandfather's journal, and he had read its enchanted pages before passing it along to me.

My temper flared suddenly. "You knew that I could kill you, and you did this anyway? *Why?*"

He smiled lazily at me from where he reclined against the tile. "I knew there was a possibility that you *might* kill me. You know Mathias; he never gives a straight answer."

"But if you knew ... why would you still want to be with me?"

"I was willing to take my chances." His smile held all the warmth it had before as he said, "I'd rather face the possibility of death than to never know what it was like to be with you."

His kind words erased any trace of anger. "I'll learn more control," I said softly, "I swear."

"I know you will. According to Mathias, had I been at my normal strength," he said as he tried to stand up and slipped. "Like I said, my *normal* strength," he laughed. "It wouldn't have been so bad. He said that if you and I were together, it would be the first taste of an alpha werewolf you'd ever had," he added with a wink.

"First taste, huh?" I said helping him to his feet.

"You've gotta love Mathias, the man had a way with words," he grunted as he leaned on me for support.

"What else did he say?"

Marco sat down on the rim of the tub with that kind, knowing smile still on his face. "He said that would be the only time there would ever be a chance that you might kill me." He sighed, "Good news, Red. I'm still alive."

"Why only this time?"

"Because after that, you would be able to control yourself. He said you would remember what the point of no return felt like, and keep yourself from going there again."

"Shit, now I have to worry about accidentally killing you when we have sex!" I felt like I had just been given a prize, only to have it snatched away.

"Not exactly, Red," he laughed softly. "Only my beast calls out your power so strongly, and I have no intention of turning on you during sex, not completely anyway. According to Mathias, it was the beast that tasted so good. I hope to God you know what that means, because it sounds nasty to me."

"Yeah," I said, "I know what he means. So, let me get this straight. As long as you don't completely turn, I'll be able to stop myself?"

"Right. You would have been able to stop yourself today if I hadn't hurt you. You were drawing enough of my strength to replenish yours."

"This could get complicated," I sighed.

"Only if you let it. Mathias also said that because of our strong connection, if we were ever together, you could give your strength to me if you wanted to." He touched the side of my face softly as he whispered, "Don't worry, Red. I asked him for one straight answer, and he gave it."

I remembered when I had done the same thing. I had asked if I should break off all contact with Marco. The answer was no.

"What was the question?"

"I asked if you would ever kill me, either accidentally or purposely, not just during sex, but ever." My heart fluttered as I awaited his answer. "The answer was no. He said you would never inflict any pain on me that I did not ask for," he said with a smile.

"That's a straight answer?"

"Well, I had to ask another question to get the second part. The answer to you killing me was just flat, NO."

"I'm going to have to have a long talk with Mathias."

Marco laughed softly as I helped lower him onto the bed.

"How do you feel?" I asked, as I crawled in place beside him.

"Good," he sighed. "Surprisingly good." He looked down at me as he asked,

“But what I’m dying to know is, what did I taste like?”

I’m not sure what possessed me as I leaned over him and whispered, “Here, let me show you.” I remembered what I had felt when I tasted Marco’s power. The Seducer’s fire flowed through me, and I felt Marco’s beast rise up within me. It was as if I had captured a part of him, and now I would return it. An inhuman growl escaped my throat as I bent down, pressing my lips tenderly against his. Once again I could feel his desire, only this time, it flowed from me. All that I had pulled from Marco before seemed to course through my body. I could feel it, taste it on my tongue. That hot, honey-sweet sensation poured over me, and as I deepened the kiss, I felt it pass to Marco.

I felt his sharp intake of breath as I gave back his strength. His skin became feverish beneath my hands as his usual warmth returned. My back arched, and I growled. It was a sound that normally would have frightened me, but not this time. It was Marco’s beast inside of me, the part that I seemed to have captured. And with one last trembling breath, I returned it to him.

I collapsed against his chest.

“That was amazing,” he practically purred. “It was almost better than sex. What did you do to me?”

“I returned your beast,” I said.

“I had no idea you had taken it.”

“Neither did I.”

“So, I suppose that’s what Mathias meant when he said you could give me back my strength.”

“Did you still feel like a werewolf?” I asked.

“Yes. You didn’t take my beast completely, just his strength.”

“Well, I’ve got news for you,” I teased, “I decided to keep some for myself.”

“And why would you want to do that?” he asked with a smile.

“Because you still recover faster than I do,” I said, as I moved closer to his lips. “And without your strength, I would be too weak to do this.” I kissed him softly, and lost myself once again in the experience of Marco.

## Chapter Sixteen

I woke early the next morning to find Marco brushing the hair back from my forehead as he snuggled against my face. There was no better way to wake up. He was warm and comforting next to me. His big muscular body was wrapped around me so that my legs were thrown over his thigh, and I was lying on my back. His legs were scooted underneath me almost like a chair. His left arm was across my stomach, and his right arm was underneath my head, with the fingers of this hand toying absently with my hair.

“Good morning, Red,” his deep voice rumbled near my ear. “Did you sleep well?”

“When I finally got to sleep,” I replied with a smile.

“Are you complaining?”

In answer to his question, I snuggled harder against his body and sighed. I had wanted to wake up like this for so long. Not just wake up beside Marco, because I’d done that before. I wanted to wake up with him after the best night of sex in my life, and that’s what had just happened.

I rolled to face him and he straightened his long legs so that the front of our bodies pressed together.

I looked into his dark eyes and said, “I love you.” I felt better every time I said it, because it was the truth.

“I love you too, Red,” he whispered, kissing me on the forehead. After a minute he laughed softly, “I’m not sure I can get up.”

“Does that mean you’re not ready for round two?” I teased as I scooted off the bed.

“I think it’s more like round seven,” he grunted, struggling to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

Once we took turns using the facilities, Marco got in the shower with me and started washing my hair. I loved to have a man wash my hair, and I couldn’t think of one I’d rather have perform the task.

When I turned around to rinse I ran a hand across the scars on my lower abdomen. I had never felt the need to hide them from Marco as I had at first tried to hide from Alfred and Dracula. Dracula had showed me his own scars in response, after getting on his knees and kissing my imperfections. I was even upset at the thought of Luther having to help undress me when Bade and I had been so badly injured about a month ago. Luther didn’t seem bothered, and Bade tried to comfort me by saying that he’d seen worse. To me, they ruined me. I had felt like damaged goods ever since my attack. I didn’t scar after that, and I healed nearly as fast as a werewolf. But the marks from my attack remained. There are several vicious slashes across the right side of my stomach, beginning level with my belly button, and extending to the front of my upper hip bone. Three diagonal cuts above my navel, and three cuts at an angle on the left side. They faded to a pale pinkish white, but that’s as much as they ever healed.

“These don’t bother you?” I asked Marco.

“No,” he said softly. “I want you to know, Red, that I’ve never loved anyone this way before. I have never looked at a woman and thought, if I die tomorrow, it’s alright, just as long as I’m hers tonight.” I was nearly in tears as he continued, “No, Red, your scars have never bothered me.” He placed my hand over his heart and I could feel the steady rhythm beneath my palm. “It’s in your hands,” he said softly. “Destroy me with care, Red.”

“I could never destroy you,” I answered, touching his face. He smiled at me then and I let my hand follow the trail of water down his body to see what else was in my hands.

By the time we made it downstairs I could smell bacon and hear Johnny, Alek, and Luther talking. I also noticed the front door had been repaired.

“I came downstairs last night and set it back in place,” Marco said.

His clothes were still wet, so he was wearing another of my large robes, like Luther had. It was red silk, and hung open revealing his ridged abs all the way to the top of his belly button. It also hung to the back of his knees like the black one had on Luther, they were the same height, after all, but Marco had bigger muscles. I shrugged; at least the important parts were covered. But the condition he came downstairs in last night was what concerned me, I hadn’t given him the robe until this morning.

“Naked?”

“Huh?”

“You came downstairs last night, naked, and set the door in place?” I laughed.

We were just entering the kitchen and Alek answered the question for me.

“Fortunately, I was just on my way home, so I was the only one who was traumatized,” the wizard drawled.

Marco blushed enough to match my robe.

“Of course, I agreed to fix the hinges. It isn’t every day you come home to find a naked werewolf in the foyer. I was sure there were some extenuating circumstances,” Alek continued.

Marco blushed even deeper and went toward the coffee pot while I thanked Alek for fixing my door. I was very fond of my front door, seeing as how it was an antique. Fortunately, the hinges were the only thing Marco had damaged when he kicked it in the day before.

“Impatient, were we?” Johnny teased. “So, did you kill it?”

“Kill what?” Marco and I asked together.

“That wild animal I heard upstairs last night; it was frightful.” Johnny shuddered to emphasize his comment.

“Alright,” Marco said, rounding on him, “get it out of your system now, before I have to kick your ass.”

“How did it taste?” Johnny asked.

“How did what taste?” Marco growled.

“That crack you ate for breakfast, thinking you can kick my ass,” he laughed.

To my surprise, they both started laughing and sat down at the table while Luther took over making waffles.

“Now,” I said, “tell me how you two know each other.”

They began to explain that Marco had taken over the pack five years ago, this I knew. Before that, he had been stationed in Jamaica which has an enormous werewolf

population.

“That’s how I met Jeremiah,” he explained, “he was my neighbor. We became friends, so when I found out he was a werewolf ... well, I couldn’t kill him,” Marco said.

I could understand that. He said he was called in on a special assignment with my father and Alfred when he was attacked. This I also knew. After his attack, he went back to stay with Jeremiah for a while, until he could learn to control the change. Since Alfred and my father had left him alive, he kept his infection secret. He waited until he had control before he came to this area.

“But why this area?” I asked.

“To track down what I really wanted.” He winked at me. “You see, there’s something about the wolf that makes you no longer doubt what you want. I knew with certainty that I wanted you, and so I came here.”

“That still doesn’t explain you.” I pointed at Johnny.

They both laughed.

“I met Johnny while I was in Jamaica. He was stationed on one of the nearby islands and sort of ...” he paused. “Well, Johnny was a rum runner.”

“A rum runner?”

“A smuggler,” Johnny corrected.

“A modern day pirate,” Marco laughed, “For the werewolves.”

“You were working for the werewolves?” I asked. “I can understand not killing them on sight, I never did that either, but *Johnny*,” I scolded.

“Hey, babe, do you have any idea how many werewolves are on those islands? It’s almost more than the people I was supposed to be protecting. There was good money in making friends with the monsters,” he said with a shrug. “Besides, who am I to talk? I’m not even completely human myself.”

Marco continued the story, “Johnny moved close by for a while after I had taken over.”

“I was looking for a change of scenery,” Johnny interrupted.

“That’s when he started dating you, and with us being friends—”

“And drinking together,” Johnny interrupted again.

“That’s how I knew,” Marco finished.

“Hey, I never knew he had a thing for you until after the fact,” Johnny assured me.

“It’s true,” Marco said. “It’s my fault. I never told him.”

“And you guys are still friends?” Alek asked.

“Sure,” Marco said. “I couldn’t expect him to read my mind. Besides, they broke up and Lilith is still friends with him. Aren’t you, Red?”

“Yeah, I could strangle him most of the time, but we’re friends.”

After breakfast I asked Marco to stay with me for a few days before things returned to business as usual. He asked if he could use the transporter in Alfred’s old lab instead of wasting two hours driving to his apartment over Club Red.

“I can be back in twenty minutes,” he said with a wink.

I gave him a ten-minute head start and decided to follow him. I had more questions I didn’t want to ask in front of everyone else. I remembered he had said there was a transporter in the basement of Club Red. But having never gone there by way of transporter before, I had no idea which of the small white tiles to press. I moved my

hands lightly over the tiles and chose the one that was still warm. The tiles remain slightly warm for about thirty minutes after they have been used; I had learned this from Alfred.

When I arrived in the basement of Club Red, it took me a minute to get over the awful freeze dried feeling of being transported. I hate those things, but they come in handy sometimes. Marco's transporter is in a large closet. When I opened the door, I took one look around and knew this used to be Bade's apartment. It was nearly as large as Marco's place upstairs, and decorated with a similar flare. However there were some things, like the swing still hanging from the ceiling, which let me know Bade had lived here.

As I walked up the top of the staircase into his apartment I nearly ran right into Marco.

"Red," he said, smiling down at me. "Couldn't wait?"

After I tackled him in the kitchen floor, Marco went to run some water in the large black marble tub in his bathroom. I had wanted to get in that tub again with Marco for a long time.

I poured myself a glass of water, and as I walked toward his bedroom, I smelled something burning. I ran into the bathroom to find Marco reclining back in the bubbles smoking a cigar. The red silk curtain which hung from a circular rod around the tub was open, and he looked fantastic.

"That's just all we need is for you to burn the place down," I said, turning on a vent as I went into the room.

Marco and I both loved a good cigar, and I couldn't say I blamed him.

"Hey, I'm the king," he said with a grin. "What good is being the king if you can't smoke in your own bathroom?"

"Tell me how you became king," I said softly as I walked toward the tub.

I had left my clothes in a pile on his kitchen floor, but before getting in I asked, "Where's your razor?"

"In the cabinet. Why?"

"You need a shave." I smiled.

I crawled into the vanilla scented bubbles with a razor and some shaving cream and shaved Marco while he shared his story with me.

"It wasn't long after coming here," he began, "before I was second in command, and Bade was third. We met when we both moved here about the same time. We were new to the pack, and didn't have any friends. Zechariahs Benson was the old king, and he was ruthless. He treated people like dogs, and he wasn't much better. The pack was in a real mess when I took over."

"What made you decide to take over?" I asked.

"Revenge."

I paused at the hatred I heard in Marco's voice. "Revenge for what?"

"I found out he ordered the attack on you and Jacob." He took a deep breath before saying, "May God forgive me one day for what I did to that man."

I shuddered. "I'm glad I never met him," I said softly.

"You have," Marco said with an evil smile, "that's his skin decorating my sofa."

"The cream-colored blanket?" I was stunned.

Marco only nodded before saying, "I leave it there as a reminder to anyone who

might think about trying to take over. It's there to say, 'look what happened to the last guy.'"

"But no one, but you and me and Luther, knows how to get up here."

"And Bade," he corrected. "Besides, the rest of the pack has seen it before. I made sure of that. Nothing ensures loyalty more than the promise of a swift death."

When I didn't reply he looked at my face and said, "I'm sorry, Red. It's not a very romantic story."

"I knew it wouldn't be, but I wanted to know. Thank you."

"For what?"

"For avenging me."

We shared a moment of serious eye contact before I removed the cigar from his mouth and put it between my lips. He raised an eyebrow, but didn't object as I shaved around his mouth.

"There," I said, putting the cigar back in his mouth. "All ready for company."

"I just told you I skinned a man alive, and you finish shaving me?"

"Yuk, I didn't know you did it while he was still alive."

"Oh," Marco said, "maybe I should have left that out."

I thought it over for a minute. I remembered how brutal my attack was, looking down and watching the beast trying to tear its way through my stomach before my father hacked it to pieces before my eyes.

"No," I said. "The bastard got what he had coming."

Before we fell asleep a few hours later Marco asked me, "Why did you get a dragonfly tattooed on your big toe?"

"It had special meaning to me. I've always loved dragonflies."

"It was Mathias' personal totem," he yawned.

"Really? He never told me that."

"He said it represented freedom and strength."

I wanted nothing more than to curl up and spend the night with Marco, but I had something I needed to take care of.

"Marco," I said, kissing the soft skin just beneath his earlobe. "I just remembered some business I need to take care of. I'll be back," I promised.

"Alright," he sighed.

I had deliberately taken just enough of his strength to help me walk straight so I could carry through with what I intended. I was on my way to Original Sin to order The Red Light Special.

## Chapter Seventeen

Once I arrived back home by way of the transporter, I managed to bypass everyone else and get to my room. I went straight for the closet and looked for something appropriate to wear. I couldn't just go barging in off the street and order a big helping of alpha werewolf. Although, I must admit, I was tempted to do just that.

There were still a few dresses in the back of my closet that I'd not had the opportunity to wear and I started looking through them. I selected a vintage black chiffon gown with straps wide enough I could wear a decent bra underneath. I put on the same black shoes that Dracula was sure to notice if he saw me, and after slapping on the barest trace of makeup I was on my way.

As I arrived at Original Sin, I was greeted with a throng of reporters. Fortunately, Dracula had given the bodyguards outside specific instructions to be sure I arrived unmolested any time I chose to visit. They held the reporters securely back behind the velvet rope, and I entered as quickly as possible without looking like I was in a hurry. However, when I saw the flashing cameras, I was glad I had taken the time to give my hair and makeup the once over before I left the house.

When I entered the door, Eden greeted me and told me Dracula was next door at the theatre.

"That's alright, Eden. I haven't come to see Dracula tonight," I replied with a smile.

I seated myself at the first booth along the wall, and when a tall thin vampire came over to take my order I said, "I've come for The Red Light Special."

It was only a matter of minutes before I looked up from the drink menu to see Bade standing over me. He was wearing another pair of impossibly tight black pants; however, these were velvet instead of silk. He was also wearing another shirt with ruffles all down the front in place of buttons. This one was a deep blue, and it made his eyes look slightly darker than the frightening pale shade I was used to. Now there was a thought, I was used to looking into Bade's eyes.

He had a drink in each hand and as he slid into the wrap-around booth beside me, he passed one my way. "Tie Me to the Bedpost," he said with a wink. "You really should try it."

I took a sip. It really wasn't bad.

"As much as I would like to think you came here for a taste of me, I know it isn't true." He smiled warmly as he asked, "So, what can I do for you, love?"

I toyed with the straw in my drink for a minute before saying, "Bade, why did you leave the pack?"

He was quiet for several minutes. Then he finished his drink in one gulp and ordered a Tryst before answering, "I've never actually talked to anybody about this before."

"Will you talk to me?" I asked softly, putting my hand over his.

"Are you just asking because you spent the last twenty-four hours sucking

Marco's dick?"

That was probably the rudest thing Bade had ever said to me, but I didn't let it faze me.

"Never stand behind someone you wouldn't get on your knees for," I said. "My lips are quite tired."

He smiled sarcastically and said, "Look I'm sorry. It isn't easy for me."

"You think this is how I wanted to spend my evening? And to answer your question, I'm asking because I want to know. Because I ..."

"Care?" he asked.

"Yes, Bade, because I care."

"I watched him move up in the ranks right along with me," he sighed. "He always talked about you, loved you from a distance. I thought that surely once he avenged you and became king he would at least make a move. Actually, I thought that since he was the king, he should just take what he wanted. He always said the timing wasn't right, or you wouldn't understand." Bade paused and ordered another drink. "As you know, he refused to keep a harem like the previous alpha. He said it was barbaric and he absolutely refused to discuss it."

"But he allowed you to keep one."

He raised one eyebrow at me and went back to his story, "Yes, he did. The thing is, I took it as a sign of weakness that he wouldn't just go out and take what he wanted. I was tired of watching him pine away for something he could easily have if he just made a move."

"He said you had some ideas about restructuring the pack. Is that true?"

"Yes. I wanted to have slaves instead of Omega wolves. Omegas are the lowest rung on the ladder, the brunt of jokes, that kind of thing. If you want to pick on someone for no reason, it's them."

"Why did you want to have slaves? What purpose would that serve?"

"I figured if he could just go and kick someone's ass or fuck the shit out of them every now and then without consequence, it might help him to grow the balls to approach you."

"Bade! That's horrible."

"What? You asked." He shrugged and took another sip of his drink.

"So you disagreed about how things should be done, and you didn't think he was man enough for the job."

He sighed, "You're oversimplifying things, but yes."

"And what about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Aren't you overcomplicating things?" I asked.

He laughed, and I would like to say it was unappealing, but that would be a damn lie.

"There's one thing I left out," he sighed. "After so many years of listening to him talk ... his obsession became my own."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. After a few minutes Bade asked, "He showed you the fur blanket, didn't he?"

"Why would you say that?"

"I knew something had to inspire this conversation." He grinned from ear to ear,

and it was the most wicked thing I'd seen since the last time he smiled at me. "Are you afraid of seeing me end up as a throw rug?"

"Yes," I said defensively. "But if you'd rather be skinned alive ..." I tried to slide out of the booth and Bade stopped me.

"Not so fast, love. Spend some time with me, and let's have some Sex."

"Excuse me?"

"A blend of cognac and coffee and cream; it's on the menu," he replied.

I flopped back down with a sigh and Bade put his arm around me. "Don't be like that, love. You like me, or you wouldn't care if he kills me or not."

He was right, but what I said was, "How do you know I just don't want you to kill each other?"

Bade pulled me tight against him and said, "Smile, look happy to see me, and let's change the subject. Can you stay with me for an hour?"

"Sure." The smile he had asked for came easily enough.

\* \* \* \*

I ended up staying an hour and a half before hurrying home to change. I met Johnny on my way in and said, "I'll explain later," as he took in my overdressed appearance.

I stripped down, sprayed the dress with some fabric refresher and jumped in the shower. The last thing I needed was to go back to Marco smelling like Bade.

When I crawled back in the bed with Marco three hours after I had left, he just sighed and snuggled up to me. I was almost asleep when he asked, "Just what do you think you're playing at, Red?"

I froze. What had I done wrong? Bade was wearing cologne, but I'd even washed my hair. Oh shit. I kissed him goodbye. Did I remember to brush my teeth? Was that necessary?

Before I could think of another reason to worry Marco grabbed me, rolled me over him, and just like that I was facing the bathroom door. "You know I always get closest to the door, Red," he sighed.

After seeing what had happened to the last person to cross Marco, I almost cried with relief. But then I remembered he loved me, and Marco would never skin me alive. But Bade was a different story, and as I fell asleep that night, it was him I worried about.

\* \* \* \*

As much as he wanted to stay, business and the upcoming challenge called Marco away. He left around lunchtime on Friday, and just missed Elijah. I stepped out the door, intending to fertilize my roses and saw Elijah running frantically up my driveway. His face was covered with blood, and he looked positively stricken.

He fell at my feet and threw up in the grass.

"Elijah," I said, dropping my tools on the ground.

I kneeled down beside him and wrapped my arms around his waist as I turned my face away, deliberately not looking at what he was throwing up.

"Oh, my God," he panted repeatedly.

"Elijah, what's wrong?" I asked as I took off one of my garden gloves and began to wipe his face.

The right side of his face looked slightly pink, like he had a sunburn on just one side. His left eye was clear and blue again, but the right still looked bloodshot, though

not as bad as before. He had a few other various bruises, but not as bad as I'd seen him wear before. He held his left arm tightly against his chest. It was black-and-blue, and stitches were clearly visible around his bicep.

"Should you be here?" I asked.

He looked on the verge of tears.

"No, Eli, don't misunderstand. You can stay, but why did they let you out? What happened?"

"The doctor said I could go," he said, taking a deep breath. "And Marco said I should come here, that I would be safe until after he takes care of Peter. So, I had Dr. Sinclair drop me at the end of the drive. It's a beautiful day," he said, motioning around with his right arm. "I thought I'd just take a little walk and be glad to be alive, you know? But then this rabbit ran across in front of me." He gagged again before continuing. "I chased it off through the woods. Lilith, I didn't know I could move that fast," he said, looking completely astonished. "And the next thing I knew, I was eating it," he moaned.

For some reason I was overtaken with a fit of giggles. Elijah looked offended, and I couldn't say I blamed him.

"You're upset because you killed a rabbit?"

"I *ate* it," he corrected. "It was the most disgusting thing I've ever done," he said defensively.

I composed myself and asked, "Can I get you anything, Elijah?"

"You got a breath mint?"

This time we both laughed, and I helped him to his feet.

"Mary hasn't seen me," he said, putting his arm around my shoulders for support.

I took another good look at him and decided that was for the best. He was dramatically improved. But for someone who was used to seeing Elijah in all his cuteness, it was a horrible shock.

"You look like shit," I agreed.

"Thank you, you're too kind," he drawled as we made our way up the steps.

"Are you in any pain?"

"A little. You got anything stronger than these?"

He took a bottle out of his pocket and I read the label.

"This shit is strong enough to take down a horse. How much pain are you in?"

"Have you ever had an arm reattached?" he asked sarcastically.

"No, thank God. Elijah I think you should reconsider this medication. How many have you been taking?"

"Just one like the bottle says."

"Shit. Never listen to what the bottle says. Dr. Sinclair writes these, and he never gives enough." I handed him two pills. "Here, I'll get you some water, and you take both of these."

When I brought back the water he did as instructed and I asked, "How are you? Not your injuries—I can see that for myself."

He considered the question for a minute and said, "I think I'll be alright." He reached over and took my hand. "It's a price I was willing to pay to save Mary. Actually, I went there willing to die. I guess I got off easy."

Only Elijah would have such optimism under the circumstances.

I knelt in front of his chair and pushed up his sleeve enough to get a really good look at his left arm. After this I turned his face from side to side assessing the damage.

“I would have paid any price to save *you*,” I said softly.

He smiled at me, and I knew God had answered my prayer. The sun had returned to my life. Not unharmed, but he would mend. I moved the other chair around so Elijah could prop up his feet while I did some gardening. Johnny came out after a few minutes and introduced himself. Luther had also stayed over again and came out to check on him. Alek was at the theatre with Dracula. I had rehearsed my lines a few times with Luther, but not nearly enough. We were scheduled for our first dress rehearsal this weekend, and I needed to get my butt in gear.

Our first performance would be the night after the full moon. Dracula had offered to reschedule after what had happened with Peter, but so many tickets were sold in advance, it was impossible. No matter how you looked at it, I would go on stage in a few weeks with one of the men I had loved gone from my life. As bad as it sounds, I hoped it was Peter.

Later that evening, I left Elijah in the kitchen with the rest of the guys and I slipped out the door saying that I had an errand to run. The truth was, I had something on my mind, and I intended to find out what I wanted to know.

No one had noticed when I went upstairs and put on a black dress suit. I thought I looked good, but they didn't see me on my way out. I had just yelled in the direction of the kitchen that I would be back.

On my way in Original Sin, Eden just showed me to a booth. Dracula had not yet made his appearance for the evening, and was at the theatre again. They didn't even ask what I wanted this time, they just sent Bade over.

He was wearing the silk pants and white ruffled shirt again. I was beginning to think that particular style was his dress code. He slid in the booth beside me and handed me a pinkish looking drink.

“How about a little Rough Trade?” he growled sexily.

I laughed, “Is that why the drink names are so crazy, so you can use them as pick-up lines?”

“You know you want me, love. This is twice in one week,” he said, smiling wickedly, “and Marco doesn't have any more skins to show you. So, what brings you here?”

“Can I count on you?” I asked suddenly.

“What do you need?” he asked.

I could tell by the sound of his voice that Bade was concerned.

“If something goes wrong ... if Peter doesn't fight fair,” I nearly choked on the words, “Can I count on you if something happens to Marco?”

After several minutes of us both quietly sipping our drinks he said, “Yes.”

## Chapter Eighteen

I breathed a sigh of relief and snuggled closer to him. I'm not sure what made me do it, but I couldn't be near Bade and not touch him. I had become positively touchy feely since I'd started hanging around werewolves.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you too," he said after a minute. "How did you heal me? A month ago when I should have died in the mud ... how did you do it?"

I explained to Bade as best I could what had happened, but it didn't make any sense. Finally I asked, "Do you trust me?"

"For what?" he looked skeptical then said, "Yes."

"Give me your hand. This may seem strange at first, but if I can't tell you, the only thing I know how to do is show you."

One minute I was sitting there holding Bade's hand, the next we were plunging into my memories. The rain was falling hard, and Luther and I had just removed a massive pole from the right side of Bade's chest. I didn't want to hurt him more than was necessary, but the pole had to be removed. Luther released him, and he fell to the ground.

I tried to apply pressure to the wound, but blood continued to flow, leaving the werewolf increasingly cold to the touch. My tears began to mingle with the rain as I looked down at him. I begged Bade to transform so I could heal him. I refused to let him bleed to death; I couldn't stand by and watch Bade die.

"Please, Bade," I whispered softly, as I rested my forehead against his. "Please."

I felt the hair that touched my forehead begin to retract, and I kept my eyes closed. My ears were filled with the sound of Bade's bones breaking and reforming. His shoulders that were pressed against my legs began to shrink. The pointed ears that had been beneath my hands seemed to slip through my fingers. In a matter of minutes, I was holding handfuls of Bade's golden hair and looking down into the pale blue eyes of a man I should have let die.

"Sit up," I said.

Bade got shakily to his knees before me. The cold rain poured over every ridge and curve of his naked body. He was a vision of sinful desires, glistening in the pale moonlight. Only the gaping wound in his chest ruined the illusion. Truthfully, I wasn't sure if I could heal Bade or not. I had never tried to use my abilities to heal anyone's physical injury before. I had healed my own wounds, but not consciously. Whatever happened, I had to try.

The warm sensual power flowed through my body as I looked at Bade. I called on that part of myself that had been passed down from The Seducer. I might not know how to heal him, but Mathias did. I knew he did, and he was a part of me. That meant somewhere deep down, I knew how to heal Bade. It was just a matter of tapping into that knowledge. Time was short, and I decided to let my instincts take over.

Steam began to rise from my body where the cold rain touched me. A fire such as

I had never felt before burned within me. I reached out my right hand, and placed it over the grisly wound. Blood seeped through my fingers, and I fought back more tears of regret. Bade wasn't going to die, not when I could save him.

"I thought you didn't have any hang-ups about killing me," Bade said gently.

"Things change," I breathed as I pulled him toward me. His full lips were soft and tender as they pressed longingly against mine. With my other arm, I hugged Bade against me and he trembled. Through my direct contact with his skin, I knew Bade did not shiver with cold. He wanted me that much. I hadn't realized. I felt his desire as if it was the tide coursing through him, and crashing against my lips. I called it to me. I pulled Bade's desire from him to fuel the fire inside of me. Through his lips, I drank him in, pulling him down like a moth into my flame. I thought of everything I'd ever wanted to do to Bade, and I used that energy. I let that desire build until I thought the fire would consume me. I released the flame, and felt it course through my body into his. The wound began to close underneath my hand. Bade threw back his head and cried out, only this time, his voice was not filled with pain, but pleasure.

I dropped down in the mud and looked up at him in amazement. The wound was not completely healed, but the hole in his chest was closed. There wasn't a scab and the skin was still raw, *but the wound was closed*. Bade looked down at his chest with a startled expression. He reached behind his back, obviously looking for the other hole and withdrew his hand without a trace of blood.

I broke the contact and Bade gasped, "Oh, my."

"You see why it was difficult to explain?" I asked breathlessly.

"Wow. That's what it feels like to kiss me?"

"You asshole." I poked him in the ribs and he laughed.

"I'm kidding," he snickered. "That was amazing. I had asked Dracula about it, and he explained some things, but that cleared up some other questions for me."

"Like what?"

"Like how you really feel about me," he said with a wink.

Out of nowhere I asked, "Do you still have a harem?"

He seemed surprised but answered, "No, love. I haven't kept a harem in a very long time."

"Good, because if you're going to flirt with me, we can't have that shit," I teased.

The problem was I really enjoyed Bade's company. I wasn't in love with him; it wasn't the same as what I felt for Marco. But I really liked being around him. He had charisma. Bade had a way of making you feel like you were the most important person in the world. You knew it was bullshit, but he was very good at the illusion.

"There's something else I've wondered about," he began. "Dracula explained this voice of seduction thing to me. He also said that what you did when you healed me was a form of vampirism too. He said you were able to sort of feed, or draw strength from my desire."

"That's right." I wasn't sure where he was going with this, and knowing Bade, I probably didn't want to know.

"Are you hungry?" he purred.

"As a matter of fact," I began, but I never got a chance to finish the sentence.

Yet again, I'm not sure what came over me. I was starving. I had left while they were cooking dinner, and I probably should have stayed at home. I hadn't eaten lunch

either, and when Bade mentioned feeding, I found I was ravenous.

I trembled as I took his face in my hands and kissed his soft pink lips. Bade had the most perfect heart-shaped lips, and they tasted of strawberry liquor. He growled as he used his big body to press me back into the corner of the booth. I put both my hands inside his shirt, running them hungrily over his warm skin. He moved one leg in between my thighs, and I had him right where I wanted him. For the first time without sex involved, I consciously unleashed my power. Not the power I had used to heal, but the power I had used to drain Marco of his strength. I felt Bade's desire begin to flow from his body to mine. I kissed him deeply, and it was like drinking from a straw. He tasted even better than I remembered, and it was with considerable effort that I released him.

"Do it again," he panted.

"My angel, so good of you to come by."

We both looked up at Dracula standing over our table, and he didn't look happy. Well, he had just caught me making out with Bade at the booth closest to the door. That meant everyone going and coming for the last several minutes had gotten quite the show.

"Thanks for the snack," I said, turning to Bade with a smile, "but I really must be going."

I slid around to the other side of the booth since Bade didn't seem capable of moving. As I walked by Dracula I whispered, "Sorry, Vlad, but I just came by for the special." I kissed his cheek, and with that contact let flow to him the reason for my visit.

He smiled his understanding at me, and walked me to my car. Since I hadn't been brought there by his driver, I'd opted to park the car myself.

"I'm around back," I told him as he opened the front door and motioned me forward.

"Well," he said, closing the door back on the flashing cameras and reporters. "I shall walk you out the back."

"Won't they be waiting there, too?" I asked.

He paused in the middle of the floor and closed his eyes. I waited for a minute before touching his arm lightly.

"Vlad?" I said softly. "What's wrong?"

"Not a thing," he said with a smile. "The reporters will not bother us."

"What did you do?" I asked as he led me across the dance floor toward the back exit.

"I gave them the idea that we would come back through the front door at any moment."

"Impressive," I said. "Still illegal, but very impressive."

We turned to the right down a hallway. I ran my fingers over the soft fabric of his coat beneath my hand and realized I felt at home holding on to Dracula's arm.

"Speaking of impressive," he said casually, "that was quite the show you put on with Bade. I see your powers are growing."

"I've got it under control," I said, but I wasn't sure that was the truth.

"Truly?" he asked.

Dracula opened the back door and put his hand on the small of my back as we approached my car.

"Why do you ask?"

We paused beside my car and I rested back against the door, waiting for his

answer. He didn't smile when he looked down at me, but his eyes told me he wanted to. He leaned in close and for a moment, I thought he would kiss me goodbye.

"Because The Seducer's fire burns," he whispered against my lips. "It is unlike any passion you have ever known."

"I've got it under control," I repeated. And with those words I placed a soft kiss against his lips. "Goodnight, Vlad."

"Goodnight, my angel."

When I arrived back home everyone was still in the kitchen. Apparently dinner had taken longer than I had thought. I'm sure it had been delayed several times by bullshit, considering everyone in the room.

"Lilith," Elijah called as I walked past the kitchen, "aren't you going to eat?"

"No thanks Eli, I've already had something," I answered honestly.

"You went for fast food and you didn't invite me?"

I smiled at Elijah as I said, "I just went somewhere local and had the special."

Luther stepped over to me and pressed his nose to the side of my throat. I felt him breathing against my skin and it made me shiver.

"You smell like Bade," he growled for my ears only.

I took another good look at Elijah talking to Johnny and Alek. He looked horrible. I pulled Luther outside and shared my idea with him.

"I understand the principle behind it," he said. "I just don't think I can do it."

"Fine," I said as I rolled my eyes. "Then give me Bade's number, because I know you have it."

"You've been spending an awful lot of time with Bade," he accused.

I explained that too as briefly as possible and Luther understood. He gave up the number and I placed the call. Marco would have been my first choice for what I had in mind, but he was on Terra tonight meeting with my uncle Aldan again. Ever since the enactment of the werewolf code, he and Aldan met regularly to discuss how things were going. I'm sure he was sharing the recent events that had changed all our lives with my uncle, so he wouldn't be back any time soon.

I went upstairs and changed into my black silk robe before going back downstairs. It was late, Johnny had already gone to the guest room, Alek was down in the dungeon, and Luther was sprawled out on the couch.

When I went in the kitchen, Elijah was alone, pouring himself a glass of water to take more pain pills.

"Where should I sleep?" he asked.

"With me," I whispered, taking his hand.

The smile he gave me was almost up to his usual standards before shock settled in.

"Lilith, what about Marco?"

"Just sleep with me Elijah," I said with a smile. "I'm not asking you for sex."

"Good," he sighed. "Because I hurt so badly that I don't think I could rise to the occasion."

We both laughed as I led him up the stairs by his uninjured arm.

"If I didn't know better, Eli, I'd say you'd lost interest in me," I teased.

"And I'd say I'm delirious with pain and too much medication," he replied.

"Trust me, once these pills start to work again, I would try my best if it's what you

wanted.”

“I believe you.” I smiled, squeezing his hand in what I hoped was a comforting gesture. “Now, let’s see what we can do to fix you up.”

When we entered my bedroom, I locked the door, and he looked a little apprehensive.

“Don’t be afraid,” I said softly.

“What are we going to do?”

“Get naked,” I said.

“Right here and now?”

“Do you need help?” I purred, as my power began to flow over him.

“Probably,” he answered.

Elijah raised his right arm, and I pulled the t-shirt over his head before sliding it down his left.

“Now, let’s get you out of these,” I said softly as I began to unbuckle his pants.

“Oh, my God,” he gasped. “Are you sure Marco isn’t going to bust in and kill me?”

“I’m not going to molest you, Elijah. Relax.”

“That’s easier said than done,” he said as I slid the jeans down his legs.

“Nice feet,” I teased.

After I assured him several more times that Marco wasn’t going to kill him, Elijah made himself comfortable on the bed, and just as I began to untie my robe Bade walked in. Luther knew to let him in and I had told him where to find the key above my bedroom door.

“Well, well, well,” he said, sounding like the devil incarnate as he wrapped his arm around my waist. “What have we here?”

Elijah looked absolutely terrified. Bade wasted no time removing his clothes. Even in his haste, he made it look like an art form. When he looked up and saw the way Elijah was huddling under the covers he said, “Relax, Elijah, we’re not going to ass rape you.”

Elijah started laughing almost hysterically with relief.

“Holy shit,” he said. “I was worried enough, but then when you walked in, and you pull out a weapon like that I’m thinking ‘they’re gonna rape me and throw me off the balcony.’”

I nearly doubled over before scolding, “Now you know I would never hurt you, Elijah. Shame on you for even thinking it.”

“Then, why are you guys naked?” He looked at me and revised his question.

“Well, why is *he* naked?” he said, gesturing toward Bade.

“Because werewolves heal faster when they sleep next to other werewolves. You’re becoming a werewolf, and you’re in need of healing. I’m close enough to being a full-fledged lycanthrope that it helps to be next to me, too,” I explained.

“What about Marco; I mean, why Bade?”

“Because Marco is on Terra, and Bade is the only other alpha male around here willing to get naked with you,” I teased.

“And this had nothing to do with the fact that you’ll be naked, too,” he said darkly.

“Of course not. Because I’m not going to be completely naked.”

I was telling the truth. I had decided to keep on a black silk bra and panties. Bade had seen the show before, but I didn't think that flashing Elijah at this time would be appropriate.

Elijah looked at me again and sighed regretfully, "I look so awful."

I opened my robe, revealing my scars as I said, "None of us are perfect."

I approached the bed from the side closest to the door as Bade moved around to the left side. Elijah asked, "You mean I have to get in the middle," and pulled the covers up to his throat.

"Don't be shy," Bade said suggestively.

"Don't harass him," I snapped. "It would be best if we could both touch you," I explained.

Elijah thought about that for a moment before saying, "How come that prospect doesn't disturb me as much as it should?"

Bade laughed as he pulled back the covers, "Because you're becoming a werewolf. You'll get used to wanting to be near other lycans. For some, it's a gradual change; others are instantly comfortable with it."

"Your injuries are pretty bad," I said. "We'll probably need to repeat this. We won't necessarily need Bade every night, but you'll need to sleep with me for the next week or so."

"I think I can handle that," he said.

As I moved closer to the bed I let my robe fall to the floor. I crawled up from the foot of the bed and just looked at them. Even with the injuries Elijah was still cute. And Bade was enough to make you foam at the mouth even on a bad day. I was thinking that maybe I should get in the middle, but instead I pulled back the covers and snuggled up to Elijah's left side.

"Give me your arm," I said softly.

## Chapter Nineteen

He moved his arm toward me and I pressed it against the front of my body. The stitches on his bicep were touching my bra, that wouldn't do him any good. I unfastened my bra with one hand, and moved his injured arm between my breasts with the other.

"There," I sighed, taking his hand, and resting it on my inner thigh.

I tucked my right hand underneath his arm, and rested my left across his stomach. Bade snuggled up to his right side, and I snickered when Elijah quickly moved his hand to where mine rested on his stomach.

Bade pressed his face against Elijah's, and I felt him stiffen.

"I'm not gay," Bade assured him. "You and all the male review at The Package Store couldn't give me any wood if you were carrying two by fours."

I laughed so hard that I shook Elijah.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to tear your stitches or anything."

But he was laughing too, and was considerably more relaxed after Bade's comment. After a few minutes we all settled down and fell asleep. This is the way we remained for several hours before I heard Bade in the bathroom. Since we were in perfect health, neither one of us passed out like the last time we had slept together a month ago. At the time, most of my ribs were broken, and Bade had a recently closed hole in his chest. We passed out for a week.

I listened until I heard him turn on the sink before I slid from underneath the covers. I also picked up my robe from the floor. Bade had seen it all before, but with me dating Marco, I didn't feel like it was right to just stand around naked with other men. I was still wearing my black silk panties, so I only pulled the robe closed enough to cover my breasts.

My bathroom has a double sink, so I went to the one beside Bade and poured myself a drink of water.

"Why hide now?" he asked softly.

I had never heard Bade's voice after he had just woken up before. His voice didn't have the gravelly appeal that Marco's did. It was a softer, subtler deepness, and it was very pleasant at two o'clock in the morning.

"I'm not hiding," I yawned. "I'm getting a drink of water."

Bade obviously saw no need to hide. But then again, most werewolves are very comfortable in their own skin. As I looked at his magnificent backside, I thought I might be more comfortable *against* his skin, and then pushed the thought from my mind.

Bade looked like he had been carved out of marble. He and Marco were both very well defined, but when it came to skin tone, Bade was more golden, like a Greek God come to life. Marco had a natural tan, and though he wasn't dark, he always looked like he'd been out in the sun. Marco's beautiful muscles looked like they had a permanent bronzing lotion on them. Bade came closer to looking luminescent. He was two inches taller than Marco, and though that isn't a big difference in general, it is if you're five foot four and your standing beside him. I was already dwarfed by Marco's

size, but Bade's six-foot-four frame left me feeling like a midget.

He was propped against the counter washing his face. Pieces of golden hair clung to his face, and when his eyes were closed, I got a good look. He was still wearing the silver stud through his left nipple, and for some reason that made me smile.

"If you're not hiding," he said, still washing his face, "then why put on the robe?"

"Because I didn't feel like parading around naked in front of you."

"You mean because Marco wouldn't like it," he said shrewdly. "What makes Elijah any different? You put his arm against your breasts."

"Yes I did. And as soon as he's in any condition to start to enjoy that, I'm going to stop. Besides, Marco sent him here for my protection. I'm sure he meant for me to help him heal as well."

"I'm sure he didn't mean for you to call me for help," he said, turning to face me.

My eyes stayed firmly fixed on his, and I was proud of myself.

"Why didn't you ask Luther?"

"You didn't have to come if you didn't want to."

"There you go," he said softly, "always jumping to the defensive. If I didn't want to be here, love, I wouldn't be." His Australian accent was also a little thicker when he first got up.

"Luther didn't want to do it," I answered, as I pushed myself up to sit on the counter beside him. I would feel much better if we were on eye level.

"That homophobe," he snickered. "Luther has always been a strange one, even for a werewolf."

"He was always strange for a human," I laughed.

We talked for a few more minutes about nothing in particular before Bade took a step to the left and slid my knees apart.

"Why did you really come in here?" he growled.

"I was thirsty."

He stepped between my legs and pulled me close to him.

"There we go again," I said. "Going from enemies to friends much too quickly."

"You can bite my nipple off again if it makes you feel better," he teased.

I laughed and he kissed me. Like a true predator, he had been waiting for me to lower my guard. I pushed him back, and to my surprise, he moved. That made me feel better. I'm very strong, but I'm no match for an alpha male if he decides to hurt me and has the advantage. But Bade didn't want to hurt me. Hands that could have crushed me caressed my arms softly, and a body that could have dealt serious pain, began to inspire pleasure. I knew Bade liked it rough, but I also knew through his touch that he didn't want to be that way with me. I was shocked to find that Bade Garren had the kindest, most gentle hands to ever touch me.

It was at that moment that I trusted him. No matter what he might say or do, Bade would never again try to hurt me, and he greatly regretted the time he had. Bade struck me once, just after I had bitten off his left nipple. I really had it coming, but so did he. He had already apologized for hitting me, but he had continued to regret it.

"I've never envied anything else of his," he growled against my lips. "Not the money, not the power ... but you, you're different."

"Bade, I care what happens to you, but I'm in love with Marco. I would never hurt him. I wasted too many years of my life being his enemy. I don't intend to screw up

again.”

“But you let me get this close,” he breathed against my cheek.

“Because you don’t want to hurt me,” I said with certainty. “You’ll stop when I ask you to.”

Bade pulled back enough to look me in the eye. His throat was flushed with arousal, and I dared not look to see what else had responded.

“It could be our secret,” he whispered, running his hand up my thigh. “Marco would never know.”

“It doesn’t matter, Bade,” I said, removing his hand. “I would know, and as appealing as you are right now, I’d rather die than betray him this way.”

“It would appear he has chosen well,” he growled softly, running his hands up my back.

“Stop,” I whispered, and he did.

Bade stepped back just enough to let me slide off the counter. But even as I stood up our bodies touched and I couldn’t help but see how his body had responded to my nearness.

“Don’t be offended, love,” he said, popping my ass as I walked by. “I’m an animal,” he said with a wink. “I had to try.”

“You’re a pervert,” I teased, “who uses being an animal as an excuse.”

\* \* \* \*

Bade left later that morning, and Elijah’s appearance was very drastically improved. I removed his stitches before we went down for breakfast. His bruising was significantly less, and his eye was no longer bloodshot. He was close enough to being my adorable Elijah again that I couldn’t help hugging him before we went down the stairs. Both of us were already dressed, so this wasn’t as odd as it would have been an hour before.

“What was that for?” He smiled, and I kissed him on both cheeks.

“For being you,” I said as I hugged him again and nearly cried. “For looking like you again,” I whispered.

His smile did wonders for me. Elijah’s smile always had a look of innocence about it, even though I was now certain that was not the case. His smile was never diminished by the horrible things he saw, or was forced to experience. There was hope behind his blue eyes that morning, and I loved him even more for it.

\* \* \* \*

Dracula came by that evening. We were in the sitting room with Luther rehearsing when the phone rang. It was Peter. I hadn’t even known he had my number, or why the hell he would think I wanted to talk to him. He said he needed to speak to me, alone.

“Without the wolves,” he stressed.

Normally, I wouldn’t have been stupid enough to agree, but he made it sound like he had changed his mind. Peter sounded almost apologetic. Our conversation was brief, and when I hung up I shared it with Dracula.

“I am your partner; take me,” he said reasonably. “I am not a werewolf.”

I should never have agreed to do either of these things, but I went to see Peter, and I took Dracula with me.

We arrived twenty minutes outside of town at an old farmhouse. I knew the

people who owned the property, though no one had lived there in years. It was mostly farmland and cattle fields. The old house had just never been torn down. It was raining, and we were soaking wet by the time we walked across the yard.

When we went in Peter was waiting. He smiled when he saw me, but his blue eyes turned cold when he caught sight of Dracula behind me.

"I was hoping it would turn out like this," he said, and his voice was no longer something I recognized. It sounded like Peter used to sound, but the tone was different. How could I have been so stupid? He wanted to kill us. He was not my ex-boyfriend anymore, he was a lunatic.

"I've been watching you together on the news," he said, and I felt Dracula moving closer to me. "It makes me sick," he spat. "It's bad enough you're balling a werewolf, but now you've got some sick shit going on with the dead man here," he said, nodding toward Dracula. "You disappoint me, Lilith."

With these words, Peter's hand moved. It was a blur. He had something in his hand, and he tossed it toward me, but it hit Dracula. He had jumped in front of me. The vampire screamed, and it was a sound like I had never heard before. There was more than physical suffering in that scream. He clutched his hands to his face, and ran outside into the storm.

"What have you done?" I roared.

"Just thinning the competition," he said, sneering, "like I did with that cop friend of yours." He gestured toward the door as he said, "Look at it this way, now his *outside* will reflect his *inside*."

I was so overcome with rage that I was nearly blind by the time Peter said, "Did Marco let you see what I did to the cop?"

I could tell he thought Elijah was dead, and I wasn't about to correct him. If he thought Elijah was gone, then he wasn't in danger.

"I tore off his left arm and half of his face," he laughed, "ruined his good looks, just like your vampire."

I could hear Vlad weeping out on the porch, and it did something to me. Something snapped inside of me at the sound. I'm not sure what you'd call it, but I felt myself come undone.

"You don't understand, Peter," I said softly. "You are no longer a part of the competition."

Before he could react to these words, I extended my claws and ripped the flesh from the right side of his face. He screamed and I dove on him. The growls and screams that came from my throat were so far from human that he began to look around for other werewolves. I clawed at Peter's body for all I was worth, lacerating his chest and stomach before I finally latched onto his left arm.

He growled and flung me from him. But I was back again in a blink, biting and clawing at his flesh while he screamed and tried to throw me again. I dug my nails into his bicep and began to chew on his arm. He began to transform partially, but I had taken him by surprise, I had the advantage. Peter had never expected me to attack him.

He continued to try and sling me from his body and the last time he threw me, his left arm went with me. His cries of pain were almost worse than Dracula, as he staggered toward the back door, holding what was left of his arm. His lacerated face was bleeding uncontrollably, and I followed him through the kitchen like a cat stalking a wounded

mouse.

“That was for Elijah,” I growled as he fell to the floor and looked up at me. “I’ll give you time to heal for Marco to have his turn,” I said. “But God help you if I ever come to avenge Dracula.”

I kicked him so hard he flew out the back door into the rain. The next thing I knew I was running through the old house so fast I didn’t even see my surroundings. I stumbled onto the porch.

Dracula was standing on the steps in the rain, his hand pressed to the right side of his face. He was bent forward, and smoke rose from his flesh beneath his dark hair.

I took a step forward.

“No,” he yelled. “No, my angel,” he said more softly. “Do not see me like this.”

“What has he done to you?” I cried, falling to my knees on the porch.

“Enough,” he said. “He has done enough.”

I watched as Dracula walked off into the storm. I didn’t know where he was going, but I knew he wanted to be alone. I had no idea of the extent of his injuries, but was horrified at the thought of his beauty being marred. Rage coursed through my body again, and I was sorry I had let Peter live. But to have killed him now would undermine Marco’s authority as king.

I walked back inside the house and rummaged around until I found a garbage bag.

\* \* \* \*

When I returned over an hour later, Elijah and Marco were sitting on the sofa talking. They both stopped at my appearance. I was soaked through from the storm, and my white shirt was pink where the blood had mixed with the rain. I walked over to them and flung the garbage bag onto the coffee table in front of Elijah.

## Chapter Twenty

“What’s that?” he gulped.

“Your pound of flesh,” I growled.

His expression told me Elijah had a pretty good idea what was in the bag, but he looked anyway.

“Oh, my God, Lilith,” he gasped, recoiling from what he’d seen. “What have you done?”

“The same thing he did to you,” I said fiercely. “That’s Peter’s left arm; I ripped it from his body while he begged me to stop. And I tore off the right side of his face,” I growled. “Just like he did to you ... and to Dracula.”

And with that I started to cry.

“Eye for an eye,” I said nastily, “arm for an arm.”

I wiped at the tears streaming down my face and moved toward the stairs. I was going to have a breakdown, and I didn’t want to do it in front of Elijah.

By the time I walked into my bathroom I was shaking. I had promised myself that I would hold it together until I could be alone. I had picked up not only Peter’s arm as evidence of my gruesome revenge, but the skin from his face as well. I had done this with as much detachment as possible. I had fought back the images of what I was afraid had been done to Dracula’s beautiful face. I fought back the visions of the assault on Elijah Peter had described, and I tried not to cry.

But now I was alone, and I ripped the bloody t-shirt from my body with a roar before I fell over the toilet. I was still throwing up when I felt Marco’s warm hand on my shoulder. I collapsed back against him, unable to control the tremors running through my body.

“I tore him apart,” I gasped, through chattering teeth.

I was now shaking uncontrollably, but not with cold. I was horrified at what I had done.

“I ripped him up like an animal.”

I threw up again before panting, “This is a man I had loved. I ripped off the face I used to see in my dreams.”

I threw up again.

“The hand that I brought back in that bag is the one I used to hold,” I cried.

“Oh, Marco,” I said. I looked down at the blood on my hands and tried frantically to wipe it on my jeans. “What have I done?”

He held me against his chest and began to rock me gently back and forth while I cried. He began to stroke my hair and his soft touch helped to slow my heartbeat, but nothing could erase the images in my mind.

“He’s ruined,” I said as the memory of Vlad covering his face in the rain stabbed through me. “He’s ruined,” I wailed.

“How do you know he won’t heal?” Marco asked reasonably after I told him what had happened. “Vampires can also regenerate.”

“I just know. This was different somehow. His screams,” my voice broke and I tried again, “they went beyond physical pain.”

Marco is a good man, and when others would have been jealous over my concern for Dracula, he understood. I had shared with him how I had dreamed of Vlad since I was sixteen. A part of me belonged to him, and it always would. Marco had accepted this, and I knew as I touched his bare arm that it caused him physical pain to see me mourn so deeply.

Marco wanted me to be his completely, but he would never have wished any suffering on the vampire. He would never wish any suffering on anyone, not even Peter. He simply did what had to be done. I loved him even more for the twenty minutes he sat on the floor holding me while I wept for another man.

Finally I pulled back and wiped my eyes one more time.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked softly.

“You could help me get out of these clothes,” I said.

Just the thought of being covered in Peter’s blood deeply disturbed me. I remembered how badly he was injured when I’d kicked him through the back door and almost got sick again. Instead I reached for Marco and hoped my eyes conveyed my urgency to be rid of the clothes.

When he helped me to my feet, I was unsteady. I propped against his shoulders while he slid the wet jeans down my legs. My shoes were already gone, though I didn’t remember taking them off.

He started walking me toward the shower and I stopped him. “Wait. Throw them away,” I said, pointing at the blood covered clothes on the floor. “I can’t stand for them to be in my house another minute,” I begged. “Please, throw them away for me.”

“Alright,” Marco answered softly. His eyes were filled with compassion as he patted my shoulder lightly, before turning to do what I had asked.

I sat on the edge of the tub while Marco gathered up the clothes. I gave him the bra and panties I was wearing also. “Get rid of them all,” I said. I waited for him to do this, and when he returned to me a few minutes later I asked, “What did you do with the, um, you know?” I couldn’t bring myself to ask what he did with Peter’s arm.

“I took care of it,” he said.

Marco began to run water in the tub and I whispered, “Thank you.” I tried to focus on the sweet smell of the vanilla bath oil he poured underneath the faucet and the sound of the running water. I tried to lose myself in the comforting feel of his presence, but nothing seemed to work.

When he motioned for me to climb into the tub, I did as he asked in silence.

I stared numbly into space while Marco washed me. I didn’t want to watch the water turn pink or see what he was scrubbing from underneath my nails. I just let him do it and was thankful to God and Marco that I didn’t have to do it myself.

“Could you show me what happened?” he asked softly.

“No,” I said vehemently, turning to face him. “I don’t want you to see me like that.” Then I said more softly, “I love you too much to give you the same nightmares.”

All of the sudden, I was afraid of burning in Hell for the things I’d done, and I began to confess to Marco as if he were a priest. I told him about how I had been talking to Bade how I had called him there the night before, and even pressing Elijah’s arm between my breasts.

When I finally stopped to take a breath he said, "I appreciate your honesty, but I knew you've been seeing Bade." He smiled at me kindly. "I'm not angry, Red. I trust you."

"Confession is good for the soul," I said weakly.

After several minutes Marco said, "What you did tonight was harsh, but necessary." He paused before saying, "My pack could use such an enforcer."

"I've got a feeling I already took the job when I attacked Peter tonight."

He nodded his head, and just like that I became the enforcer of Marco's will. If I saw fit to deal out justice on the wolves, I was now a bounty hunter with his blessing.

He helped me out of the tub and wrapped a large towel around my shoulders. I walked into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed while Marco cleaned out the tub. For a moment I felt strangely detached from the situation and reasoned that I was going into shock. Honestly, I didn't know why it had taken so long.

After a few minutes he followed me into the bedroom and picked up my blow dryer. Before he could turn it on I stopped him. He was standing beside me at the foot of the bed and I reached for him, hooking one finger in the top of his jeans. I pulled Marco to me and pressed my face against his stomach.

"Thank you," I said. "Not just for helping me clean everything up, but for being here ... for caring enough to stay. For not calling me a ..."

"Hush," he said, cutting me off. "Tonight was not your fault," he said gently.

Marco turned on the blow dryer and while he dried my hair I focused on his gentle touch. I still held onto his waist while he ran his fingers through my hair, and in spite of the circumstances, I loved every minute of it.

Elijah and Luther camped out in the living room that night. Even though Marco stayed with me, I could not rest. It was in the wee hours of the morning when I left Marco asleep in my bed and leapt from the balcony. When I thought of Dracula my heart hurt. I had to find him. It was still storming, and I ran through the woods until I reached The Dungeon.

The Dungeon is a hardcore whips-and-chains type of establishment about a twenty-minute drive from my house, though I'm not sure how long it took me to reach it on foot. If anyone beside me knew where to find Dracula, it would be Mason.

The Dungeon, like its name suggests, is not a place for the faint of heart. I could barely see through the rain as I approached the entrance of what looked like an abandoned castle. As I walked across the gravel parking lot, I noticed I wasn't even wearing any shoes. In my haste to find Dracula, I hadn't thought of it before now. But my cold feet were nothing compared to what he must be suffering. I knocked on the drawbridge looking door and waited until I saw the slot open. Two dark eyes peered down at me and to my surprise, the door opened. Normally, they would have asked what business I had there, especially since I was standing in the rain barefoot in my pajamas.

"*He must be here,*" I thought as I stepped inside.

Before I could ask for Dracula's whereabouts, I saw Mason walking toward me. It was very late, and he was more casual than I had seen him before. He wore only black silk pants with a drawstring, and a flowing silk robe. I noticed he was barefoot also. Mason is over six feet tall, and when he came to a stop only a few feet away, he towered over me. The black robe he wore fell open to reveal his lean toned body, and the pants hung low enough to show the curve of his muscular hip bones. His long dark hair

blended with the robe and made his porcelain skin seem much paler than it was. His eyes were brown, though they appeared black when surrounded by his usual dark eye makeup. He was also wearing cherry red lipstick. Mason is not unattractive by any means, but he's a freak in every sense of the word. Through Dracula's memory, I had seen him turn, and that somehow made him less frightening to me. This was a good thing, because Mason had always scared the shit out of me.

"You've come for him," he said softly, but it wasn't a question. "Poor Little Red," he said in his deep velvety whisper. However, Mason's voice was lacking its usual seductive undertones tonight. I realized with some surprise, he was actually attempting to express sympathy.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"He doesn't want you to see him like this," he said, and then more gently, "*You* don't want to see him like this."

I never intended to show weakness of any kind in front of Mason, but I began to cry. Not loudly, but tears began to slide down my cheeks and I couldn't stop them.

"Please, Mason," I whispered. "I need to see him."

Mason put his arm around me and I didn't try to stop him.

"Come with me first," he said.

As we walked down the long corridor I noticed the place was closed. I hadn't even paid attention to the limited cars in the parking lot. The last time I had been here we went past the main room and down a hallway to the right. This was where I had found Bade being whipped by two vampire dominatrixes. But this time we took two right turns until we reached a staircase. Here we descended far below the main part of The Dungeon, past another series of doors, until we stopped at Mason's office.

He ushered me in and I just stood there, going numb from shock and cold. Mason took a blanket from a black sofa and wrapped me in it before seating me behind his desk. His office looked like something that belonged in a dungeon. There were several bookshelves, all stained a dark color, just like his desk. The sofa was black with a leopard skin blanket which he had wrapped around me. An enormous werewolf skin rug decorated the middle of the floor, directly in front of a fireplace which wasn't lit. His chair was large, also made of a dark wood, and looked very old.

I almost smiled with appreciation when he plugged in a small space heater and sat it in front of my feet. I really hadn't expected kindness from Mason. Then it hit me: he felt sorry for me, and I felt even worse.

He knelt at my feet and began to rub them. I didn't object.

Finally I got up the courage to ask, "It wasn't acid was it?"

"No," he said softly. "It was holy water."

I felt like I was going to faint. Holy water burns would not regenerate. They would scar. It was the only injury, to my knowledge, that was permanent for a vampire. Not just holy water, but any burn by any holy object would not completely heal.

Mason looked at me with concern as I said so softly it was barely audible, "He's ruined."

I was devastated. Of all the horrible things to do. Of all the wicked and senseless things, why would anyone want to ruin Dracula's beauty?

"I know this is of little comfort," Mason said as he continued to rub my feet, "and I can tell that you do not want to look to me for comfort." He paused. "I won't hurt you.

I would not have hurt you, even if he hadn't ordered me not to. But that is beside the point," he said as he put one of my feet against his thigh and began to rub the other. "The point is, I have known him for a very long time, and I have yet to find anything he cannot find a way around."

"But his face is melted," I whispered, horrified to say the words out loud.

"Burned," he corrected, "and only the right side." He looked up at my face, and I'm sure I looked as lost as I felt. "Have faith, Little Red." Then he laughed bitterly. "Well, those are words I never thought I'd say again."

"I saw you," I said suddenly. "Through his memory."

"He allowed you inside his mind?" This seemed to impress Mason.

"Yes."

"What did you see?" As Mason asked this, he rose from the floor and opened a small cabinet behind his desk. From here he retrieved a bottle of dark green liquid. I watched for a moment as he put ice into a sort of funnel above a glass. He poured the green liquid through the ice and as it turned a cloudy pale color he handed it to me.

"This will warm you," he promised, "better than my lifeless hands."

I took another look at the glass. "Absinthe?"

"As you know, Bade comes here often. He is fond of the green fairy. Now, I believe you were about to tell me what you saw?"

I recounted the entire dream for Mason. From the bodies littering the ground to the moment he was turned, I didn't leave out a thing. During this time, he had seated himself at my feet again, and looked like a child hearing an interesting story for the first time. All the while he rubbed my feet, and despite what he said about his hands, they did help to warm me.

I continued to sip my drink while I asked, "Who were you? How did you end up on that battlefield?"

"The promise of glory, the surety of riches and plunder," he sighed. "Greed and lust that we passed off as righteousness, all in the name of God."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but the Crusades have always fascinated me. Actually, all of medieval history fascinates me." I judged his expression before continuing. "Since he won't see me, and I'm still too upset to go home, will you tell me about it?"

To my surprise, Mason seemed glad someone had asked, but at the same time, it was painful for him to talk about his past. You could hear it in his voice. He told me many things about life in general during the Dark Ages before saying, "My full name is Mason Storm, and I was one of the Knights Templar."

I had recognized his armor in Vlad's dream, but it was still a shock to think of Mason as a holy man of any kind.

"We stormed Jerusalem in July of 1099. Like a pack of rabid dogs." He paused for a moment and his eyes seemed to be looking at things I could not see.

"The entire population of the Holy City was put to the sword. Jews as well as Moslems. Seventy thousand men, women and children were massacred. The battle raged for three days. In places men waded in blood up to their ankles. Horses trod through rivers of innocent blood which flowed freely from the hands of the guilty."

He paused again for a few moments before saying, "It was horrible, but we were convinced that it was God's will. We even went to pray at the Holy Sepulcher before

hurrying back to the slaughter.”

“But I thought the Knights Templar weren’t formed until after the first crusade?”

“Do you believe everything you read?” he asked with a sarcastic smile. “Surely you don’t believe something as organized as the templars formed by chance? Or from the convenient need to guard pilgrims?”

He poured me another glass of Absinthe and continued. “It was on the third day that I was, however unwillingly, embraced. I was horrified. Not only at what had been done to me, because I had heard the gypsies talk of vampires. I was not completely ignorant.” He looked stricken as he said, “I couldn’t believe that God would do this to me. I had fought in his name, for his glory, and what had it gotten me? Do you know what it got me?”

“No,” I said softly.

Mason had begun to pace back and forth in front of the desk and though I was fascinated, I was also horrified by his story.

“I died as a virgin at the hands of a vampire,” he said bluntly.

“No.”

“Oh, yes.” He smiled bitterly. “You see, we of the holy order were not allowed the pleasures of the flesh.” The way he said those last few words made me feel dirty. “We were not allowed to even *speak* to women. In fact, many of us did not bathe in the hopes of further repelling them.”

I didn’t know what to say. After a few moments of silence all I could come up with was, “You really died a virgin?”

He laughed, and his throaty bedroom voice made my heart flutter. “Yes, I did. But I vowed then and there that I would not waste the eternity I had been given bound by chastity.”

He flicked his tongue at me suggestively, and I smiled. I couldn’t help it. Maybe it was the Absinthe, but I was actually starting to enjoy Mason’s company.

## Chapter Twenty One

Mason's intimate confession helped me to see him in a different, more human light, and for the first time, I wasn't afraid of him. Not even a little bit.

"So, how did you ...?"

"Fall so far from grace?" he finished. "Well, I did every despicable and blasphemous thing I could think of. I killed, mutilated, and tortured innocent people just for the fun of it. I took whores off the street and fucked them in public places. I had sex with priests inside of temples. I became everything I had ever reviled ... and it did not bring me peace," he said sadly.

"So, why the make-up, why the show?"

"It's who I am," he said simply. "And if you're wondering, I also found out that who I am isn't gay, either."

"So, what do you call all those priests?" I asked suggestively.

"An experiment," he said with a shrug. "But you know what I still like to do on occasion?"

"What?"

"I like to wear women's clothes," he confessed.

For some reason, the thought of Mason wearing a tight corset and panty hose was not as unappealing as it should have been. In fact, I'd kind of like to see him that way.

"Why?" I asked.

"Do you ever wear men's clothes, a boyfriend's shirt perhaps?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

I thought about it for a minute and sighed, "Because when I wear it, I think about the man who was beneath it. And that just turns me on."

"Exactly," he replied with a wicked smile.

"I've just got one more question, Mason."

"Hmm?"

"Why had Dracula promised himself he wouldn't turn anyone else?"

He propped on the desk and crossed his arms over his chest. "Because he had realized that what he was doing was wrong. He had tried for a time, to turn as many as possible."

"Why?" I sounded like a broken record.

"In order to form an extermination squad, to kill more werewolves."

"And what about you? After all this time, do you regret anything?"

"That's three questions," he said, but he answered me anyway. "I don't necessarily regret anything," he said carefully. "However, I realized it was not God that led me to slaughter, but my own stupidity."

That was probably as close as Mason would ever get to being repentant, so I didn't ask for more. I walked around the desk and he asked, "Where are you going? You're still wet; you'll catch your death out there tonight."

“You’re taking me to him,” I said.

The tall lean vampire rose to his full height and stared down his nose at me. After a moment, he moved toward the door, and I followed. Dracula had been in the room next door all along. He was sitting with his back turned, facing a large blazing fireplace. When I came in he turned slightly toward me. The left side of his face still looked perfect. His shoulder-length hair was carefully placed over the right side, and it hurt me to see him hiding.

“No, my angel,” he pleaded as I moved toward him. “Please. Do not see me like this.”

“You cannot hide from me,” I said with more determination than I felt. “I will not run in fear from you. You accepted me even though I wasn’t perfect. How could I turn on you now?”

When I got close enough to smell his cologne he turned away from me and I started to cry again. I got down on my knees and rested my head against his thigh. I didn’t try to look at his face. Even though it broke my heart, I would honor his wishes. I just wanted him to know that I cared.

“It’s my fault,” I whispered, my tears soaking his pants.

“No, my angel,” he said gently, placing his hand on my head. “You could not have prevented this.”

“I should never have gone. I should never have taken you with me,” I cried.

“He would have only found someone else to hurt. Perhaps someone who has not had the good fortune to live so long with my good looks,” he laughed bitterly.

“Oh, Vlad,” I cried, burying my face against his thigh. “I would give anything,” I rambled, “anything to make this go away.” In that moment I wondered if I could heal him. But holy water injuries were severe. It would take more than a kiss, or merely drawing desire to correct such awful damage.

“It is not so bad,” he whispered, continuing to stroke my hair. “At least I can still play The Phantom.”

I laughed, but not like I was really amused.

“Will you agree to be my Christine now?”

“On one condition. You agree to let me see your face someday, and we will find a way to fix this. I blame myself,” I said quietly, “let me make this right if I can.”

He agreed, and I lifted my head from his lap, but I didn’t open my eyes. I rose to my feet and pulled back the hair from the right side of his face, careful not to touch the skin. Hot tears spilled over my eyelashes and down my cheeks as I leaned forward and kissed his face.

Dracula began to cry as I felt the texture of the rough-ruined skin beneath my lips. He wept openly, like someone who had just suffered a great loss. I crawled into his lap, and pressed my face against his, but I never opened my eyes.

After what felt like a very long time we were both still sniffing, but we had stopped crying.

“Tell no one of this,” he said softly. “I do not need their pity.”

“I don’t cry because I pity you,” I whispered, “*but because I love you.*” Only I didn’t say the last part out loud. I would never be untrue to Marco, but a part of me had loved Dracula for a very long time. It was a different kind of love than the romantic sort I felt for Marco. I loved Dracula like another part of myself.

As strange as it may sound, I was comforted after crying with him. I felt better after he reassured me he would have willingly suffered if it would prevent Peter from harming another innocent. It still broke my heart, but I felt that somehow, everything would be alright. I just had no idea how.

“Go back to your werewolf, my angel,” he said as he kissed my forehead. When he did this I could feel that his lips had not been damaged. Thank God for small miracles. “Do not mourn for me,” he whispered.

“It’ll be alright,” I said, as I pressed another kiss against the rough skin on the right side of his face. “I have no idea how, but I know that it will be.”

About this time I heard someone sniff near the back of the room and remembered Mason. I slid from Dracula’s lap, careful not to open my eyes. I felt him stand in front of me, smelled his cologne, and could feel the warmth of his nearness when he whispered, “You may look at me now.”

His hair was once again covering his face, and when he smiled, if only for a moment, I could imagine there was nothing horrible beneath those long black locks. I could also see one dark emerald eye peering through the hair, which caused me to once again sigh with relief. It was only his skin. He wasn’t partially blind. I would fix this, I just didn’t know how.

I kissed him, and let some of the hope I held so tightly pass to him.

His smile was all the thanks I needed.

I left him sitting by the fire and, as I walked to the door, I noticed Mason was crying. His dark eye makeup had run all down his face in long black smears, and he was trying to stifle a case of the sniffles.

“I haven’t seen anyone just *care* for someone else like that in so long. I didn’t know people still just cared,” he cried softly as he placed a hand over his cherry red lips to stifle another sob.

I put my hand on his arm as Dracula called over his shoulder, “It is alright, Mason. See that she gets home safely. I will not have her barefoot in the woods in this weather.”

I was exhausted. I had barely slept, barely eaten for what seemed like forever. First I was upset about Elijah, then Dracula, and now, I was ready to collapse. When Mason closed the door behind me, I nearly fell to my knees.

“There, there, Little Red,” he said softly, scooping me up in his arms. “Let’s call your werewolf, shall we?”

Mason carried me to his car while the large bouncer who answered the door carried an umbrella over us both. I snickered when Mason told him thanks and called him Butch. Once I was safely in the passenger seat of his antique car, and wrapped once again in the leopard skin blanket, Mason got behind the wheel. He was still wearing his pajamas, but he had put on some slippers before stepping outside.

As we made our way down the drive he took a cell phone from an inside pocket on his robe and called my house. Marco answered on the second ring. I listened while Mason explained who he was and that he had me with him.

I laughed when he said, “No, I am not holding her for ransom.” There was a pause. “I’m returning her.” After another pause he assured Marco of my well being, and that we would be driving up in front of the house within the next fifteen to twenty minutes, depending on the rain.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew Marco had the door open and was thanking Mason for returning me. The vampire graciously said it had been his pleasure but he hoped my next visit would be under more pleasant circumstances. Marco closed the door on the vampire's provocative smile and carried me in the house. Mason had insisted that I keep the blanket.

Marco didn't say anything at first, and I was afraid he was mad at me. I would have been mad at him, running off like that in the middle of the night. But I had to go. I just wasn't sure how to explain that to the man I left sleeping in my bed. Besides the fact that I had been returned by Mason, who was not known for his good reputation, Mason hadn't explained to Marco why he had me in the first place. I also had a terrible chill. The temperature had dropped again, and though it wasn't really cold weather anymore, it was if you stood out in it barefoot like a moron.

Marco carried me into the bathroom and began to run water in the tub. I sat on the edge of the tub for several minutes, afraid to speak. Finally he asked, "How is he?"

"You knew where I was?"

"I knew you had gone to find him."

I told Marco how Dracula was doing while he adjusted the water temperature.

"Do you really think there's hope?" he asked softly.

When he should have been angry, I heard concern in Marco's voice. After I just looked at him for a minute he said, "I *do* actually care. Just because he's as hopelessly in love with you as I am," he sighed heavily. "Well, I suppose I can't fault him for that."

"Marco, I wasn't trying to run away from you. I just had to know ...."

I didn't know what else to say.

"I know. If it were me, what would you have done?" he asked suddenly.

"I would have kept Peter alive long enough for him to feel my pain," I said with more violence than I had intended. "I care about Dracula, but let's you and I have an understanding."

He raised an eyebrow and I continued more softly, "If I wanted to be with Dracula, I would not have come home tonight. I would be with him now. I would have been with him before now. I'm not going to lie and say I don't care because I do. I will do anything within my power to make things right with him. But what I feel," my voice broke. "What I feel for him does not begin to compare to the feeling I have every time I hear your name. People will ask me about you," I said as I started to cry again, "and I feel my heart leap when they say your name. If only I could say what the sight of you does to me, you would understand. You never have a reason to be jealous. I love Dracula, it's true. But there is no word that describes how much I want to be with you."

He moved to embrace me, and I snatched away.

"If you think that you can just give me that look after the day I've had and I'm going to just fall into your arms then you are full of so much—"

He kissed me and as his lips pulled back from mine I breathed, "Shit." But it was meant now in an entirely different context.

He smiled as he pulled the blanket away from me and began to take off my wet pajamas. He had slipped on a pair of jeans to go outside, and he took these off also.

"I'm sorry, Red. I *was* jealous. I try hard not to be."

"I know," I said. Might as well give credit where credit was due. Marco was very patient and understanding with me.

“But I am jealous of Julius Blight, I’m jealous of Johnny, of that prick Bradley, of Alfred, Dracula, and every other man who has ever touched you.”

“That would just leave you.” He raised an eyebrow and I clarified. “Other than everyone you just named, you are the only other man who has touched me.”

“Good,” he growled, “Because I have shown them mercy in allowing them to breathe around me.” He smiled wickedly as he pulled me against him and said, “And I’m all out of mercy today, Red.”

I put my arms around his neck as I purred, “Ooo, I like that. But, I’m exhausted, baby. Are you going to show me any mercy?” With my last words I rubbed myself against him suggestively.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” he said as he growled again close to my ear.

When we finally got in the tub, the water was just the right temperature. Marco just winked and said he had it set hot enough to scald on purpose.

“So, you were planning to distract me long enough for the water to cool?”

“Is that a complaint, Red?”

I smiled as he lowered himself into the water with me and leaned back against the side of the tub. I slid between his legs and rested my head against his chest.

After several minutes of me listening to his heartbeat he suggested, “You should ask Mathias what to do about Dracula.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too. But the thing is, Mathias’ solutions are never easy.” I looked up at Marco’s handsome face and hated myself for the question I was about to ask. “If he says I have to do something drastic in order to heal Dracula ... will you let me?”

“I don’t own you, Red.”

“Yes you do,” I whispered.

He kissed my forehead before saying, “I don’t know. I suppose it depends on how drastic.”

“Could *you* leave him like that?” I asked.

He seemed to think this over before saying, “No. He’s saved your life, he saved Luther, and he has become a friend to the pack. No,” he repeated, “I couldn’t leave him like that.”

So, I guess we both had our answer.

## Chapter Twenty Two

Marco hugged me tight for a few more minutes before we finished our bath and crawled back into bed.

He smelled wonderful, and I remembered that the full moon was only two weeks away. I snuggled tighter against Marco and he whispered into my hair, “Don’t worry, Red.”

It seemed like all I had done for the past year was cry. I never used to cry, at least not in front of people. But there I was, crying again as Marco pulled me on top of him, and I snuggled my face against his throat. He began to rub my back gently, and the touch of his warm hands soothed me.

\* \* \* \*

We had a dress rehearsal that night, and Marco went with me. The theatre was magnificent. The Bleeding Heart was designed like one of the classic opera houses. The upholstery was a lush red trimmed in gold, and golden sculptures were around every turn, most of them were of naked women.

Alek was there, because he was the director, and so was the entire cast, but not Dracula. When it came to the parts where I needed to cry in order to show Juliet’s emotion, it wasn’t hard. Everyone thought I was just a marvelous actress, but I was just in misery at Dracula’s absence.

I had kissed Luther before, but when I kissed him during rehearsal that night there was something different. Something that was never there before. It wasn’t lust or anything like that. I didn’t want to jump Luther. I realized after a minute that my emotional state had left me partially unguarded against his feelings. When I had touched his lips, I felt what he felt, and Luther was just as upset as I was.

I looked out in the audience and saw Johnny. I could tell he had come straight from shooting practice because he was still wearing his gloves. Johnny’s favorite gloves had the fingers cut out. Across his right knuckles it said, “GOOD,” and “EVIL” was across the left. He’d always had a sort of rock star appeal about him, and tonight was no exception. His torn jeans and cowboy hat just added to the picture.

After the rehearsal we all went home pretty quickly. Luther went back to his apartment on the second floor of Club Red and took Elijah with him, Alek returned to the dungeon, and Johnny went to the guest room.

Marco and I spent the rest of the week together trying not to worry about the upcoming full moon. We spent time transporting between my place and his, and tried to pretend like we weren’t upset.

\* \* \* \*

It was almost a week later when the entire town closed down early because of the weather. Another bad storm was expected, including tornados. Kat closed her shop early and came to my house. If things got bad we could always go to the dungeon. Kat didn’t even have a cellar and felt much safer at my house.

Elijah and Luther were back, and Johnny was still there. Marco was on Terra for

another meeting with Aldan, and I called him on Aldan's communicator to let him know he should stay there until after the storm. Electrical disturbances sometimes affected the transporting system, and I would hate for some of Marco's particles to be left behind.

I called to check on Dracula, and he assured me he was already underground. There was really nothing left to do except break out the candles and board games and hope for the best.

While we were putting candles all around the large fireplace in the sitting room, Kat had an idea. "Why don't we eat all the ice cream?"

I laughed as thunder rumbled overhead. "Why?"

"Well, if the power goes out, and it probably will, it will all melt, anyway."

"Sure," I sighed, "What the hell?"

Elijah, who was looking much better, helped me to take down a carton of chocolate and vanilla while Kat looked for some syrup and nuts.

Alek was reading over the play to be sure we had covered every scene to his satisfaction while Johnny just sat at the table looking sulky and cool. I suppose it's a gunslinger thing.

Kat built a huge banana split and topped it with nuts and chocolate. Bless her heart, she even decorates desert, I thought. She turned it toward Johnny excitedly and said, "Isn't it pretty?"

He looked like he was genuinely smiling, but I recognized his sarcastic grin.

"Yeah," he said with mock excitement. "Now why don't you sprinkle it with some queers and unicorns?"

"You asshole," Kat sneered.

Johnny cupped his hand over his ear. "*Twat* did you say? I *cunt* hear you?"

Kat slapped him so hard his little round sunglasses were knocked off, but Johnny never lost his cool. Even when we both saw his blood red eyes. He picked up the glasses, fogged them with his breath and winked at Kat while he polished them on his shirt. I thought she might scream.

"Bet you thought I wore these just to add to my sex appeal," he said with an evil smile.

"What are you?" she breathed.

"I'm a halfbreed," he said casually.

"He's part Icarum," I explained.

"You mean the gorgeous guys with wings?!" Kat exclaimed.

"That's right." He winked again, before putting his glasses back on. "My mother was human, and her eyes were brown. My father's were lavender. Red is what you get when you mix those two colors, though I've never heard of this happening to anyone else," he said as he pointed at his eyes.

I'll admit, Johnny's eyes scared me at first glance, but I got over that real quick. They really weren't creepy to me, but Kat seemed to think otherwise.

"But, you don't have any wings," she pointed out tentatively.

"Figure that one out all on your own?" he asked. "That's right. I never got my wings." She looked at his black fingernails and he said, "These are just another abnormality. Lucky for me, they're in style right now."

"Do you have any other abnormalities?" Kat asked.

"Just one," he said suggestively. "But that's the reason Lilith likes me, don't you

sweetheart?” He winked at me. “You see, the Icarum men have always been very popular, and Lilith has a particular fetish for feathers.”

“Why?” Kat asked at the same time I said, “Johnny, that’s enough.”

“We’re hung like mules, every last one of us,” he said, grinning at Kat, “even the halfbreeds.”

“Fuck you,” she laughed.

“If that’s what you really want, then I am for it. I am always for it, make no mistake,” he drawled.

“I’ve got news for you, you don’t walk on water,” Kat retorted angrily.

“No, darling, I walk on toilet paper, cause I’m the shit.”

Alek, who had been completely preoccupied with the play, threw back his head and laughed. “That’s great,” he said between breaths.

“Fuck you, too,” Kat snapped.

He just laughed harder and said, “Looks like there’ll be a line.”

She huffed off toward the sitting room and all I could do was laugh. We all ate too much, drank too much, and were still playing board games when the electricity finally went out. We had been listening to the radio to get regular weather reports, and even though we were out of danger from tornados, the power would remain out at least until the middle of the next day. According to the radio station, some power lines were down, and road crews were having difficulty reaching the area.

Luther was asleep with his long legs hanging over the loveseat. Elijah had brought a sleeping bag, and so had Kat. They were camped out at different ends of the coffee table. Alek was snoring in a chair near the fireplace, and Johnny and I were still playing Black Jack.

“So, why did you really want me to come here?” he asked, and I could tell he had had too much to drink.

“Because you’re the best, Johnny, and that’s what I need.”

“Are you sure there’s not another reason?” he asked.

It was getting late, and I was sitting too close to Johnny. I looked at the clock. One hand was on the eleven, the other was on my thigh.

“I’m sure,” I said, removing his hand. “It’s getting late, Johnny.”

I went upstairs, but didn’t immediately close my door. I kicked off my shoes, and by the time I turned around he was standing behind me.

“Go to bed, Johnny.”

“Relax, Lil, I was planning on it,” he said with a smile.

Johnny walked over and stretched out across my bed.

“Don’t make me go,” he whispered.

I walked to the edge of the bed and looked down at him.

“Johnny, don’t make me care about you again. We’ve been down that road before.”

“Yes, but it was newly traveled, almost virgin territory. Now it’s been paved, and there are nice little lines for us to stay inside.”

“That sounds dirty,” Luther said from behind me.

I was so glad he had come upstairs, and I let it show in my smile.

“Go to bed, Johnny,” he said in a friendly but firm tone. “You’re drunk.”

“That I am.” He nodded. “Would you be so kind as to help me to my feet,

darling?” he asked me.

Once he got his balance, Johnny left and Luther locked the door behind him.

“Would you have made him leave if I hadn’t come in?” he asked.

“What do you think I was trying to do?”

Luther just laughed. We snuggled up like a couple of kittens in a blanket and drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The night of the full moon, Marco came to my house. We would be leaving from there to face Peter. Marco had designated the place. They would be fighting where the full moon gathering was normally held for his pack. I had only recently found out that Marco’s pack had about a thousand members, so they rotated who was in attendance.

Luther and Judas went with us. Even though Judas was a wereleopard, he was under Marco’s protection, and had been allowed to run with the wolves. This would be Elijah’s first full moon, and Marco wanted to be sure he was safe. He was down at the werewolf clinic, in a cell in the basement. Dr. Sinclair and a few other pack members would be there to keep him company. Kat had come over to stay with Alek, just because the both of them were too worried to be alone. They could pace the floor together until we returned.

I was terrified, and said nothing on our way to the gathering place. Luther held my hand the whole time. When we arrived about an hour away from my house, the moon was just rising. We parked on a small dirt road beside some trees and walked for what seemed like forever before we entered a clearing.

The trees had been cut back in an almost perfect circle. As we emerged from the trees, so did hundreds of other werewolves, all from Marco’s pack. Most were already changed into the half wolf form. Others were completely wolf, and a few were still human. The ones who were still human were dressed like Marco and Luther, in clothes they didn’t care about tearing up when they transformed.

Toward the back of the clearing was a large rock, which must have been Marco’s throne. I hadn’t actually expected him to have a throne, even though he was a king. The rock had a natural sort of seat curved out in it, with arm rests and everything. It had obviously not been carved, but was a natural formation that had been worn down over the years by many different kings.

He walked toward the throne, and I followed him. The wolves all gathered around us, but not too close. They began to form another circle within the clearing as more and more could be seen through the woods. Marco took a seat, and motioned for me to stand on his left side, while Luther stood on his right. I wanted to ask why, but felt like it wasn’t the time for questions. He sat solemnly and waited for his challenger to arrive.

It wasn’t long before Peter emerged from the trees on the other side of the clearing, and I saw that his arm had already fully regenerated. The pack parted to allow him to enter the circle they had formed in front of the throne. The members of his pack that had come with him stayed back, while he issued his challenge again for all to hear.

“My name is Peter Davenport, and I challenge you Marco Barak, for the honored title of *lupinus regalis* of the Canis Romulus clan.”

Marco rose and looked down on him from the slight elevation where we stood.

“I, Marco Barak, king of the Canis Romulus clan, accept your challenge.”

My heart was about to beat its way through my ribs when another familiar voice could be heard over the crowd.

“And I, Samuel James of the Canis Remus clan, lend you my support,” he said to Marco.

Sam is middle-aged with shoulder-length, salt-and-pepper hair that he had pulled back in a tight ponytail. His lean, tall frame was adorned with old clothes like everyone else, but he looked regal all the same. Sam is the leader of the second largest werewolf pack in the country, located in Texas. He is also Marco’s mentor. Under the circumstances, it was good to see another friendly face.

Marco nodded his thanks toward Sam and continued toward Peter.

Just as he entered the circle another voice called out, “And I, Bade Garren, former beta wolf of the Canis Romulus clan, offer you my support.” He stepped forward and knelt in front of Marco. “And my allegiance,” he said. “If you will allow me to return.”

When he looked up Marco answered, “You will never be my second again, however, my armies could use a new leader. Will you accept the position of Garm? Will you work with my mate, my enforcer, and lead my armies?”

“I will,” Bade answered.

“Then rise,” Marco said, “and take your place beside my enforcer.”

Bade nodded again and came to stand on my other side.

“The challenger gets to name the form,” Marco said to Peter. “What will it be?”

“Half wolf,” Peter answered.

## Chapter Twenty Three

I didn't want to watch Marco turn, but couldn't really look away. What sort of queen would I be if I turned away from the king when he revealed his beast? His hands began to lengthen first, but I had seen this before. You could hear the bones breaking and reforming as his skin became covered with black fur. As I watched, I found the process not only horrifying, but fascinating. Marco turned more easily than anyone I had ever seen. His hair became longer, and he threw back his head and howled. As he did this, his shirt began to tear underneath the strain of his massive chest. The bones of his lower legs lengthened, and his feet became gigantic paws. His face began to lengthen as well, but it was not the sideshow I had expected. Marco's transformation flowed, almost like a movie, but without the screaming, or the melodrama. It wasn't something awful or scary, it simply *was*.

Sam had warned me that when I saw Marco change one of these days, it would make me think differently of him. I found Sam's eyes in the crowd and looked at him as if to say, "I can take it." I think at this point I loved Marco too much to feel any other way. Yes, it changed me, but it didn't make me want to run from him. None of us are perfect, and when he was in human form, Marco was close enough to perfect for me.

During this time, Peter had also changed, but I hadn't been watching him. His fur was the same pale shade of blond his hair had been, and he was almost a foot shorter than Marco's now seven-foot frame. They circled each other, growling and snarling and I felt faint. Bade reached over and took my hand. I was surprised to find his covered with fur. He had transformed right beside me, and I hadn't even noticed.

As they continued to circle each other, growling threats, I whispered to Bade, "What made you change your mind?"

"If you have such faith in him, maybe I was wrong," he said.

I looked up at him, and he smiled at me. A smiling werewolf can be frightening to someone who's never seen one before, but I knew the difference between a smile and a baring of teeth.

"You based your decision on my feelings?" I asked softly.

But before he could answer, I heard an awful sound that let me know someone had finally attacked. I gasped as Peter leapt toward Marco. He stepped out of the way, but Peter scratched his leg. He had drawn first blood. Marco backhanded him and Peter yelped like an injured dog. The gathered werewolves stepped back to allow him room. When Peter got to his feet, I realized his jaw was dislocated. He put it into place with a crunch as Marco growled, "Is that the best you've got? I came here for a *fight!*"

Peter dove at him, and Marco slashed him across the chest. The challenger was now bleeding badly, but he continued to fight. It didn't bother me as bad to watch as I'd expected. That is until Marco jammed his claws into Peter's rib cage and pulled out a lung. I screamed and Luther and Bade howled their approval.

I knew Peter had to die. After all, a challenge for king was a fight to the death. But I wasn't ready for what I had just seen. Marco flung the organ toward the waiting

pack, and I think some of them actually began to eat it.

I looked to Marco and asked a question with my eyes. He seemed to know that I needed to be with Peter in these last moments. He inclined his head slightly, and I didn't wait for further permission. I ran to Peter, who was already returned to human form and cradled his body against me as I cried.

I didn't cry because he was dying, but for all of the time I had missed him while he was still alive. I hadn't known I could still shed tears for Peter, but I did. There was silence all around us, only broken by the sounds of his laborious breathing and my retching sobs.

After several minutes Peter leaned back in my arms so he could look at me. I no longer saw the cold-hearted individual who had so recently tried to kill the man I loved. Nor did I see the sadist who had nearly killed Elijah and ruined Dracula's beauty. I looked into the eyes of the man I used to love, and it felt like I was dying.

"Sssh," he whispered softly as he reached to cup my face with his blood covered hand.

"Peter, I—"

"I'm so sorry," he interrupted. "I never meant to hurt you."

His voice was so faint. Though my vision was mostly blurred with tears, I watched as Peter grew paler, knowing that I could save him. But, I couldn't. If Peter were left alive he wouldn't change. I knew this through my direct contact with his skin. He would try again to kill Marco, and this I couldn't allow.

But he was telling the truth when he said he was sorry. Involuntarily, I was pulled into his memory of the night our relationship had ended. The night he had called me a monster. Peter was horrified. His father had so recently been killed by the same animals that had now attacked his girlfriend. He had horrible visions of me doing the same thing to him. It was out of this fear he had lashed out at me, and he'd spent the rest of his life regretting it. I wanted Peter to know how I felt, while there was still time for him to hear it. However, I would spare Marco the pain of my words. Through our shared connection, I whispered through his mind, *"I loved you, Peter. I have always loved you. And no amount of cruel words or the passage of time could ever change that."* But we both knew he deserved to die.

With great effort he stretched up and kissed my cheek while he whispered, "I was wrong. *I am the monster.*"

I wept even more uncontrollably than before as he continued. "I want you to have something, to remember me by."

"What?"

"My skin."

"*What?!* Peter, I don't understand."

"All of these years I pushed you away. All I ever wanted to do was have you close to me again." He took a deep breath and exchanged a look with Marco before he continued. "After I'm gone, let me keep you warm."

Then I understood. Peter meant for me to have his hide. I closed my eyes as he began to transform back into the golden blond werewolf in my arms. He gasped at the pain brought on by the transformation, and his injury. When the transformation was complete, I buried my face against the soft fur of his chest and held Peter to me while he breathed his last breath. My ear was pressed against his chest, and I heard the last beat of

his heart, felt his last breath against my hair.

“No,” I cried softly into his hair. “No.” I cried for all the years I would never get back. For all the nights I had laid awake longing for these arms. Arms that would never again hold me and a man that would never again be mine. But the man that I had loved had truly died a long time ago.

I was scarcely aware of the fighting that had broken out around me. Shrieks echoed through the night as well as the sound of tearing flesh. Peter’s wolves were attacking our pack. But the world stood still around me. For a moment Peter had been mine again, I’d felt it in his heart. He had died mine, just like a part of me would always remain his.

My cries of misery grew louder, but they could no longer be heard. Such was my grief that it echoed with the pain filled howls of the fighting wolves. For some reason my only thought was getting Peter to safety. I knew he was dead, but still I wanted to protect him. No one seemed to notice as I dragged his body to the safety of some nearby trees.

As I looked down at him, the only part of me that didn’t feel numb was my heart. Just when I thought the pain in my chest would become unbearable, I heard terrible howl. I knew that sound. I ran back to the clearing in time to see Marco take down the wolf that had so viciously attacked his unprotected back. I should have had his back. His injury was my fault, and I knew it. However, I was frozen to the spot. I had only seen Marco in his half wolf form once before tonight’s fight. And even though I had just witnessed him fight Peter, I hadn’t truly seen him in action before. He was frightening. Bade was brutal, and I had watched him enough to become familiar with his tactics. But Marco was savage. Bade sought to break all those before him, but Marco tore them apart. He didn’t bother wasting the time to break their bones; he simply ripped them to shreds.

I had never seen another werewolf with claws like Marco. They were retractable, like mine, and much longer than normal. I watched as he extended these claws once more and slashed his way through two more wolves before I came to my senses enough to help him.

I charged forward with a battle cry that reflected all of my agony as I attacked the first werewolf I saw. Caught up in the fury of the moment, I forsook my blades in favor of my own claws, and dug them into the sides of the large male whose back I had jumped on. With a strength I had never before exercised, I dug my fists through his sides and tore loose his ribcage. He fell to the ground as I shoved my claws into the back of his neck, severing his spinal cord.

Several more came at me, and I tore through them like they were nothing. I knew no pain, registered no injury other than the emptiness inside of me. And in that moment I became the animal I had always feared. For the next several minutes, I was a monster. All of the ugliness within me showed through, but I had neither the strength nor the will to care anymore. I only knew that these wolves were trying to take from me something else that I loved, and I could not allow it. I would be what I had to be, do what I had to do, breathe my last breath, to keep them away from Marco.

It took me a moment to realize that I had killed them all. All that were close to me, at least. I looked around to see Marco finishing with the last of the wolves closest to him, and was once again struck with fear. After all I had seen, and all I had done, it was a wonder anything could still frighten me, but he did.

The large black werewolf couldn't possibly be the man I had held in my arms so recently. He wasn't just an animal; he was a machine, a force of nature. Marco was unstoppable, and I knew then why he led the pack. Could anyone stand against such might? Why would anyone be fool enough to try?

He turned to me suddenly, and I trembled. For the very first time, it was with fear. A cold knot of dread began to form in the pit of my stomach as he walked toward me, and I was certain he meant to punish me for running to Peter, for not being there when he needed me. I had never bowed to anyone else in my life, but just as I was about to hit the ground, he stopped me. Marco's large clawed hand pressed firmly against my chest, and I gasped.

I couldn't meet his eyes, I was terrified. I stared at my feet as he knelt on the ground, abasing himself before me. In front of all of his wolves, Marco looked at me from his knees. His muzzle was covered with blood, and his eyes were amber. I saw many claw marks over his body, but he didn't seem to feel them.

He held out his massive hands to me, palm up as he began to speak. "Look at these hands, Red," his deep voice rumbled, and I obeyed. They were covered with blood and fur, but they were still Marco's hands. "These are the hands of your protector. These are the hands of the man who loves you, the man who would die to protect you. These are my hands," he added more softly, "and you should never fear them." And in front of God and all his wolves, I took Marco's hands before I fell into his arms.

"It's alright, Red," he said as softly as his rough voice would allow.

After several minutes he asked, "Where did you take Peter?"

I pointed to the trees where his body rested as Marco rose to his feet. He motioned for Luther to follow him, and I gasped as they walked toward Peter. "What are you going to do?" I called.

"Carry out his last wish," Marco answered.

I fainted.

When I came to a few minutes later, Bade was holding me. We were facing several fully transformed werewolves, and they were eating what was left of Peter's pack.

"What are they doing?" I asked stupidly.

"Taking care of the evidence," he said.

I tried to lift up and see around him and Bade sort of shook me back down into his arms.

"Trust me; it's better than what's in that direction."

"Oh, Bade," I said, burying my face against his furry chest.

"I would walk with you out of the clearing," he said, "but I don't think Marco would appreciate that. Besides, I got a few funny looks when I picked you up to start with."

"Why?"

"Well, I've been away for over a year, and I'm not only welcomed back, but the new *kulin* finds comfort in my presence. You think that's suspicious, love?"

"He knew I had been talking to you," I said, still not looking at what was going on around me.

"I know," Bade rumbled. "I told him."

"What do you mean you *told* him?"

"We spoke at the clinic, when I went to visit Elijah."

I didn't know what to make of this, but before I could comment, there was an awful tearing sound that made me start to gag.

"We're leaving the clearing," Bade called to Marco as he ran with me still in his arms to the edge of the woods. If it weren't for his supernatural speed, we would never have gotten there in time for me to throw up.

## Chapter Twenty Four

We performed *Romeo and Juliet* the next night to a full house. It was wonderful to be on stage again, and the tickets were sold out for the next week, which was as long as the play would run. Alek was very pleased, and Dracula watched it all from his reserved booth on the left hand side of the stage. He wore a half-mask like The Phantom when he attended the performances, and everyone just thought it was a promotional move for our next production. Only I, and a few others, knew the truth.

Elijah came to every show. He was in good spirits, and as he pointed out, “At least I don’t have to wear contacts anymore.” I gave him the number of my friend Richard who had been turned into a snake man only a few months before, just in case he needed someone to talk to.

Bade was still working as The Red Light Special, even though I found out from Marco that he really didn’t need the money. Apparently, Bade had inherited an obscene amount of money when his aunt and uncle were killed in a car accident a few years ago. Well, that would explain how he could go without a job for over a year. Some members of the pack were still a little miffed about how he had been allowed back in. Others were just wary of trusting someone who had proved untrustworthy before. But on the whole, things seemed to be working out.

Marco and I were really happy, and it showed anytime we were together. I finally had what I had wanted for so many years: a knight in shining armor. Or was that shiny black fur? Hell, it didn’t matter. Whatever you wanted to call him, he was perfect for me. Marco loved me for who I am, he saw the real me. To finally be seen was the most fulfilling experience of my life.

Most people are not used to having someone see them as they truly are. There are people who live together and look at each other every day without one ever really seeing the other. I’d rather have one day with someone who really sees me, really knows me, than a lifetime with someone who only looks at me.

Kat was still dating Judas, and that seemed to be going well too. All was right with the world, except for one thing. I still hadn’t asked Mathias if he knew a way to heal Dracula’s face. I was so happy that I was afraid to ask.

The End