



BITTEN

By

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Chapter One

How do dead men attract so many live women? I can't, for the life of me, understand it. It was Halloween night, and I was yet again trying to unravel this mystery. I might have had more success without the alcohol. But I'd been suckered into the whole situation, anyway.

I was at a bachelorette party in a club called Lucy's. Who the hell has their bachelorette party on Halloween night? My friend, Karen. While I watched the tall, leggy blond celebrating her last night as a free woman, I got distracted by ... the wildlife.

One of the main attractions at Lucy's was its dancers. Taking center stage was a luscious piece of meat by the name of Alex. He was a weretiger. I knew this because he'd purred at me earlier. His lithe body moved easily to the music, like a well-oiled machine. He was beautiful, but I didn't pay much attention. While he gyrated to some of Ms. Lennox's greatest hits, I found what sweet dreams were made of—and it wasn't on stage.

He was around six-feet tall with long auburn hair and the most magnificent backside I'd ever seen. I couldn't wait to see what his front looked like. While I took in the view, the lyrics of the song combined with my blood alcohol level made me think I might like to be used by him. Better yet, what it might be to abuse him.

Whoever he was, I was willing to bet he wasn't human. The really hot ones rarely are. Everyone knows Lucy's isn't run by humans, though the patrons are almost exclusively human, but I was still surprised to come across someone so obviously ... *other*.

As I watched him, I knew he was aware of my gaze. How could he not be? As my grandmother would have said, I was "staring a hole through him." On my way to the restroom, I had to force myself to look away from the redheaded stranger before I ran into a table.

My red dress was still in good shape, even after a night of bar hopping with a bunch of drunken twenty-something's. It was strappy and short, but not short enough to look slutty. The color went well with my dark hair, and I ran a hand through my long wavy locks as means of freshening up. After rummaging in my little red evening bag, I powdered my nose and reapplied lipstick before leaving the restroom. If that tall, handsome ... whatever he was decided to look my way, I wanted to give him something worth looking at.

I reentered the main room, and he turned toward me as if he'd read my mind. His hair fell in a silken mass about his shoulders as he turned. His eyes were a stunning shade of green, which matched his shirt perfectly and complemented his hair. I admit that I have a weakness for redheads, but this one made me literally weak.

The top few buttons on his shirt were undone and I tried not to stare at the pulse in his throat as he approached. My smile just wasn't working, and I'm sure I looked as nervous as I felt. Before he could get closer, I walked out the back door. Yes, I know it was a cowardly thing to do, but I wasn't about to pick up a strange preternatural being.

I'd also had quite enough of the party and was taking out my cell phone to call a cab when I froze.

Something was coming toward me. I looked around and realized I'd walked out into a dark alley. Stupid is too mild a word. Whatever it was, it growled as it approached, and I saw amber eyes glowing in the darkness.

"Going somewhere?" a deep voice growled.

Before I could answer, I was pinned against the wall. My cell phone fell to the ground along with my purse. A werewolf had flung himself at me and was pinning me by the throat against the wall. I could barely breathe, let alone summon up a scream.

He leaned in and began to sniff my midriff as if he were breathing in a steak on the grill. But before he could bite into my flesh, he was gone. I hit the ground and stared in numb shock as the redheaded stranger flung the werewolf down the alley as if he weighed nothing.

The wolf yelped like an injured dog and ran, but my savior didn't pursue. As the stranger turned to me, his eyes glowed as well and with his long hair now covering his face, they were all I could see.

"My name is Navarre," he said, and his voice was like velvet. "I don't know who you are Miss, but you should stay out of dark alleys."

"I'm Sandra."

"Well, Sandra, it looks as if my dinner has escaped this evening."

Then I understood. He was a vampire. I looked into his eyes once more and knew what Navarre wanted as a reward. I tilted my head and instantly felt his lips pressed against my throat. I'm not sure the exact moment he bit me. Excitement and arousal coursed through my veins like the greatest thrill. He smelled of expensive cologne and his hair fell across my face as he embraced me. Just as the pleasure became almost too much, I felt the slightest pain, and he withdrew from me.

Navarre thanked me for my generous reward, and I made it home safely that night.

"You may think I'm crazy, but that won't be my last visit to Lucy's. Blame it on my weakness for redheads, but I'm going back for more," I told my sister.

"You're crazy," Priscilla said with a laugh.

"You should have seen him," I insisted while fumbling around in the cabinet for some aspirin.

"Are you going to tell Zanna?" she asked.

"I wasn't planning on it."

Zanna is my grandmother, though we've always called her by her first name. She's also a witch, like most of our ancestors, which might explain some of the odd behaviors of my family, but certainly not all of them. She runs a shop in town called "Potions, lotions, and other wicked notions."

"But, I thought you were working today?" Priscilla asked.

"Yeah, so?"

"So, those marks are obvious," she teased.

As she said this my sister rose from her chair and pulled back my hair, exposing Navarre's bite.

"You have a point." I sighed. "I'll just wear a turtleneck until it heals."

"Oh," she said, dropping my hair back into place. "I've got just the thing," she

assured me as she took off toward her room.

Priscilla and I both live with our grandmother. Our parents died when we were young, and life with her is just about all we've ever known. Zanna has a large, though very strange, home built by her great grandparents years ago. The style is eclectic, to say the least. It's not exactly Victorian, but it's close. Priscilla lives at the top of what we used to call "the tower" when we were little, and I live in the guesthouse which is connected through the greenhouse.

There are plants growing all over our home. Whether it is in the greenhouse, or up the side of the porch. At a glance, it might look overgrown. But upon closer inspection, you can see how lush everything is and that the place is actually well tended. It's almost like one big garden that just happens to have a house in the middle of it.

While I took some aspirin, I heard something crash at the top of the stairs.

"Not another of your remedies, Pris," I yelled. "The last one broke me out in hives."

"This one will work," she called.

From the sound of things, she was already on her way downstairs.

"Here," she said, holding a little jar out in front of her.

"What's in it?" I asked.

I took a whiff of the contents and nearly passed out.

"Don't ask," she answered. "Just rub a little bit of this over the bite and it will be well by morning."

"Are you serious?"

"Just do it," she said urgently. "I swear this one will work."

Priscilla is three years older than me. She's a bit strange, but brilliant. There was only one problem with her spell work. Her potions either really worked, or they *really* didn't. Still, I didn't want to have to worry about covering up my neck for longer than a day or so, so I let her rub the mixture over the small puncture wounds.

"There," she said, smiling. "Now, you'll only need to wear a turtleneck for today." She took a closer look at me and asked, "Exactly how did you get home last night?"

"I must have taken a cab," I said, turning back to the coffee pot. It was still really early and if I was going to make it through the day with a hangover, I needed some caffeine.

"Must have? You mean you don't remember?"

"Not exactly, no. But I was really drunk," I reminded her. "The point is that I made it home in one piece. I could have been killed by that werewolf, but as it is, I'm unharmed."

"Unharmed? You were bitten by a vampire and don't remember how you got home!"

I shut my eyes tight against her shrill voice.

"You don't have to yell, Pris. I feel bad enough as it is."

"Sure you do, but not about the bite. You just feel bad because you drank too much. What you did last night was very dangerous."

"You're not my keeper," I said angrily.

"No, I'm not. But you know what Zanna always said about vamps. They can't be trusted. They just aren't human anymore. They see the world differently than we do."

Okay, so he was hot. There's nothing wrong with that, but you can't get mixed up with him."

"And that fling you had with the wereleopard—that was all right I suppose?"

Priscilla rolled her eyes. "No one needs to know about that. Besides, that was different."

"How so?"

"I just wanted a good fuck."

I laughed and it made my head throb.

"What makes you think I'm looking for more than that?"

She grew very serious and to my surprise, she hugged me.

"Because John was a redhead." She sighed. "It's not just a weakness, honey. You're looking for a man who doesn't exist."

"I'm not looking for John," I answered softly.

"Then what are you looking for that a living breathing human can't satisfy?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," I answered.

I poured myself a cup of coffee and walked back with it through the greenhouse and into the guesthouse. Two thousand square feet all to myself, was normally enough to make me smile, but not today. No one had mentioned my John in a long time, and I couldn't help but be a little sad at his memory.

We were married right out of high school. He was the love of my life and for two years we were perfectly happy. We'd even decided to have children. But before I could get pregnant, John was killed on his way home from work one night by a drunk driver. To make matters worse, the driver was one of my ex-boyfriends. His name was Jamie, and no matter how much he apologized, I still hated him.

I found Zanna's copy of the Necronomicon and was going to attempt to resurrect John, but she stopped me. Thank goodness for that. I was out of my mind with grief and only later saw the foolishness of what I had almost done.

I wanted to curse Jamie too, but I never did. Still, it didn't matter. He killed himself two months later. He left a letter explaining that he blamed himself for John's death. Even though he was going to serve time for involuntary manslaughter, Jamie didn't feel that was a harsh enough punishment for what he'd done. To my discredit, I agreed. However, I had never forgiven myself for hating him. Even though I had never performed the curse, I wished it on him with my hatred. Jamie's death was my fault, and there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't pray for forgiveness.

"I'm sorry," Priscilla said from behind me and I jumped. I hadn't heard her following me. "I shouldn't have mentioned John," she said softly.

"No, it's all right," I said. "That was nine years ago. You'd think I could hear his name without falling to pieces by now."

"Come on," Priscilla said with a sigh. "Get dressed and let's go to work. I'm supposed to brew up some more ritual bath wash today."

Ritual bath wash was one of our best sellers, and something that my sister did well. Her cleansing magic never failed and as she smiled at me that morning, I felt like my spirit was being washed clean.

"All right," I said, taking a sip of my coffee. "Give me about twenty minutes and I'll be ready."

Today was the day I was supposed to collect some fresh ingredients and order others online. Our shelves were getting a little bare in some areas. You'd be surprised what a market there is for already prepared spells. Or better yet, those who are willing to pay to have a spell performed. Sure, there were plenty of people who still hated us for what we were, but there were plenty who didn't, and we were well out of the Burning Times.

Our house was on the outskirts of a little town in South Carolina called Westley, and it was beautiful this time of year. October was my favorite month of the whole year, and fall, my favorite season. Unfortunately, this day was November first, and my favorite holiday had passed. I'd much rather have dressed up and passed out candy to the kids last night instead of being dragged along with Karen. But I was going to be her maid of honor this Saturday, so I really had to be there.

As I selected a comfortable pair of jeans to wear, I reminded myself that if I hadn't gone along, I never would have met Navarre.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked my reflection while I brushed my hair. "You can't get involved with a vampire. Pris is right."

But while I plugged in my flat iron, I didn't listen. In a few minutes, I had straightened out my long dark hair and found a comfortable blue turtleneck. Priscilla, who was always hot-natured, met me at the door wearing Capri pants, a T-shirt and sandals.

"It's sixty degrees out here," I said incredulously.

"Yeah, it feels great," she said.

Chapter Two

As we walked into the shop, I heard my grandmother telling someone, “They’re caraway seeds. I’m telling you, honey, you say the words and mean them, then you put these in his path and the man won’t go anywhere.”

The woman fidgeted nervously, and I could tell it was her first time in a place like this. I looked closer and recognized her as my fifth grade teacher.

“Oh, all right,” she said shakily. “If you swear it will work.”

Zanna took her hand comfortingly, and the woman stopped shaking.

“Trust me,” she said.

I waited until she left to step behind the counter and ask, “What was that all about?”

Priscilla stopped to listen as well.

“Wasn’t that, Ms. Adams?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Zanna said. “Her husband has been running around with his secretary and she doesn’t want him to leave her.”

“Oh, that’s awful,” I said.

“You want to know the worst part?” Zanna asked. “I think I sold the herbs to the secretary to perform a love spell.”

“Oh, shit,” Priscilla said. “That’s really bad karma.”

“I didn’t know,” Zanna said, with a wave of her hand, which caused her long sleeve to nearly hit her nose. Zanna enjoyed the fact that she didn’t fit in. She always wore long flowing fabrics, dresses and skirts with odd patterns, and shirts with ruffles. It suited her.

I also preferred something sheer, flowing, and feminine. But it was cold. Screw trying to look the part.

“Kiss My Ash,” a young woman said as she approached the counter.

“Excuse me?” a lady answered from across the room.

“Right behind you,” Zanna answered.

That was the patented name of her remedy for ashy skin. Zanna had a remedy for just about everything. I snickered to myself while Priscilla went off toward the back to make some more bath wash. The name we marketed it under was “Clean Slate.” We all felt it was appropriate.

The back of Zanna’s shop had a complete kitchen. It was here that most of the ingredients were mixed and spells cast. I opened up a laptop and sat down at the small table to order supplies while Priscilla started mixing ingredients into a large pot on the stove.

“Did you hear about Trisha?” she asked conversationally.

“Trisha who you went to school with?” I asked. When she nodded I said, “I couldn’t stand her.”

“Neither could I.” She almost giggled. Priscilla tucked a strand of her long blond hair behind one ear and said, “She bought an ugly toad spell.”

“She did not!” I said, looking up from my supply list.

“Sure as hell did. I sold it to her yesterday afternoon while you were getting ready for the party.”

An ugly toad spell is designed to make a person see someone else as repulsive. It is most often purchased by jealous girlfriends.

“Is she screwing a married man again?” I asked.

“How should I know? I just sold the potion. So, are you going to bless the ingredients tonight?” she asked.

I glanced at the counter full of ingredients ready for me to make into candles. Priscilla’s talent lay in cleansing and what I called purifying magic, while my grandmother could do just about anything. So could I, really, but my *gift*, as Zanna called it, was for love magic. In fact, many of the spell kits and potions in the store were now wearing tags which read, “prepared by Sandra.” Word had traveled pretty fast when people started to realize that my love spells were more potent than others.

Priscilla teased me by saying that it was because I was a slut at heart. I laughed to myself as I ordered more glycerin and answered, “I’ll do it this afternoon.”

After lunch, Zanna asked Priscilla, “Can you watch the front for me? I need to run an errand.”

“Sure, where are you going?”

“To collect some coffin dust.”

“What?” I yelled from the back. “You can’t be serious. What in the hell would someone need that for around here?”

“Maybe someone’s mummy is bothering them,” Priscilla teased.

“Old Mrs. Pringle is paying me top dollar to dig up some dirt from her husband’s grave.”

“Why?” I asked.

“She wants to send it overseas so that his spirit can protect her daughter in London. She’s convinced that her landlady is evil,” Zanna answered with a shrug.

While my sister watched the front and Zanna left the shop to look for coffin dust, I went to the back to work my magic. Our top-selling products were a line called “Aphrodite’s Caress,” and they were all made by me. The potion I would be working on this afternoon was designed for the practitioner to bathe in before performing love magic.

I’m not sure how to explain what I do, or why my magic is so powerful when it comes to love. Maybe it’s because I hunger for it so very much. In the back of the shop I have a large cauldron. Yes, I actually use a cauldron. This is where I prefer to mix some of my larger batches of potion. I closed the door, drew the shades, and lit my candles. The candles I used had been ritually blessed and were a soft shade of pink to symbolize romantic love.

As I began to mix ingredients into the cauldron, I closed my eyes, stirring while I pictured John before me ... and I let myself feel love. Then I chased away his image from my mind and focused instead on whoever purchased this potion being able to attain that kind of love. All of the emotions this spell was designed to evoke coursed through me and into the potion.

I poured in rosewater and sprinkled some dried rose petals over the bubbling mixture. Both red and pink petals swirled as I stirred the liquid. After the mixture had come to a boil for several minutes, I held my hands over the cauldron and closed my

eyes. I let everything that I felt flow from me to the potion. I pictured it falling from my fingertips like specks of glitter and gold and sprinkling itself across the potion.

I had just finished when the door opened and I nearly collapsed. I believed in putting all of the energy I could into my work.

“You give too much,” Priscilla said from behind me.

“People deserved to get what they pay for,” I said weakly.

“They’re not paying for your soul,” she said.

I moved to sit down while the potion cooled and she said, “I hate to ask, but someone out front is asking for you.”

I poured myself a glass of ice water and walked out front to find one of the most frightened looking women I’d ever seen. She was tall, with short blond hair, and piercing blue eyes. She couldn’t have been over twenty and I wondered what could cause such a young woman such severe distress. Then I remembered that I was her age when John had died.

“How can I help you?” I asked.

“Are you Sandra?” she asked, glancing around nervously.

“Yes, that’s me. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I only came here because ... um ... I heard you were the best,” she stammered.

“The best at what?” I asked.

The woman looked down at her hands as if her fingernails were the most interesting thing in the world. Then she suddenly blurted out, “I think someone is trying to kill my mother!”

“Then you should go to the police,” I answered at once. “Honey, I’m not a bodyguard,” I added softly.

“But you don’t understand,” she said as tears began to stream down her cheeks. “I don’t have any proof.”

Priscilla handed her a tissue while I asked, “Has someone threatened your mother?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Does she have any enemies?”

“She’s not exactly popular, but I don’t know of anyone who stands out.”

“Then why do you think someone is trying to kill her?” I asked.

The woman stopped crying then and looked at me steadily with those piercing eyes.

“Because I’ve seen it in my dreams. There’s a presence ... something dark,” she whispered, leaning in close to the counter.

My grandmother was a dreamer, so I understood. Me, I’m a feeler. I can feel when something is wrong, but I don’t always know exactly what it is.

“Have you seen a face, or any particular location?” I asked.

She looked so relieved.

“You believe me.” She sighed.

“Of course we believe you,” Priscilla said.

“I knew that witches would understand,” she said then added quickly, “No offense, of course. It’s just that I don’t normally come to places like this. But I couldn’t tell my mother. She’d never understand.”

I took in her designer handbag and shoes and suddenly understood that she didn't mean "places like this" exclusively in relation to witches. This woman was not used to buying handmade items from local stores.

"You mean this was your first time seeing something like this?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "Well, the first time since I was little."

"How old are you, Miss ...?"

"Jenny," she supplied, and extended one hand while she wiped her eyes with the other. "And I'm eighteen. I just graduated last month."

Okay, so I was close. The makeup had made me overestimate her age slightly, but I knew she was young.

"What exactly do you see?" I asked, getting back to the subject.

"I see my mother," she began. "She's in a dark place, but I don't know where. I just know that someone forced her there and they're going to hurt her." She was beginning to sound panicked again.

"I'll be honest with you, Jenny. I'm not sure what to do. Since you don't know a name, or even have a picture in your mind of whoever is trying to hurt her ... most of the spells I can think of probably won't work." I paused for a minute while Priscilla stepped around the counter and patted Jenny on the back.

"I've got an idea," I said, as I stepped around the counter and headed toward the back shelf. "Here."

"A house-protection spell?" Priscilla asked.

"It's the best I can do," I told her. "You do still live in the same house right?" I asked Jenny.

"Yes, we do."

"This comes complete with instructions," I told her as I handed Jenny the small basket of ingredients. "You do this tonight," I added.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "But what about when she leaves the house?" she asked.

"Have her wear this," I said as I reached for an amulet on the shelf. "This was ritually charged during the last full moon. If she wears this, it will protect her."

"But ... she doesn't believe," Jenny said as she took the crescent moon-shaped charm.

"Then just tell her it's a gift," Priscilla suggested. "Don't tell her what it's for."

"She doesn't have to believe for it to work," I explained.

After Jenny left the shop, Priscilla turned to me and asked, "Do you think she'll be okay?"

"The girl or her mother?"

"Both."

"I sure hope so."

I went to the back and sat down in front of the computer again. We needed some more unicorn root, pentagram necklaces, and sage, as well as several other ingredients which were mostly used in spells to keep your lover faithful. You'd be surprised at how much of that kind of stuff we sell. I would have thought that more love and faithful spells would sell around Valentine's Day. Nope. It sold more now, close to the holidays. I guess the closer it got to Thanksgiving and Christmas, people just wanted to be sure they had someone to come home to. And it wasn't just women, though most of our

customers were female.

Every now and then you'd get a man who wanted to buy a love spell. We had several practitioners in the surrounding area who were male and came in every couple of weeks to buy supplies. But other than that, you didn't see many men around here unless they wanted to buy some more dandruff shampoo, or a cure for warts. Priscilla was working on a potion to remove unwanted hair. But so far, it had made our neighbor, who had volunteered, go bald. Fortunately, Zanna was able to help him grow his hair back fairly quickly.

Chapter Three

We got a call from Zanna a few minutes later asking if we could close up. She said she would have dinner waiting for us once we got home. After she'd personally delivered the coffin dust to Mrs. Pringle, she said she was exhausted.

"Sure," I answered. "I've almost got all the supplies ordered. They should be here by Monday."

"Good, cause we're running out fast. I can't believe how much dragon blood has gone up. You'd think it was gasoline the way they keep jacking up the price," she complained.

"Do you want to go collect it yourself?" I teased.

"Hells no," she laughed.

"Then, I'd say it's worth the price," I told her.

By the time I hung up with Zanna, we had another customer. Bless her heart, she had to be the plainest girl I'd ever seen. She had soft brown hair that was cut in a very blunt style just above her shoulders. She also wasn't wearing any makeup, though she looked to be at least sixteen. She was slender and tall. If she'd stood up straight, she might have had the figure of a model. But this girl slumped forward making her tall thin frame look awkward rather than graceful.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I need to be beautiful," she said softly.

I wasn't sure how to respond.

"You mean you want a glamour?" I asked.

"Yes," she said then quickly looked away. "It's just for Friday night. We're having a dance at school and ..." her words trailed off.

"It's not permanent," I told her.

"I want them to see my inner beauty," she said. "You know, the real me, not just some dork who sits next to them in class. I don't want to lie to anybody. I just don't want them to all be hung up on my flaws ... at least for one night."

"Is there someone in particular you're concerned with?" I asked.

"Well, maybe this one guy," she said. "But mostly, I want everybody to see that there's something more to me."

Over the next few minutes she introduced herself as Gertrude and I explained to her how the glamour worked. After that, I sold ten charm bags and two "Marriage To Hell" kits. We sell a lot of what some practitioners would call "dark magic." However, in order to avoid bad karma, they all are packaged with a warning. It tells whoever might use the spell all about the law of three and states that we will be held harmless, that we have merely provided the tools, but their wicked intention is what will work the spell. It was Zanna's idea and, so far, it had worked.

When it was finally time to close up shop at four o'clock, Priscilla walked over and handed me a bundle of braided sage. She was holding an identical bundle which we lit and walked with through the store, allowing the smoke to waft into every corner of the

building. We did this every day at closing time to cleanse the shop of any negative energy or bad spirits that people might have brought in with them.

Once we were done I noticed how tired Priscilla looked. Even though she was older than me, she'd never really looked it. Most people thought we were non-identical twins. She is taller than me, around five-foot-seven, and bigger, though she's nowhere near overweight. I'm just too thin, or so she tells me. Her long blond hair that had started out looking glossy was now stringy and held back with a rubber band. I wondered how bad I looked.

"You look tired," I said softly while I checked the locks again.

"You too," she said with a yawn. "Did you get everything ordered?"

"Mostly. I just need to gather some herbs from the greenhouse when we get home."

On our way home Priscilla chattered on about what Zanna was probably cooking for supper, but I couldn't get Jenny and her mother off my mind. Her fear had been so real. Whatever it was that girl saw, it had her convinced that her mother was in danger. There was something else I also wondered about.

"What do you suppose she meant when she said her mother wasn't very popular?" I asked, interrupting Priscilla's fantasy about fried chicken.

"I dunno," she said, shrugging. "Maybe she's just a cunt."

I laughed and accidentally ground the gears on our old pickup truck. It wasn't much to look at, but it got good gas mileage and was our vehicle of preference for work.

"If you can't find 'em, grind 'em," my sister teased.

"Shut up," I said with a laugh. "In all seriousness, that didn't bother you?"

"Course it bothered me," she said. "But we did all we could do. We can't go home and stand watch over her bed or anything."

"Yeah," I agreed. "That would be a bit extreme. I just felt so bad for her." The silence seemed to stretch between us until I asked, "If you could have prevented mom and dad's death, you would have ... wouldn't you? I mean, if you saw it coming like she did."

"Sure," Priscilla said as she scooted over and put her arm around my shoulders. "We both would have. But we were kids, Sandy. There was nothing we could have done. You can't compare this girl to yourself. First of all, this *girl* is grown. If something does, God forbid, happen to her mother, then she'll be all right. It's not the same situation at all."

She was right, really. But it still bothered me.

Priscilla got out to open the garage, while I drove the old blue truck inside. The temperature had already started to drop, and I wrapped my arms tightly around my body as I walked around the side of the house. It had been the most beautiful day. The air was cool and crisp, the sky was a pale blue, and the leaves were all turned for the season. Cool air just feels somehow cleaner to me. I breathed deeply as we walked underneath the kitchen window.

"Chicken," Priscilla said with a smile.

When we stepped onto the porch she stopped me and pulled down the neck of my sweater.

"Wow."

"Oh, no. Does that mean it turned some freaky color?" I asked.

“No, it looks great. Really. You’ll be healed in time for the wedding for sure.”

I’d forgotten about that. I was to be Karen’s maid of honor, and my pale yellow dress did not have anything to cover my throat.

“Thank goodness,” I sighed.

“How about thanking me?” she teased.

Once we stepped inside, the scent of roast chicken and fresh vegetables wafted toward us, and Jenny and her mother were forgotten. Coffee for breakfast and no lunch had left me absolutely famished. We helped Zanna finish up and had just sat down to eat when she asked me, “So, how was the bachelorette party?”

I stumbled and dropped my fork as I answered, “Oh, it was all right.”

Zanna eyed me suspiciously before asking, “And how was the wildlife?” I knew without being told that she meant the hot dancers who were mostly shape-shifters.

“There was a hot weretiger named Alex,” I supplied while I got myself another fork.

“Weretiger, huh? I haven’t seen one of those before. He seem any different than a werewolf?” she asked casually as she pulled back her long dark hair. Only the streak of gray near her left temple really gave away my grandmother’s age.

“No,” I answered. “Same aura, same electric sort of energy about him.”

“Interesting,” she said as she cut a large piece of chicken and put it on my plate.

Zanna had always been cautious about Lucy’s. It was the only vampire-run business close to us, but it had been there a long time. I wasn’t even sure how long, but it seemed to have always been around. I wasn’t sure which of the vamps actually owned it. Most of the vampires in the area worked night jobs in one club or another. Very few businesses would hire them, even if they were a tourist attraction. Sure, there were laws against discrimination, but people were still prejudice.

Werewolves didn’t fare much better. Most places required a blood test to even bag groceries nowadays. They’d hire someone with drugs in their system over someone with lycanthropy. Personally, I didn’t think that was fair, but nobody asked me. I was all for the equal rights movement for monsters that had started up a few years ago. But when it came right down to it, a mob could go out and stake a vampire or lynch a werewolf, and nobody really cared.

Of course, a lot of people still felt the same way about witches. But our status dramatically improved when compared with vamps or shifters. My grandmother’s attitude toward vampires had always surprised me. She never outright claimed to hate them, she just didn’t trust them. She’d never expressed an opinion one way or another about shifters.

Soon the conversation turned to our increasing market for love spells and I could finally relax and eat.

“I try to tell people that love is often like magic. It takes the path of least resistance,” Zanna said as she poured herself a glass of white wine.

I preferred red, so I shook my head when she offered me a glass.

“You mean that’s why a man will screw anything that walks and still claim to love someone else?” Priscilla asked cynically.

“Because it was easy? Yes. Men in particular are susceptible to choosing the path of least resistance. Not all, mind you. But most simply lack the discipline required to turn down a piece of ass.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Zanna had never even tried to sugar coat her language around us as children. After all these years, I still thought it was funny sometimes.

We had just put away the dishes when someone started knocking frantically at the back door. It was never good news when anyone came to our back door. That meant they didn't want to be seen here. After all, this was a house full of witches. We walked together and looked down the hall. Ms. Adams could be seen clearly plastered against the glass of the small window on the back door.

"She looks desperate," Priscilla said at the same time I said, "I don't want to deal with this tonight."

"She's got money in her hand," Zanna said. "Let her in."

By the time Priscilla reached the door, Ms. Adams was clawing at the glass.

"You've got to help me," she said, stumbling through as Priscilla opened the door.

"What's happened?" Zanna asked, moving forward to put her arm around the smaller woman.

"He's left me and gone to her," she wailed.

"Now, Mandy," Zanna said soothingly to Ms. Adams. "You calm down and tell me *exactly* what happened. I can't help if I don't know the whole story."

They led her into the kitchen and I followed. She sat down at the table, shaking like a leaf and running her fingers nervously through her short red hair.

"I did what you said with the caraway seeds," she began. "I sprinkled them where I knew he would walk and I s-s-said the words," she stammered. Then Mandy Adams started to cry as she said, "But I put them at the front door, and he went out the back. He walked right past them and he went to her!"

"What do you want me to do?" Zanna asked soberly.

"I want him to leave her. I want her to disappear from his life and I don't care how."

"But ..."

Ms. Adams slapped down what looked like five hundred dollars onto the table.

"I don't care how," she said. "I'll take the karma for this. I want that bitch gone and I want her gone now! Here," she said as she pulled pictures of herself, the secretary, and her husband out of the inside of her coat. "Use these if you need to. I heard that sometimes a picture helps. I've even got a piece of her hair," she added, wiping more tears.

She pulled a small plastic bag out of her pocket and said, "I found it on his coat."

"I understand you're hurting," Zanna said softly. "But I'm not going to curse her. I won't do that."

"Then make her go away. Make her leave him alone. I want him to only think of me, to forget her entirely. I want him to love me so much that there's no room for anyone else."

With her last words, Ms. Adams crumpled forward and started to cry harder.

"That, I can do," Zanna almost whispered. She reached out and took the money, slipping it into her apron pocket as she told Priscilla, "Go get the dragon's blood."

"So, you'll help?" Mandy asked. "What are you going to do?"

"First we'll do a spell to break them up. Then, we'll work a spell to strengthen your relationship, to rekindle your fire," she explained.

“Sandy, I know you’re tired, but we’ll need you for the second,” she said to me.

I let all of my weariness show in my face and Ms. Adams blurted out, “I’ll pay another five hundred if you’ll stay. Please.” She reached out and took my hand. “He’s all I’ve ever wanted. I’ve loved him since we were children, like you and John. Surely you can understand that,” she pleaded.

About this time, Priscilla returned with parchment paper, dragon’s blood, and black candles.

“I understand,” I replied. Then I turned to my grandmother and said, “I’ll rest for a minute while you do the first. Call me when you’re ready.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank you!” Mandy said.

“Thank me when he comes back,” I said, and left the room.

I took a small basket with me to collect my ingredients while they moved Ms. Adams into the sitting room and cleared the floor to cast a circle. There was a small sunroom which connected to our greenhouse. This was where we left all of our herbs to dry. Many were stored in jars and labeled, while others were still hanging from the ceiling.

I started filling the basket with bittersweet, cinnamon, and columbine. Next I took out some small bottles of magnolia and jasmine oil, as well as patchouli incense. Then I took the basket through the greenhouse with me into my part of the house and gathered up the candles, along with some of my love potion. I kept one of my closets full of ritual candles. I took out a bundle of red and pink taper candles and placed them into the basket.

Dealing with Mandy’s bad marriage wasn’t high on my priority list, but she trusted me enough to want my help, so I would give her my full concentration. I put down the basket and stripped as I walked into the bathroom. The guesthouse was built several years after the main structure and had the only garden tub on the property. After running some hot water in the tub, I filled it with Priscilla’s ritual bath wash and pinned up my hair. I needed to cleanse myself of anything that might interfere with my spell work tonight.

I wanted to relax, but there was something in her eyes I couldn’t refuse.

Chapter Four

Desperation. That's what I'd seen on Mandy's face. I knew what it felt like to be desperate to reclaim the one you loved. The difference here was that Mr. Adams was still alive.

After bathing thoroughly, I dried off and put on the sheer white robe I normally wore for such rituals. Most of the time, I preferred to work my spells skyclad, but I didn't know how Mandy might take that. Then again, the robe hung almost completely open in front. I might as well have been naked.

On my way back through the greenhouse, I paused to collect some red and pink rose petals. Just as I walked through the door, I found Priscilla with her hand reaching for the doorknob.

"We're ready for you," she said.

As much as my sister and I might like to joke with one another, we were always very serious when it came to magic. She led me solemnly into the sitting room, where Zanna had already closed her circle. She was wearing a long black robe, and Priscilla's was white.

I motioned for Mandy to sit in the center of the floor as I gathered up my supplies, placed the candles around us, and began to cast my circle. I lit some more patchouli incense and as I moved around the circle, I anointed each candle with jasmine oil, to aid in healing her broken heart, as well as magnolia oil, to elicit fidelity.

Next, I scattered the rose petals inside the circle, before I moved a small fireproof plate and parchment in front of me and knelt facing Mandy. I wrote both her and her husband's names on the paper and used it to start a small fire.

"Every time I add an ingredient, you take a sip of this," I instructed, handing her the love potion.

She nodded her agreement, and with the circle complete, I began the spell.

I straightened my back, and let the robe fall to the floor. To my surprise, Ms. Adams didn't so much as flinch.

"Ancestors past, strengthen their love and make it last," I said. With these words, I added the columbine to the fire to return their lost love, and Mandy took a sip of the potion. "See that her love is still true. Light their flame to burn anew." With this, I added the cinnamon to elicit feelings of passionate love and lust. Mandy continued to sip the potion and I noticed a fine line of sweat beading on her forehead.

"Holding to each other they shall be, to walk together through all eternity. Let their love for each other continue to grow, greater than any could ever know. No temptation or evil shall cross their hearts, for both are not whole—they are merely parts. I ask that you give them this every day, let their love be strengthened in every way."

With my final words, I added the bittersweet to heal her broken heart and to help release them both from painful memories.

"Finish it," I ordered Mandy, and she turned the potion up.

I threw back my head as a rush of power left me and the flames of every candle

leapt toward the ceiling. Mandy gasped as my power flowed over her and I nearly collapsed. By the time I closed the circle, I was completely exhausted. I slipped back on the sheer robe and walked into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of wine while Priscilla cleaned up.

“That was incredible,” Mandy whispered.

“Yes, very impressive,” Zanna commented, raising an eyebrow at me.

She showed Ms. Adams to the door while Priscilla walked back in with one of my favorite wraps and threw it around my shoulders.

“Thanks,” I said with a smile. “I was freezing.”

“You can barely see them,” Priscilla said, lifting my hair to examine the bite marks on my throat.

“Oh, shit,” I whispered and pulled the wrap up around my neck. I’d forgotten about the bite again.

“That was most impressive,” Zanna repeated as she came back into the kitchen and went to pour herself a glass of wine. “Ah, screw this. You girls want something stronger?”

“Sure,” Priscilla said.

“Whether you’ve noticed it or not, your powers are growing,” Zanna said, taking out a bottle of tequila and a bag of limes.

“What are you making?” I asked.

“Margaritas,” she said, smiling.

“It’s late,” I said.

“All the more reason to have a drink after having to deal with crap like this in the middle of the night,” Priscilla said.

“Cheers to that,” Zanna added and tossed my sister the limes. “Start slicing.”

“Thanks,” I said wearily, “but I’ll just take the wine and go to bed.”

“Suit yourself, dear,” Zanna said.

I left my sister and grandmother with the tequila and took the bottle of wine and a glass back to my room. The guesthouse was, in fact, a complete house, but I still called it my “room.” After finishing one glass of the sweet red wine, I decided to take a shower. Even though I had bathed earlier, I always felt like washing again after performing magic.

I raised the bedroom window and took a deep breath of the fresh night air. Boy, did I ever want to sleep. I could barely keep my eyes open while I washed my long hair. I knew that if I went to bed with it wet, it would be full of waves by morning, but I didn’t care. Just as soon as I dried off, I crawled into bed, wet hair and all.

I had barely closed my eyes when a soft, velvety voice whispered, “You should eat something.”

I sat up quickly with the sheet clutched to my chest. There in the far corner of my room sat the vampire I’d met last night. Worse still, he looked very comfortable in my oversized chair, as if he’d been sitting there for a while and taking in the sights. Like when I’d walked in a few minutes ago. Butt-naked.

There was a time, not so long ago, when I simply didn’t understand what made the undead so attractive. But as I looked at Navarre casually draped across my furniture, I was beginning to understand. He was wearing black pants, and from the way the moonlight reflected off the fabric, I guessed them to be silk. The shirt he wore was either

really blue or black, I couldn't tell for certain in the faint light. The shirt fell open to reveal a good portion of his chest, as well as what appeared to be a scar on the left side, right over his heart. My breathing grew faster, and I recognized the smell of his cologne. The muscles low in my stomach clenched in response as if he were wearing pheromone dust.

He smiled at me as though he could sense my arousal. Of course, it wasn't a very friendly smile. It was the barest curling of his sensuous lips. It was a very knowing, very masculine smile, and one I wasn't prepared to witness.

Finally I forced myself to ask, "What are you doing here?"

"Checking on you," he answered softly. "After that run-in you had with the werewolf last night, I wanted to be sure you were safe."

"Why?"

"Can't a vampire do anything nice without having it questioned?" When he asked this he smiled, but once again it wasn't quite friendly.

"Don't take it personally," I said, sitting up straighter so that I could get a better look at him. "It has nothing to do with being a vampire. It's about a strange man letting himself into my house." He laughed, and I tried not to shiver but failed miserably. "How did you get in?"

Navarre leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. As he did this, tendrils of his long auburn hair fell over his shoulders. The soft sound of those strands of hair sliding over his shirt seemed to be magnified, and so did the fluttering of my heart.

"Through the window," he answered at last.

Then another, more chilling thought crossed my mind. "How did I get home last night?" I asked. My voice sounded frightened and breathy, and I hated myself for it. But, there *was* a vampire sitting in my bedroom. Every now and then I suppose I should cut myself some slack.

His smile held many wicked promises as he said, "I brought you home. Why, don't you remember?"

"No, I ... thought I must have called a cab," I said breathlessly.

Then all of the sudden I couldn't breathe. I had let a strange man bring me home. No, I corrected myself. Not just a strange man, a strange *vampire*! Priscilla was right, I had taken too many chances last night.

"It's all right," Navarre said softly as he sat down beside me.

I jumped, because I never saw him move. He was just suddenly beside me, with his hand resting on my bare shoulder. His fingers were cool to the touch, and yet they burned me.

"No, it's not all right," I said between gasps.

"Sshh," he soothed. "Slow down or you'll hyperventilate. Everything is all right," he repeated. "I'm not going to hurt you." With these words he began to rub my back. I believed him. I can't explain it exactly ... but there was something in his touch. Whatever he was here for, it wasn't to cause me harm.

"You don't understand," I said once I had regained some control. "I let a stranger bring me home and I don't even remember it. Surely you can understand how much that frightens me."

"Yes," he said, still rubbing my back.

Then another unsettling thought came to me. "I thought you had to be invited

before you could come in”

His emerald eyes were kind as he told me, “You invited me in last night. Of course, I will not hold you to something you said in such a state if you do not wish it so. You were very drunk.”

“Oh, no,” I groaned. “What else don’t I remember?”

But Navarre only laughed in response. Once again, the sound made me shiver. Navarre had the sort of laugh that said so many things without saying anything at all. His eyes had the same effect.

“You really should eat something,” he said.

He reached out to brush the hair back from my face and I trembled. I couldn’t help myself. He paused as his hand brushed across my cheek. His eyes were focused on my lips as if they were the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen. As if by command, I felt my lips part as Navarre ran his thumb across my bottom lip.

Finally, I pulled my mind back to what he’d just said and asked, “Why? I’ve already had dinner.”

He withdrew from me and I felt cold in a way that had nothing to do with the open window, or the breeze, which made goose bumps across my flesh.

“I knew a wizard once,” he said, “a long time ago. Even if he’d already eaten, spell-casting took a lot out of him. He usually needed a snack afterward.”

“How did you know I had been working spells? I never told you what I am.”

“Maybe not,” he answered. “But you told me your name, and I did some checking around.”

“You spied on me.”

“I asked people who you were,” he corrected. “And when I got here tonight, the air practically crackled with magic. Knowing that you were a witch ... I guess I assumed you were the one responsible.”

I considered his words for a moment before saying, “There are some strawberries in the fridge.”

I clutched the sheet tighter, pulling it right up underneath my chin to make my point. If he thought *I* was going to get them he was out of his immortal mind. After a minute, Navarre rose from the bed and started to walk down the hall. His laughter floated back into the room, and this time I knew he was laughing at me. Let him. He’d already seen the show once tonight. I wasn’t planning on any re-runs.

I thought about getting up and putting on a robe, but I’d seen how fast he could move. I didn’t dare take a chance. Instead I tucked the covers down around my thighs and pulled the comforter up as high as the sheet. My comforter was dark green with golden leaves stitched in an intricate pattern across its surface. The sheet was a much paler shade of green, but they both reminded me of his eyes. As I smoothed my hand across the fabric I couldn’t help but think how wonderful his auburn hair would look spilled across the matching pillowcase.

Then I had a sudden vision of him lying naked beside me with the sheet just barely covering him. His long hair slid across the pillowcase as he turned toward me, making the same sound it had earlier when sliding across his shirt.

“Shit,” I whispered, shaking my head.

Was that a fantasy ... or a memory?

“Here you are,” Navarre said.

Once again, I hadn't heard him move, but he was standing at my bedroom door with a bowl of fresh strawberries and a glass of water. He sat them on the table beside my bed before asking, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied.

I was still shaking a little, but this time it was from the cold. Navarre noticed this, and went to build a fire while I ate. Apparently, he wasn't going to leave until he knew I had eaten something. Even with him in the room, the thing I longed for most was sleep.

"This is beautiful," he commented, running his hand over the old stone fireplace in my bedroom.

"Thank you. There's another one in the living room." I paused. "But, you've probably seen that already."

I swallowed hard, trying not to imagine what else he had already seen.

"My great grandmother had them flown in from Scotland years ago. They're from an old castle," I explained. Navarre seemed fascinated by this and paused while I finished the story. "The ancient castle was in ruins, and she loved their Celtic designs."

"Your great grandmother must have been very wealthy," he said, turning back to the fire.

"Not really. She had an ongoing affair with a rich Scottish baron," I explained.

"Candid, aren't you?" he said with a laugh.

"Hey, there's no reason to lie about it. Grandma Selena was a total slut. Everybody knows it."

"Well, they do now," he said playfully. "There's no shame in simply being what you are."

"Maybe not," I said.

Chapter Five

While Navarre finished building the fire, I had the privilege of watching him. To say that he was the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen would have been an understatement. Words could not accurately describe what he made me feel. His skin was flawless, except for the scar on his chest. And yet he wasn't perfect in an untouchable sort of way.

Some people who look flawless also look untouchable and cold. Neither of those words could ever be used to describe this vampire unless you were talking about his temperature.

"How long have you been a vampire?" I asked suddenly.

He turned to me then, and the firelight dancing in his eyes seemed to reflect something from within. I was afraid that if I got too close to Navarre, I might get burned. But just like a moth, I was drawn to him. I wanted him to be close to me, and then suddenly ... he was.

I blinked and Navarre was sitting beside me on the bed again. Then I realized what had happened. He had captured me with his eyes. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts before it could happen again. He looked a little disappointed, but he still hadn't answered my question.

"I'm sorry," I said. "If the question was too personal ..."

"A very long time," he interrupted. "It has been a very long time," he whispered as he leaned in close to me. With these words, I knew he wasn't just referring to his long life and I felt myself blush.

Navarre leaned in close enough that I thought he would kiss me and my heart leapt into my throat. Had I kissed these lips before and managed to forget?

"Do not worry," he whispered against my lips. "When I brought you here last night, I tucked you in," he said softly as he brushed the tip of his nose against mine, "and left you safe, sound ... and unsullied."

With his last word, Navarre rose from the bed and walked toward the window.

"Goodnight," he said, and this time his smile was friendly.

He ducked down in order to step through the window, and in a moment he was gone. I lay there for a minute and wondered if I was relieved or not that I was "unsullied." The fact that I couldn't decide said a lot. I scooted off the bed with the sheet still wrapped around me and closed the window, along with the blinds. Then I put on a nightshirt and tried to sleep.

* * * *

Morning came and, to my surprise, I had actually rested after Navarre left. I also remembered while I brushed my teeth that I had noticed a slight accent when he spoke last night. It wasn't very strong, and I only picked it up when he said certain words.

While I combed my hair, I wondered where he was from, and what he had been before I knew him. I also realized that I regretted not knowing him better. Part of me felt a little embarrassed. But then I reminded myself that John had been dead for nine years. There was nothing wrong with me being attracted to someone else. Sure, I'd dated since

his death, but nothing serious. I wasn't a saint, but I hadn't been spreading myself around like butter either.

There were just very few men I found interesting enough to go out with, let alone sleep with. The closest I had come to a serious relationship was when I dated one of my old high school friends a couple of years ago. Chad was a sweetheart, but I couldn't be with him without seeing John when I closed my eyes.

I didn't want to replace John, and I didn't want to be alone. One thing I knew for sure, I needed someone who didn't go away just because I closed my eyes. I pulled on a pair of blue pajama pants underneath my long white nightshirt while I looked for my slippers. It was too cool in the mornings now to walk through the house without slippers. Well, it was for me at least. Priscilla said I was the most cold-natured person she knew.

I opened the door to the kitchen as quietly as possible before I heard Zanna snoring all the way from the living room.

"Never mind," I sighed and closed the door hard enough to make Priscilla jump. She had been asleep with her forehead resting on the kitchen table.

"I hope you haven't been drooling there, because I'm about to cook breakfast," I told her.

"Oh, my head," she moaned.

"Did you guys enjoy your *bottle* of tequila last night?" I asked while I tossed the empty bottle into the wastebasket.

Priscilla only groaned in response. I set a bottle of aspirin in front of her along with a glass of ice water. She smiled at me weakly.

"That was stupid," she said softly, and I knew it was because her head hurt so badly. She was almost whispering.

I started gathering up ingredients to make breakfast, but tried not to bang any pots and pans together in the process. Scrambled eggs were always what my sister wanted to eat after she'd had too much to drink the night before. Zanna, on the other hand, would come in about an hour later, drink stale coffee, smoke a cigar, and be fine. Our grandmother was only sixty-five, but she didn't look a day past forty-five, and most days she had more energy than I did.

I had just cracked the first egg over a bowl when Priscilla said, "Who were you talking to last night?"

I nearly dropped the shell onto the floor.

"I wasn't talking to anybody. I took a shower and went to bed." It wasn't easy to lie to my sister, so I kept my back turned. As long as she couldn't see my face, she couldn't read me like a book. "Besides, I thought you two were in here drinking."

"We were. But Zanna made this really great batch of margaritas and I went to ask if you wanted to reconsider joining us."

"That was sweet of you," I said and forced myself to smile. There was no way she could know Navarre was in my room if I didn't tell her. I busied myself with fluffing the eggs before I poured them into the pan.

Their loud sizzle almost kept me from hearing her next comment. Almost.

"I could have sworn I heard a man's voice."

I thought maybe she was setting me up. Maybe Pris knew someone was in my room, and she just wanted me to fess up. But when I looked at her I changed my mind. She looked like she was daydreaming, staring off into space as she sighed and said, "He

sure had a great voice, whoever he was.”

I laughed. “Pris, I told you. There was no man. You must have imagined it. How much did you drink before you came to get me?”

She seemed to think it over. “Well, we *were* on our second pitcher.” She shrugged. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’m just horny.” She laughed and then grabbed her head in pain. “Why don’t you take me to meet your vampire?”

Boy was that ever the wrong suggestion. The look I gave her must have said it all.

“I didn’t mean so that *I* could hook up with him,” she amended quickly. “I just meant that since we’ve identified my problem, and we know where to find a solution ... might as well.”

I continued to eye her suspiciously while stirring the eggs.

“You’re jealous,” she teased.

“I am not. I just don’t see why it’s all right for you to be attracted to a vampire and not me. I’m just ...”

“Jealous,” she interrupted. “Don’t worry, Sandy. I’m not after your vampire.”

“He’s not *my* vampire.” But even as I spoke the words, I turned back to the eggs with a smile. I couldn’t let her see the way those words thrilled me, especially since I couldn’t explain my reaction. Why *did* the thought of Navarre being mine excite me so much? Was it his ravishing good looks ... or was it more the thought of being ravished by *him* and not his charm? I hadn’t been this excited at the thought of calling someone mine since ... since John and I were married.

“Are you all right?” my sister asked. She was standing beside me now, and put her arm around my waist. Since she’s taller than me, she rested her head against mine rather than on my shoulder.

“I’m fine.”

“You’ll never stop thinking about him,” she said. “But one day, it’ll make you smile instead of cry.”

I offered her a sad attempt at a smile and said, “Your eggs are ready.”

“Come on,” she said. “You need to get out some more. Karen’s bachelorette party didn’t really count. That was just a bunch of women on a mission to get drunk and get laid. Well, except Karen. She just wanted to get drunk.”

“And this isn’t?” I snickered.

“No, this isn’t.”

“Then what is it?”

“We’re just looking for a good time.”

“I’m still surprised you didn’t come,” I said. “You never did say why you didn’t want to go with me.”

“And get eaten by a werewolf in an alley?” she taunted.

“Hey, whoever said that Little Red didn’t *want* the wolf to eat her?”

Pris laughed and nearly choked on the glass of orange juice she’d just poured.

“Oh, yeah. You sounded like you were really enjoying that little *encounter* before the vamp came along.”

“So why didn’t you want to come?” I pressed while I poured myself some juice and started the coffee.

“You remember Mary, right?”

“Sure. Short little blond. Wasn’t she in your class in school?”

Priscilla nodded. “And do you remember my boyfriend Ron?”

“Yeah. I thought you guys were pretty serious and then out of nowhere you dumped him. I never understood that.”

“I didn’t dump him,” she said abruptly.

I froze with my hand on the egg carton. “What happened?”

“He went to a party and had sex with Mary Jenkins. He *fucked* that dirty little slut at one of Karen’s parties!” She paused to grab her head again and to my surprise I realized she was crying. “So obviously, going to another of her little *get-togethers* wasn’t exactly appealing to me.”

“Honey, I’m sorry,” I said, taking a seat beside her. “I never knew. Why didn’t you tell me?”

She just shrugged and wiped her eyes on her shirtsleeve.

“Because he was the only man I have ever been able to see myself having a future with ... and just like that, it was all gone. It’s so fucking pathetic.” She sniffed. “I’m thirty-three years old and I don’t even have any decent prospects.”

“That is *not* pathetic. My sister happens to be a beautiful, vibrant young woman and I won’t let you talk trash about her.”

“Shut up,” she said, but now she was smiling. “So, what do you say?”

“About what?”

“Take me to Lucy’s tonight.”

“You two going back to that club?” Zanna asked as she walked into the room. She moved slowly, like the room might get away from her if she walked too fast.

“We were thinking about it,” I said. “Can I get you anything?” I made the offer even though I knew what she would say.

“No thanks, dear. Coffee is fine. I think I’ll go out on the porch and have a smoke.”

At some point she must have showered and changed the night before, because she was wearing a pair of cream-colored pajamas and smelled of fresh lavender when she passed me. I watched my grandmother remove her long wrap from the bench beside the front door and waited until she stepped outside before I spoke again. I watched as she lit the small thin cigar and brushed back her long dark hair. Mine looked exactly like it, just without the gray streak.

“Don’t talk about it too much around her,” I cautioned. “I don’t think she likes the idea at all.”

“No, if she *really* didn’t like it, we’d know it by now. I think she’s just not happy about it, but she doesn’t really hate the idea,” Priscilla reasoned. She got up to pour herself a cup of coffee and asked, “Are you coming in to work today?”

The shop was only open till noon on Fridays. It was the day I had always looked forward to most. I enjoyed my work, but I also enjoyed having the afternoon off. I leaned back and stretched before answering.

“I was thinking of taking out my bicycle and gathering up some supplies. I think you two can manage for a few hours without me,” I teased.

“You bum,” she said with a laugh. “Where are you riding?”

“I dunno. I kind of wanted to go over our old trail again. You know, the one we used to ride when we were kids. Of course, it’s all paved now, but it’s still beautiful this

time of year.”

“Take your cell phone,” she said. “And while you’re there, gather up some wolfsbane.”

“Pris, that was an isolated incident. He just attacked me because I was the first idiot to step out the door.”

She laughed. “Well, you might be the first idiot to ride by today on a bicycle. Be sure to wear your little red hood.”

After breakfast, Priscilla did the dishes while I went to get dressed. It was already seven-thirty and she had to open up the shop at eight. I decided to skip a shower, since I’d just taken one before bed. Bed. The thought couldn’t cross my mind without remembering Navarre sitting in my bedroom by the fire. I made the bed quickly, and tried not to think once again about how good his red hair would look against my green comforter.

After straightening up a bit, I went over to my closet and opened the shutters. Instead of normal doors, my closet was designed to look like large shutters. It was different, and I liked it that way. I selected one of my favorite pairs of jeans. They were old and nearly worn through on the knees, but they felt like wearing PJs in public. Next, I pulled on a long sleeved white T-shirt and over that a long crocheted sweater that nearly hung to my knees. The sweater was pale pink, almost white. I selected a scrunchie that was about the same shade and pulled my hair back into a loose braid.

“There,” I said to my reflection. “Ready to go.”

Well, almost. I had to find my shoes. I wasn’t about to put on makeup to go riding in the woods. Then again, I was blessed with my grandmother’s complexion. You’d think that having clear skin in school would have been a good thing, but my sister and I were teased constantly. Most people always thought I was wearing makeup, and that was bad when you were a little girl. Honestly, all I ever put on was lip gloss and some powder. Lipstick was for special occasions, and today wasn’t one of them. I stuffed a tube of lip gloss into my pocket and pulled on my boots on my way out the door.

Chapter Six

My old bike was parked in the garage beside the truck. I'd had the same one since middle school. Since I was only five-foot-three, I'd never needed anything bigger. It was white with a pale lavender seat and a little white basket attached in front of the handlebars. On the front of the basket there was a yellow daisy, a pink one, and a blue one. Priscilla teased me about it, but I rode it anyway. Besides, the basket came in handy for holding my cell phone and gathering herbs in the woods.

It was an absolutely beautiful day. The air was even cooler than the day before, the sky was so blue it sparkled and every time the wind whipped past me I could hear the rustle of dried leaves. It was the perfect day.

I waved back to Zanna as I rode down the driveway and turned right. We lived on the outskirts of town, which was to the left. No one in Westley had wanted very much to do with my ancestors. The house was located far enough that they didn't have to see the witches, but we were close enough for someone with an emergency to run to as a last resort. Growing up around here wasn't easy, though things seemed to have gotten better as I got older. Maybe it just wasn't as much fun to pick on a grown woman. Things changed a lot after I married John. People seemed to accept me as normal for a while, especially once werewolves and vampires were recognized as legal citizens and not just something out of a horror movie.

The announcement that werewolves were real had come as such a shock that the idea of witches became old news. People hadn't even had time to get over that shock before the vamps came out of the coffin, so to speak. But what had really shaken things up was when the mayor announced that not only was he a werewolf, so was his son.

Vampires were still a bit more taboo. There either weren't as many of them as the shifters, or they just kept their numbers really quiet. I think it was a little bit of both. Westley was a small town, and they were gradually accepting these new changes, but begrudgingly so.

When my sister and I were little, we were the bad guys. People would come running to my grandmother for spells, but just like last night, they came to the back door. She had opened her shop just before John died, right around the time that the shifters came out. Surprisingly, it did wonders for business.

The shop had been open for ten years now and most of the people in town didn't cross themselves when I passed by anymore, or warn their husbands and sons not to look me in the eye. It always amazed me that I'd had any friends at all growing up. However, there were a few open-minded families in town, just not many.

Karen's family was one of the oldest and richest in the county. When Priscilla and I first came here after our parent's death, I was surprised at how nice she was to me. But after a while I realized it wasn't a cruel joke. Karen genuinely liked me. Since she was so popular, everyone else at least treated my sister and I decently, most of the time.

Her mother, Denise, was a real fruitcake. She was one of those people who wanted to be a witch or a psychic, or *something*, anything besides normal. Well, much to

her dismay she was human, but Karen's mother was anything but normal. However, she was one of my grandmother's few friends.

Everyone knew Zanna, but most people still seemed to be afraid of her. She'd had a sister once too, my aunt Willow. She didn't talk about her much. All I really knew about her was that Priscilla looked just like her and she died before I was born. At least, that's what we'd been told. I wasn't even sure how she died. I think my grandmother just found it too painful to talk about.

As I played over these memories in my mind, I turned the corner and saw a man running full-out down the narrow road. Trees lined each side, and orange and yellow leaves littered the path. It would have been beautiful except for this strange sensation I felt when I looked at him. I got the distinct impression that he was running away from something.

"Are you all right?" I called.

He stopped, resting his hands on his knees to catch his breath. As I drew closer he answered, "I'm fine. I was just getting some exercise."

"Oh, you looked like you were running for your life to me," I said, laughing nervously.

"I'm fine," he repeated, still gasping for air.

He was about six-foot-three and wearing gray sweats. They were the same color as his short cut hair. When he looked up at me, he had the palest brown eyes I'd ever seen. He was wearing glasses with a thick black rim, which he removed to wipe sweat from his brow.

"My name's Jules," he said, extending the hand he hadn't wiped his face with. "I work at the hospital."

I assumed he meant Wildflower's Memorial Hospital because it was the only one within an hour's drive of Westley.

"Oh, are you new to the area?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "I live just down this road." He pointed in the direction he had been running.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Jules was it?"

"Yeah, I've got a brother named Verne," he said with a laugh. "Our parents were very strange. Look, I hope I didn't frighten you."

"No, I just thought you were in trouble." Actually, he had unnerved me a bit, but what he didn't know was that I had my hand on a can of pepper spray in my basket the whole time I rode toward him. I had noticed it during my ride. Obviously, Priscilla thought I might need some extra protection.

"Well, that was kind of you. I'd best finish my run. My shift starts in a few hours," he said, checking his watch.

I waited until Jules was out of sight before I turned and rode back to the fork in the road, taking the path which led away from his house. I had nothing in particular against him. I just didn't want to be alone with him again. However, the more I thought about my reaction, the more foolish I felt. The man hadn't done anything to give the impression that he was anything more than a nice person.

"Pris," I said, laughing to myself. "You've got me thinking everyone is a mass murdering werewolf."

Just to be on the safe side, I *did* gather up some wolfsbane while I was there, for

the store. When I got back it was only ten o'clock, so I decided to do some gardening. I was wearing rubber knee boots, leather gloves, and had probably smeared dirt on my face while trying to scratch my nose when I heard a car door close.

It was too early for my family to be home, which meant that someone wanted something. No one visited us unless they wanted something, and it was never tea and polite conversation. I stood up to stretch my back, just as a man came walking around the side of the house.

He was around five-foot-eight and nicely put together. He had dark brown hair, and blue eyes that sparkled all the way across the yard.

"Hello there," he called, and I couldn't help returning his smile. Whoever he was, I liked him, and not just because his jeans fit better than my gloves.

"Marcus McClain," he said, extending his hand in greeting as he approached.

I removed my right glove and took his hand.

"You must be Sandra," he said.

"My reputation precedes me," I joked.

"Oh, not in a bad way," he added quickly. "Did I catch you at a bad time?" he asked, taking in my appearance with a glance.

"Not really," I said. "My back can't take anymore."

"Can I help?"

Well, that was a surprise.

"You can carry that basket in for me, if you like."

He picked up my basket of herbs and said, "Lead the way."

Normally, I wouldn't have let a strange man follow me in the house, but I had a good feeling about Mr. McClain. I couldn't always explain my feelings, and I had no explanation for this one. He had kind eyes, and gave off a sort of warmth. Whatever he wanted, it wasn't to cause anyone harm.

Once we were inside, I washed my hands while he sat the basket on the kitchen table.

"So, what can I do for you, Mr. McClain?"

"Please call me Marcus. I'm the new chief of police," he began.

I jumped slightly. I had never been in trouble with the law, but I naturally distrusted people with authority.

"Is something wrong?" I asked cautiously.

"No," he said quickly. "At least, not with you." His smile seemed nervous and strained this time.

"Please, have a seat," I said. "Can I offer you anything? Coffee, tea?"

"No, thank you," he said.

I watched Marcus sit down and immediately start to fidget. I sat down beside him, reached over and took his hand. The gesture seemed to surprise him, but he didn't resist. When he looked in my eyes, I could feel his turmoil, but I still didn't know why he had come to me.

"What's wrong, then?" I asked softly.

"I've been having bad dreams," he said. My expression must have shown how surprised I was. "What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, go on," I told him. "It's just that you're the second person in the past three days to come to me complaining of bad dreams. Tell me about them, please."

His expression took on a haunted look, and Marcus suddenly looked older than I had first estimated.

"I keep seeing someone being killed," he said finally. Marcus glanced at me as if he were seeing if I believed him.

"Do you know who it is? Is it a man or a woman?"

"I'm not sure," he said, and seemed to visibly relax when he knew that I didn't think he was crazy. "All I see is a knife at first. The hands holding it are wearing black gloves. They could be a man or a woman's hands. Next, I see the knife coming down. I see it hit flesh, but that's it. Then I see blood. A whole fucking lot of blood."

He leaned forward and rested his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please forgive the language."

No one had cared how they spoke in my presence in a very long time.

"It's all right," I said softly. "Is that all you see?"

"Yes," he said. "That's all."

Marcus sat back again and ran a hand through his hair. The gesture reminded me of my sister. How I could be looking at an attractive man and think of her was beyond me. Sure, it was the same nervous gesture she often made, but *come on*. He was really cute.

"How long have you been having these dreams?" I forced myself to ask.

"About a month now," he said. "And it's the same dream. I see all of those things almost every night now. I had the first dream around the first of last month. It really upset me, but I got over it. I thought it was just a dream. Then, a week later it happened again. Now, it happens nearly every time I close my eyes, even to take a nap." He sighed deeply before saying, "I'm exhausted. Can you help me, Ms. Ashton?"

It had also been a long time since anyone called me by my married name. This guy was just full of surprises. Apparently, he knew all about me, but I knew crapola about him.

"I think so," I said. "Please, call me Sandra."

"Thank you," he said. His smile left me to wonder if he was thanking me for my help, or my permission to drop formalities.

"Follow me," I said, and walked toward the cupboard. While I looked for the right ingredients, I asked him, "Aren't you a little young to be the chief of police?"

"Thirty-five," he said with a shrug. "It's not like there are people beating down the door for the job. Not enough excitement for most guys my age, I suppose."

"Did you move here recently?"

"Yeah, about a year ago."

Wow. How was it that I hadn't heard of him in a year? Or noticed him in town? I suppose I just didn't pay enough attention.

"And what did Mrs. McClain think of the move?"

Boy, that was obvious. Real smooth move. And why the hell did I want to know, anyway?

"There is no Mrs. McClain," he said.

I realized then how very close he was standing behind me, and when I turned around, I found him only a breath away. He reached out to touch my face and I nearly jumped into the jars behind me. It took me a second to realize he was wiping the dirt from my face.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said with a smile. “It’s just that I’ve wanted to do that since I saw you.”

“Clean my face?”

“Touch you,” he said softly.

I knew then that he was going to try to kiss me. I turned my head, and he got my cheek instead. I’m not sure why I did it. He certainly was attractive, and I couldn’t deny my attraction. When his lips touched my cheek I felt my heart flutter. He was so close that I could feel the heat rising from his body. All I had to do was reach out and touch him.

But I didn’t. I reached up with the plastic bag of herbs I was holding and pressed them against his chest.

“These should help you sleep,” I said softly.

Marcus pulled back then, but to his credit he didn’t look embarrassed.

“I didn’t mean to ...”

“You didn’t,” I interrupted. He seemed relieved when I smiled.

I gave him the directions for how to make a tea with the herbs, and was just about to show him out when Priscilla and Zanna came walking in.

“Well,” Priscilla said, looking Marcus up and down. “I was wondering what was for lunch.”

Chapter Seven

“Priscilla,” I scolded, while Marcus laughed. “I’m sorry. This is my sister, Priscilla.”

“Marcus McClain,” he said as he shook her hand.

“And this is my grandmother, Zanna.”

He shook her hand also.

“Marcus is the new chief of police,” I supplied.

“And to what do we owe the pleasure?” Zanna asked.

“I’ve been having some trouble sleeping,” he said. “Sandra was just helping me out.”

“No offense, Mr. McClain, but we’re not exactly used to having the police ask for help,” Zanna said.

Her comment was polite, but its meaning was unmistakable. Marcus smiled and yet again it had a warming effect on me. I noticed my sister also couldn’t seem to help returning his smile.

“I meant no harm,” he said softly, “and I meant no offense. I’m not from here. As a matter of fact, I’m from Colorado, which is just about as far from here as you can get.” He laughed and it seemed to lighten the mood. Then, he reached out and took my grandmother’s hand as he explained, “My mother was a witch, the first in our family for several generations. I know what it’s like to be ridiculed and distrusted, especially for things that are beyond your control. You can rest assured, I mean you and your family no harm.”

I watched as the fine lines across Zanna’s forehead relaxed, and she sighed with relief.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to be rude. Would you like to stay for lunch?”

“Thank you, but I’m afraid I can’t,” he said, smiling warmly once again. “I have some other business to attend to.”

He thanked me again for my help and we all stood at the door to watch him leave, or rather to watch him walk.

“I don’t know about you, but I liked the way those jeans were wearing him,” Priscilla teased.

“Well,” Zanna said while she threw her wrap over the back of a chair, “that was certainly a surprise. A policeman who had a witch for a mother.” She laughed. “That’s a first in this town.”

* * * *

To my surprise, little was said about the handsome new police chief the rest of the day. Priscilla could talk of little else besides going to Lucy’s. So that evening, the sun had barely gone down before we set off for the club. I had an old black Cadillac for occasions where it would be embarrassing to pull up in a pick up truck. Priscilla tossed

me the keys while we gave ourselves one last look in the mirror.

I had refused to wear a dress this time. I felt so much more exposed in a dress than I did with my legs fully covered. Or maybe I just felt more naked after knowing that Navarre had seen me that way. I was wearing black slacks, which fit reasonably snug without being tight. The matching top I wore had thin straps and a little bit of silver embroidery and lace around the top. My hair was pulled up in a loose twist that allowed a few wavy strands to fall around my face and neck. I'd let Priscilla talk me into more makeup than usual and red lipstick. I felt like a prostitute, but when I looked in the mirror, I had to admit that she was right. I did look nice, even with the long silver earrings she'd picked out.

I watched my sister putting the finishing touches on her makeup while I readjusted my top *again*. Priscilla's breasts were smaller than mine, and I'd always envied that. She could wear any top she wanted to, and her B-cups had no problem. However, it was hard to find a strapless bra for a C-cup that actually held up anything. And going without a bra was out of the question. I could tell by the way her slinky blue top fit that she wasn't wearing one. She was also wearing black pants, but unlike mine hers were cut low enough to expose a bit of midriff.

We grabbed our coats and left through the back door of the guesthouse. Zanna knew we were going out, and I just didn't want to talk to her about it anymore. It would ruin the mood.

"How in the world did I let you talk me into open-toed shoes in this weather?" I asked Priscilla on our way across the yard to the garage. "I'm freezing."

"You won't be once we get some alcohol into our systems," she said through chattering teeth.

While we sat waiting for the car to warm up a few minutes later, I was beginning to think this was a really stupid idea. My opinion didn't change much until we pulled into the parking lot almost an hour later. The club was about forty five minutes from our house, but I had driven slower than usual. Halfway to Lucy's it started to rain.

I got out first and opened the umbrella before coming around the car for Priscilla.

"Wow," she whispered as I helped her out of the car.

Wow was right. Lucy's didn't look very different from any other upscale night club, but it practically hummed with otherworldly energy. Anyone who was even remotely gifted could feel it, and maybe even some who weren't. It was almost like the building had a heartbeat and everything inside of it pulsed to the same erotic rhythm. Speaking of rhythm, I could hear the music as we approached. I couldn't make out all of the words, but something about the beat made me want to take my clothes off. Just so we're clear, I am *not* prone to getting naked in public places.

By the time we got inside we were shivering and wet, and not in a good way. However, that was only until we looked up and saw Alex onstage. I don't remember the man at the door taking my coat and umbrella. I only know that a few minutes later they were gone.

"Oh, my God," Priscilla gasped.

I, on the other hand, was speechless. Was the weretiger really this sexy last time? I remembered him speaking to me in the hallway near the restrooms. I don't remember what he said because I was very drunk. But he winked and purred, and the memory made me smile. He was still dancing to the same techno remix of an already dirty song, but the

remix seemed to be even more sexual. Or maybe it was just the gyration of his slender hips. I'd never wanted to be a pole so badly in my life.

He moved just right and I watched a bead of sweat slide over his curves, and all the way down one lean thigh. He thrust his hips and my heart thumped painfully against my ribs. "Oh, my God" sounded pretty accurate to me because I wanted to fall down and worship Alex right then and there.

As his routine drew to a close I took Priscilla by the hand and finally found my voice. "Come on."

I led her through the crowd toward the stage.

"Where are we going?"

"To meet Alex," I said with a smile.

"You know him?"

"Sandra," he said, smiling wickedly as he descended the steps beside the stage. The muscles of his thighs flexed as he moved and suddenly the room seemed too small. Was it hot in here, or was it just him?

"You remembered," I said, trying to hide the effect his nearness was having on me.

"Of course," he answered, taking my hand.

He was so warm. His energy seemed to flow all the way through my body and down to my toes. I might have still been shivering, but it was no longer with cold.

"Short red dress, Wednesday night," he said with a wink.

"Nice memory," I replied suggestively.

"You're not so bad yourself."

"Alex, this is my sister, Priscilla."

I was just about to say something else. I'm sure it was clever and flirtatious, but it was completely lost the moment I caught sight of Navarre. And so was I. Marcus was cute, but my little crush on the police chief couldn't hold a candle to what I felt when the vampire looked at me.

I remembered how Priscilla had teased me about him being "my vampire," and suddenly the thought didn't embarrass me anymore. It didn't even make me blush. On the contrary, it sounded like the best suggestion I'd heard in a long time.

"Sandra," he whispered, rolling the "r" slightly.

My name sounded like something exotic when it fell from his lips. His lips, was there ever anything more inviting? He was across the room from me and yet I had heard him whisper. Was this some of the powers of the vampire I had heard of? Had he actually said my name out loud or merely whispered through my mind?

One moment he was talking with one of the dancers across the room when I caught his eye. The next, he was standing beside me and, this time, I knew he spoke out loud because my sister gasped when she heard him say my name.

"That voice," she practically moaned.

"Yes," he said softly. "It is a gift I inherited from my master."

"Have I heard it before?" she asked, and I had never heard my sister's voice sound so helpless and lost, yet so uncaring of that fact.

Navarre took her hand and for a second I thought she might faint as she looked into his eyes. After a moment he bent low over her fingers, never breaking eye contact as he answered, "No."

Priscilla nodded her acceptance of this as if it were gospel while Navarre kissed her hand. She may have accepted his answer, but I knew hypnotism when I saw it. Last night he had pulled some of the same tricks on me. But being able to observe this with someone else convinced me that not only was Navarre very powerful, he wasn't the least bit afraid of using his vampire wiles in public.

"My name is Navarre," he told her smoothly as he released her hand.

"I'm Prissy, um, Pristine, um ..."

Everyone laughed and while Priscilla attempted to regain her composure I supplied, "This is my sister, Priscilla."

"Ah," he said, and his voice was like velvet once again. "I knew I saw some resemblance." Actually, my sister and I look nothing alike. She's tall and blond, while I'm petite and brunette. Her hair is straight as a board, and if I don't use a flat iron, mine is as wavy as my grandmother's. Her eyes are blue, and mine are brown. The only features we both have are a very fair complexion and full lips.

As if he'd read my mind, Navarre responded almost instantly, "You have the same aura."

Just then, the werewolf he had been talking to approached us. He was wearing a blue shirt which hung completely open in front and a pair of black dress slacks. His hair was short, wavy, and black.

"Navarre, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Isidoor has a question."

"Tell him I'll be there in a minute," he said. However, before the werewolf could deliver the message Navarre said, "Ladies, this is Verne, one of our new dancers."

"Verne?" I asked. "Do you have a brother named Jules?"

"Yes," he said with a smile. "You know Jules?"

"Well, not exactly. I nearly ran him over with my bike this morning," I teased.

"Harley?"

"No, ten speed."

Verne laughed and I knew in that moment that I liked him. I could sense his werewolf energy the minute I looked at him, but when he laughed I could also feel his good nature. Verne was a nice guy. As soon as I understood this, I had a great idea. Why not leave him alone with my sister? It wasn't that I was trying to get rid of her, but I'm sure Priscilla hadn't wanted to come to Lucy's to enjoy *my* company.

"Will you excuse me?" I spoke to everyone. "I think I'll go get a drink."

"Then you can accompany me," Navarre said, lacing his arm through mine. "I was just on my way to the bar."

He was wearing silk again, and I couldn't resist the urge to run my hand over the fabric. I could feel the muscles of his forearm underneath and suddenly the thin fabric felt like a prison which separated his flesh from my touch. His shirt was black, and hung completely open to the waist, where it was tucked neatly into a pair of matching slacks. In place of a collar or buttons, the shirt had ruffles all down the front. It somehow added to the impression that Navarre was definitely not from this century. It was also one of the sexiest damn things I'd ever seen.

"I thought you needed to speak with someone named Isidoor," I said breathlessly.

"He's the bartender," Navarre replied as he began to lead me in that direction.

As we turned away I heard Priscilla ask Alex, "If I ask real nice, can I pet you?"

He growled in response, but it was a sexy, playful sound. With my mind at ease

as to whether she minded being left alone with a wolf and a tiger, I turned my attention back to Navarre. No matter how much I might have denied it to my sister, I had wanted to get him alone. I'd even thought of how I might accomplish it. The problem was I didn't know what to say to him, but I could look at him for all eternity.

Priscilla and I used to play games when we were little, like asking one another if you had to give up one of your senses, which would it be? I had never had an answer then, but I knew now that I would give up anything but my sight.

"This will only take a moment," he assured me while he stepped around the edge of the bar.

I took a seat near where he stood and got a better look at the man who must be Isidoor. He was unlike anyone I had ever seen. He was also tall, like Navarre. He was obviously not a vampire, yet he obviously wasn't human. His hair was long, and so blond it looked white underneath the lights. His features were also very unique. He had high cheekbones and an almost pointed chin. His mouth was full and his smile seemed easy enough. He was dressed in silver, and all of him appeared to have a slight glow. When he turned to look at me, I saw that his eyes were purple.

"Sandra, this is Isidoor," Navarre said.

"Charmed," he said as he shook my hand.

I watched as Isidoor tucked his hair behind one pointed ear.

"Elf?" I asked cautiously.

"Fairy," he replied with a smile.

Chapter Eight

“Verne said you had a question,” Navarre prompted.

“Yes,” Isidoor said, nodding to me politely as he turned to face the vampire. “I was just wondering if I should help someone out or not.”

“Who?” Navarre asked.

Isidoor indicated a man in the far corner with a nod. He looked bad. Not just unattractive, but bad. Depression and bad luck were etched in every line of his face. He might have been attractive if he fixed up a little.

Navarre’s eyes narrowed as he took in the man’s appearance also.

“What were you thinking?” he asked the fairy.

“A glamour, nothing serious. I thought perhaps that if he got laid, he might think his luck had changed.”

“Go ahead, it’s fine by me,” Navarre said, dismissing the bartender with a wave of his hand.

“You do realize that’s completely illegal,” I said and immediately regretted opening my mouth.

Obviously Navarre ran this place and I had just undermined his authority. However, it was true. We were allowed to sell spells, even to perform them at someone’s request as long as it was done with their knowledge. However, to make someone a ten when they were really a six was against the law.

“It’s really not that different than beer goggles,” Isidoor said casually. “Only this way, they can still drive home.”

Before I could open my mouth again, Navarre put his arm around me and started to lead me across the room.

“Take a look around,” he said, waving his hand. “Doesn’t everyone look like they’re having fun?”

As a matter of fact, they did. But all I could think of was how wonderful his cologne smelled. It was like the man wore sex on his sleeve. When I looked at him, I thought of sex, and when I wasn’t looking at him I pictured him and thought of sex.

Finally I managed to answer, “Yes.”

“I do what I do for their entertainment,” he explained. “I’m not seducing anyone here against their will, nor am I making them perform any unspeakable acts of any kind. Take the music for instance, you felt it didn’t you?”

“Yes. Wait a minute.” I stopped in the middle of the dance floor and turned to him. “Do you mean to tell me that you enchanted the music? How?”

“With my thoughts,” he said. “It’s really not that difficult. I simply concentrate on what the music makes me feel ... and before you know it, everyone else feels it too.”

Ah, so that song made *him* want to take his clothes off. Interesting. Maybe they should play it again.

“Matthew,” he said, reaching out to stop one of the waiters. “Bring Ms. Ashton a drink, in my office,” he added the last suggestively. “What will you have?” he asked me.

“A heart attack eventually,” I thought. However, what I said was, “A mojito would be great.”

I let Navarre continue to lead me across the floor as I glanced back to find Priscilla.

“She’ll be fine,” he assured me. “Alex won’t eat her.” He laughed. “At least, not without her permission.”

As he opened a door at the back of the room and motioned me forward, I wondered if the same rules applied to me. We walked down a staircase into another level of the club that I hadn’t known existed.

When he saw my surprised expression Navarre explained, “That’s just the top level.” He motioned above us. “Sort of like Purgatory,” he said with a smile.

“And where are we now?” I asked nervously.

“Now,” he purred. “We are on the second level of Lucy’s. Here you’ll find just about every lustful fantasy you can imagine.”

And with his words he gestured around the room. I saw it all, but really couldn’t take in everything that my eyes beheld. This truly was the level for the lustful. This level was even bigger than the club upstairs and all of it was filled to capacity. Vampires stood in corners, their willing victims moaning with desire. There were sofas and pillows scattered about the room, and I dared not linger too long on what was happening there. Music played here too, but it was of a deeper, more carnal nature. You could smell sex in the air and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to scream with revulsion or frustration.

Navarre seemed to feel my turmoil, and quickly led me to another set of doors at the back of the room. As soon as the doors were closed behind us I put a hand to my throat, panting.

“I’m sorry,” the vampire said softly. “I hope you were not offended. That certainly wasn’t my intention. You never really know what you’ll find on that level.”

“So I see,” I gasped.

I decided not to tell him whether or not I was offended, because I really hadn’t decided yet. Navarre must have taken my silence as permission to go further, because he took my hand and led me down another flight of stairs.

When the doors burst open this time, I was greeted by the smell of food. Several werewolves who looked good enough to eat were waiting on guests here and taking their orders.

“What the hell is this place?” I asked Navarre.

“What the *hell* indeed,” he replied with a wink. “Would you like something to eat?” he asked me.

“No, I think I’ve lost my appetite,” I replied flatly.

“Oh, my darling, don’t say that,” he sighed. “I haven’t gotten to lead anyone through these levels in a long time. I thought you would be open minded enough to appreciate what Lucy’s has to offer. What *I* have to offer,” he purred, leaning in closer to me. “Please,” he said softly and he reached out to take my hand. “Don’t reject me so quickly.”

“I’m not rejecting you, Navarre. I’m just not used to walking into a vampire orgy and straight through to a restaurant.”

He threw back his head and laughed and my eyes immediately jumped to the exposed skin of his throat.

“I see what you mean. Most people just take the elevator to whichever floor they choose and skip the rest.”

“You mean there’s an elevator and you made me take the stairs in heels?”

Without asking permission, Navarre swept me into his arms and began to carry me through the restaurant as if I were weightless.

“I prefer the stairs,” he explained.

Next, we entered the largest casino I’d ever seen outside of Biloxi. Here people gambled and spent their money on just about anything you could imagine. He carried me straight through this room to another flight of stairs. Each time someone opened the door as if by command, since Navarre had his hands full, *literally*. I wondered if he summoned them with his mind.

On the next level, he put me down beside him to explain, “This level is a spa. Here you can find just about every treatment you can imagine.”

“I thought the river Styx was supposed to be on this level.” He seemed amused by my observation. “Do you at least have any boiling mud baths?”

“Ah,” he said with a wink. “You’ve caught on to the design. What do you think?” he asked.

I looked up at him and felt that Navarre wasn’t just asking out of politeness. I got the impression that he really wanted to know my opinion.

“I like it,” I said. “But could we skip the vampire orgy next time?”

He laughed. “Surely you are not embarrassed by sexuality so much,” he teased.

“Not mine,” I assured him. “Just everybody else’s.” He laughed again and I asked, “Surely there was some time in your past when you would have been embarrassed to walk in on an orgy?”

He seemed to consider this for a moment before responding, “A long time ago, perhaps.” As we entered the next level he said, “This is where my vampire servants reside.”

“I thought it was supposed to be the level of heretics and flaming tombs.”

His laughter floated across my skin. “You’ll have to settle for a few coffins, I’m afraid.” With these words he gestured down a long hallway to my left. I realized that we were standing in what looked like an underground palace. The lights were dim, and I’m sure he didn’t need the light, but I did. Torches lined the halls in both directions.

“This place is massive,” I said. “And it’s absolutely beautiful. Do they stay in these rooms too?” I asked, as I pointed to the right.

“Those rooms are mostly for shifters, but yes, some vampires stay there as well.”

I was impressed. I’d truly had no idea how many vampires and werereatures were living so close to my home.

“Prepare yourself,” Navarre cautioned as he put his hand on the doorknob to the next level. “This level can get a little rowdy.”

The next level looked like a large arena. It was divided into three circles, almost like a circus. There were creatures fighting in each circle and people betting on all of the fights.

“What’s this?” I asked, yelling over the crowd.

Navarre wrapped his arm around me, shielding me from the crowd.

“This is the PFC,” he said.

“What’s the PFC?”

“Preternatural Fight Club,” he explained.

I turned to the right where a werewolf chose that exact moment to shift form and mangle the vampire he was fighting. I turned my head to avoid the carnage and Navarre held me tightly to his chest.

“We can stay and watch if you like,” he teased.

I looked up to find him smiling as I replied, “No thanks.”

He continued to hold me close as we entered the eighth level.

“This level is reserved for witches and wizards,” he told me.

It looked very much like the top level of Lucy’s. They even had their own private dancers down here. It was quieter than the main room, but just as large and filled with witches and wizards.

“I had no idea how many other witches there were,” I said.

“They come here from all over,” he told me. “We have quarters for them to stay in as well, but space is limited. It’s to the right,” he said. I looked in the direction he pointed and saw another set of doors.

“So, what’s left?” I asked cautiously. “The ninth level of hell was reserved for Satan himself. So what’s on the ninth level?” I asked as we made our way through the crowd to the other side. This time, Navarre led me to the elevator. Beside the doors, there was a panel instead of buttons. He placed his left hand over the panel and his hand seemed to sink inside of it as a green light scanned his fingers.

When the doors opened he turned to me with a wicked grin and answered, “I am.”

He reached for me, beckoning me forward, and I stepped into the elevator. I fought the urge to put a hand over my heart, as if that gesture would keep it from pounding so fiercely.

Navarre placed his hand against the small of my back and to my surprise his touch calmed me. Don’t get me wrong, he still turned me on something fierce. But my heartbeat slowed to a more bearable rhythm.

The doors opened, and I found myself staring into the atrium of what looked like another wing of the palace where the vampires slept upstairs. Long columns reached to the ceiling on either side, yet the space was completely open in all directions. I looked up and couldn’t even see the ceiling in the dim light, only darkness above the columns. Well, at least that explained the long elevator ride.

A massive fireplace blazed from the right corner of the room. The floor reflected the firelight so well, that I thought at first it must be made of glass. However, I took a step forward and realized it was highly polished marble. The furniture was lush, and much of it was antique. There were two large sofas in the room. One faced the fireplace directly, while the other was turned at an angle. They were both tan and looked like suede.

Navarre led me into the room slowly, giving me time to take it all in. On our way toward the fire, we passed another strange looking chair. The design wasn’t the odd part, but the material. It was dark red and slightly wrinkled. I ran a hand over the back, and it felt like rough leather.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Dragon’s skin,” he told me.

I withdrew my hand from the chair and continued to glance back at it as we walked toward the fireplace once more. The room was filled with odd pieces, yet nothing

overpowered the room. In a word, it was decadent.

“Please, have a seat,” he said, indicating the sofa which faced the fire.

I sat down and nearly sank into its surface.

“Wow, talk about comfortable,” I said with a sigh, stretching out my legs over the rug underneath the sofa. I’m sure I didn’t want to know what large animal the rug was made of, so I didn’t ask.

“I assure you, the rest of my home is just as inviting ... if you would care to see it?” Navarre asked seductively as he propped against the mantle. His hair seemed to glow in this light, and almost matched the fire.

“Are you trying to get me in your bedroom?” I asked. When he only smiled in response I informed him, “I’m not drunk enough for that yet.”

He stepped to the left of the fireplace and pressed a button on a small call box.

“Matthew,” he called. “How about that drink?”

In less than a minute I heard a soft swooshing sound and knew that something was now inside what looked like a small cabinet beside the call box. Navarre reached inside and took out my mojito.

Chapter Nine

“What service,” I said, smiling as I reached out to take the drink from Navarre.

“We aim to please,” he said softly as he took a seat beside me.

“And what a big glass,” I said with a laugh.

“We also aim to get you drunk,” he teased.

The vampire sat close enough that we weren’t exactly touching when he stretched his arm across the back of the sofa, but we were close. His invitation was clear. If I wanted to be near him, all I had to do was close the distance.

I watched him for a moment while I took a sip of the drink. Not only was it good, it was *strong*. But, I wasn’t complaining.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. “Is this not the way you wanted to spend your evening?”

“It’s not what I had planned,” I admitted. “But I’m not complaining. I’m sitting in front of the fire with a cold drink, and staring into the eyes of the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. Looking at you makes me truly appreciate my eyesight. So, you’re right when you say this is not how I planned to spend my evening. But you’re wrong if you think that makes me unhappy.”

I’m not sure what made me tell him that, but it was all the truth. We were both adults. I saw no reason to lie to him. Come to think of it, I didn’t even want to. But, I also didn’t know if I could let myself do all of the things I *did* want to do.

He smiled his appreciation for my candid remarks and said, “Thank you. I’m glad you do not find your surroundings disagreeable. Including me.” With these words he smiled and I was warmed this time by the gesture. I knew then that Navarre was giving me a glimpse into his real self. He was letting some of his barriers down, and I liked that. To be completely honest, it turned me on.

“I haven’t brought anyone here in a long time,” he told me.

“Do you trust me?” I asked.

“Am I wrong?” he questioned.

“No. I would never betray the man who saved my life.”

He smiled his approval once again. It wasn’t a full smile, but rather a subtle curve of his sensuous mouth. “I knew you were honorable,” he said. “I could sense that about you. You don’t meet a lot of people who have any honor anymore.”

“That’s the truth,” I said, taking another long drink from my glass.

“Things must have been hard for you,” he said. “Growing up in a small town and being a witch.”

“It wasn’t easy, but it could have been worse. I did at least have a few friends. As a matter of fact, I was here with one of them Wednesday.”

“Really? Which one?”

“Well, the crowd was mostly her friends. But the tall leggy blond, that was my friend Karen. She was one of the few people who treated me decently when I was growing up.”

“What was the occasion?” he asked.

“Oh, it was her bachelorette party.”

By this point in the conversation I had drunk maybe four ounces of the mojito and was already starting to feel dizzy.

“I trust everyone had a good time,” he said, making it a question.

“I think so. I haven’t heard from her since, but I’ll see her at the wedding tomorrow.”

“You have a wedding to attend tomorrow, and you’re out getting drunk tonight.” His laugh was soft and masculine and it seemed to tickle my ears. “I take it you don’t care much for weddings.”

“What would make you say that?”

He raised one eyebrow and gave me a skeptical look in response.

“All right, fine, I hate weddings. I’d rather go to a funeral any day. Not that I enjoy people dying,” I added the last quickly. “It’s just that ... people are so *fake* at weddings. No one naturally smiles that much. I honestly don’t want anyone to die, but at funerals people just seem to be more real. They don’t worry so much then about what everyone must think of them, or if they look perfect.” I sighed. “I guess I just hate having to pretend to be happy when I’m not.”

Navarre seemed to consider my words for a few minutes before he asked, “How long has it been since you were happy?”

“A long time,” I answered softly. “But this can’t be how *you* wanted to spend your evening, hearing about how unhappy I am.” We were both quiet for a few moments before I said, “I’ve been meaning to apologize to you for last night. You came by to check on me and I was rude.”

“It’s understandable to not want a strange man in your bedroom,” he said.

“Yes, but I could have been nicer to you. You *did* save my life, and you *had* been invited in before.”

“But you didn’t remember inviting me,” he pointed out.

He said something else, but I didn’t hear. All I could do was watch his lips. What else didn’t I remember? I knew we hadn’t had sex, but had I kissed him? Had I touched those full perfect lips and was now unable to remember the sensation? What a shame. I watched Navarre as he turned back to look at the fire. However, he was by far the hottest thing in the room. He tucked a stray hair behind his ear and my eyes leapt to the exposed flesh of his neck once again. Then I noticed something else—he didn’t have a pulse.

“The first night I saw you,” I began softly. “I watched the pulse in your neck. I couldn’t seem to help myself.” And with this confession, I put down my drink and moved closer to him. “But now, I don’t see it.”

I was close enough now that my thigh brushed against his. Navarre didn’t stop me as I pressed myself against him. His arm which had been resting on the back of the sofa closed around me slowly as he moved me into his embrace.

I reached up to touch his face and ran my thumb across his lower lip as he had done to me the night before. His lips parted in invitation and I stretched upward to meet them.

“Have I kissed these lips before?” I asked softly.

“You would have remembered,” he assured me. His breath was a tender promise

against my lips.

“Why isn’t your heart beating?” I asked.

Navarre reached for my right hand where it had been resting against his thigh. He caressed my knuckles lightly before kissing them and I sighed with pleasure. I couldn’t remember the last time someone kissing my hand had given me such a thrill. I watched with rapt fascination as he opened the front of his shirt wider, exposing more of his beautiful body. He placed my hand directly over the vicious scar on the left side of his chest.

The smile he offered me now displayed a tenderness I hadn’t expected. I’m not sure what I expected once I was alone with him, because I had never been in a situation like this before. But the fire in his eyes was no longer just a reflection from the hearth.

Navarre leaned closer to me once more as he whispered against my lips, “Maybe it just needs a reason.”

The moment his lips touched mine I knew he was right. We had not kissed before. No one could forget kissing Navarre. His touch was so soft, so gentle against my lips. The fire had warmed his skin and I wanted to wrap his body around me like a blanket. Slowly, he pulled my bottom lip between his teeth, sucking it gently until I cried out. The next moment, he devoured me. It was as if the vampire had been waiting for that small helpless cry. Without saying a word, I had given him my permission to proceed.

His lips parted mine with an expert touch as his hands roamed down my back, and underneath my shirt. His tongue penetrated my mouth and every muscle between my legs jumped. I moaned, no longer bothering to hide the fact that I wanted him.

While his hands continued to caress my back, I moved in order to press myself more firmly against him. I wanted to touch as much of him with as much of me as possible. I put both my hands inside his silk shirt, savoring the way he felt beneath my hands. Never had my hands touched such perfection, nor had my eyes beheld such beauty in a man. Then I reminded myself that Navarre was no ordinary man. He was a vampire.

I rose to my knees beside him and straddled his waist, never breaking contact with his lips. When I finally withdrew from him to catch my breath, I began pulling the shirt out of his pants. To my surprise and delight, Navarre helped me.

His green eyes sparkled with mischief as he took hold of the hem of my shirt and lifted it over my head. My heart was beating so fast now I thought I would faint any minute. I don’t think I had ever been so excited at the thought of sleeping with anyone in my life. Actually, *sleep* was the furthest thing from my mind.

I brushed back his long hair, sending auburn strands over the back of the sofa as he tossed back his head. I bent low over his neck and nipped gently at the tender flesh. He moaned and I gripped him tighter with my thighs.

“How did you know I liked to be bitten?” he gasped.

“Lucky guess,” I replied teasingly. Truthfully, I’d just wanted to know what Navarre tasted like. “Mmmm,” I purred as I continued to nibble at his throat.

Faster than I could blink he had me on my back, sprawled across the sofa. His hands were entwined through my hair as his mouth sought mine once again.

“Let me take you to bed,” he whispered against my throat. He lifted up enough to look into my eyes as he said, “All you’ve got to do is say yes.” His last word held a

promise of things to come. It spoke of hours without sleep, and pleasure without guilt.

I couldn't deny that I had wanted this. Since the first moment I saw him I had thought of little else but claiming the vampire as my own. My lips parted as he bent down to kiss me once more. Then, just as I was about to speak

"Navarre."

We both froze, for it was not I who had called his name.

"Navarre, are you there?"

It was coming from the call box beside the fireplace.

He took a deep breath before rising slowly to a sitting position. Navarre reached for me and offered an apologetic smile. While I sat up he walked over to the call box and pushed the button.

"Yes," he answered curtly.

We may not have had time to get his heart beating, but other parts were definitely paying attention. I tried not to blush as I noticed how obviously aroused he was.

"This is Isidoor."

"Yes, what is it?" Navarre asked.

He seemed to be trying to hide his irritation, but he was failing miserably.

"I think you may need to come back upstairs," Isidoor replied. Poor guy, you could almost hear him cringe as he made the request.

"What's wrong?" This time Navarre sounded calmer.

"It's Sandra's sister."

I gasped at the same time that Navarre asked, "Is she all right?"

"She is now," he said. "We think someone slipped something into her drink."

"I'll be right there."

"I should never have left her alone," I said as I pulled on my shirt.

"I'm sure she's fine," Navarre said.

He sat down beside me and put his arm comfortingly around my shoulders. I leaned into his embrace, gently placing one hand against his thigh. It seemed to occur to me then, with his hair falling like an amber curtain about my face that we'd almost gone to bed together. If Isidoor hadn't interrupted, we might not have even made it to the bed ... and I was all right with it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered against his hair.

His shirt was still open and I couldn't resist running my hand inside. Never in my life had I had such a hard time keeping my hands to myself. I let my fingertips roam up his side and over the ridged curves of his abs. There were so many beautiful, poetic words to describe a body like his, but all I could think was, "Yippee!"

But another little voice inside my head kept telling me, "You barely know him. You don't want to rush into anything." Rush, hell. It had been longer than I cared to admit since I'd been with a man. I definitely wasn't rushing. However, when Navarre smiled down at me, I knew I was looking for more than sex. I really did want him to be *my* vampire.

"Don't be sorry," he said softly as he brushed back my hair. I hadn't even noticed it coming undone, but my long hair was now hanging down my back and over my shoulders in waves.

Navarre rose slowly and took my hand, pulling me with him.

"Ready to face the crowd?" he asked. "I'm sure your sister is fine. Otherwise,

Isidoor would have said something more.”

“I’m fine,” I said, though my voice was somewhat shaky. I realized with a pang that I wasn’t just shaken up, I was disappointed.

Navarre placed his hand once more on the small of my back and led me toward the elevator. As he pressed the button for the eighth floor he said, “Tell me one thing. If Isidoor hadn’t called, would you have said yes?”

I reached over and took his hand, and tried to let my smile show him everything I felt.

“Ask me again some time,” I replied softly.

This seemed to please him, because I had yet to see Navarre smile so broadly. He almost flashed me his fangs. I’d read somewhere once that to show fangs in public was a sign of inexperience. However, others had argued that for a vampire to let someone see their fangs simply meant they were comfortable with them. Of course, the article neglected to mention that most people who saw a vampire’s fangs were about to be bitten.

When we reached the next level, Navarre was still smiling as he ushered me toward the other side of the room where we found another elevator. I had walked right past these doors on our way in from the stairs and never really paid attention. Obviously the elevator that led to his floor was private, for it was the only one which required a fingerprint scan to enter.

Chapter Ten

I reached to push the button for the first floor and he stopped me. His hand was now cold to the touch without the fire to warm him. I had to bite my bottom lip to keep from offering to warm him myself.

“What is it?” I asked, looking up uncertainly into his emerald eyes.

“Promise you’ll come back to see me,” he said softly. Even though he had made a request, his tone said it was more of a question. So a dead sexy vampire like Navarre could still be unsure of himself, huh? Well, that made me feel better.

When I didn’t respond immediately he said, “Not just because I’ve asked you and you feel obligated ... but because you want to.”

I reached out with my other hand and pushed the button as I pulled him down to meet my lips. This time, I let my tongue explore his mouth more thoroughly. I ran the tip of my tongue over his fangs. My heart beat faster, but not with fear. Who’d have thought I’d end up as fang bait? *Me*, who only last week was a complete skeptic when it came to the sex appeal of the undead. Yes, I liked him. I had even enjoyed being bitten. Very much.

When the doors opened, Navarre pulled away from me with a reluctant sigh and turned toward the argument in the main room.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your little make-out session,” Isidoor said. “But we have a bit of a situation here.”

Navarre looked at him sharply and, for a moment, his eyes became solid green. That brief flash of power rushed over my skin like ice water. It seemed to have the same effect on the fairy.

“I’m sorry,” Isidoor said quickly, lowering his eyes to the floor. “I didn’t mean to overstep my bounds, but things were getting out of hand.”

Navarre put his hand on the fairy’s shoulder and stepped past him into the room. There was still a crowd, but now they were watching Alex arguing with a man who I guessed to be another shifter of some sort. Alex had him backed against the wall as he growled, “I should turn you over to the werewolf hunter, Lilith.”

“Not Death,” the man pleaded.

Lilith Mercury was the most famous werewolf hunter in the world. Of course, no one had known she existed either until the lycans petitioned for equal rights. Next thing you know, her face was plastered all over the news. Now, she’s the head of an organization called H.A.V.O.C. (Hunter Assault Team for Violators of Werewolf Code), and believe me, they are serious about that shit.

“She’s so hot,” one of the dancers standing behind me said.

“Oh, and who is that werewolf she’s always pictured with?” Priscilla asked.

“He’s *so* sexy! Marco! That’s his name. My goodness, I could fuck the dog shit out of—”

“Priscilla!” I said, cutting off her little speech.

“As a matter of fact, I have her number,” Navarre supplied as he walked up beside

Alex.

“That won’t be necessary,” a woman’s voice replied from across the room.

Her voice was smooth, throaty, and confident. I knew who she must be without looking, but just like everyone else, I watched her walk across the room. She was about my height and built like a centerfold. Her hair was even redder than Navarre’s and it glowed underneath the lights. She was wearing a tight black top and matching leather pants which creaked with her every move.

A tall werewolf with long blond hair followed her closely. I didn’t know who he was, but he was obviously with her. I watched as the famous hunter stepped between Navarre and Alex as she said softly, “I’ll take this one off your hands, gentlemen.”

The man she was referring to went pale as she put one arm around his and the tall blond shifter took the other. As soon as they left the bar, it erupted in noise. The music resumed and so did dozens of private conversations.

“You keep the number for H.A.V.O.C. in your bar?” I asked Navarre.

“She and my master are well acquainted.”

“And it beats the hell out of 9-1-1,” Isidoor said.

“I thought you were supposed to be sick,” I said to Priscilla, putting the werewolf hunter out of my mind. “Weren’t you poisoned or something?”

“Yes, what happened?” Navarre asked.

“I went backstage to help some of the guys who were getting ready for their routines,” Alex said.

He must have changed then too, because he was now wearing dress slacks and a blue silk shirt. Personally, I liked the little black thong better.

“And I was helping at the bar,” Verne said.

“The point is, we left her alone for a few minutes and that guy started talking to her.” With these words, Alex motioned toward the door where the shifter in question had just left. “I walked back over just in time to keep him from carrying her out the back door. She was unconscious.”

“And I walked over in time to keep Alex from gutting him in front of the customers,” Verne added.

“So, how is it that you’re awake now?” I asked my sister.

“Oh, he fixed me up,” she said, pointing to Isidoor.

“It was nothing,” he said. “Just a small potion I keep for such occasions.”

“But this doesn’t happen often,” Navarre assured me. “In fact, this is the first problem we’ve had like this in years.”

“Yeah, most people know better than to try and use a date rape drug in a vampire owned establishment. You never know when you might be slipping something to a master vampire’s woman. Talk about stupid,” Alex said.

“Well, whatever they do to him, I seriously doubt we’ll see that one again,” Navarre said.

“So, I came up here just to see some jackass escorted out?” I asked.

Everyone stopped to look at me. Obviously, I was even worse than Navarre at hiding my irritation.

“Yes,” Priscilla said. Then she turned to Alex and actually petted him as she said, “But I do appreciate you being willing to maul him for me.”

However, Alex was more concerned with what Isidoor must have interrupted.

“So, I take it you guys were having fun? Where exactly did you get off to?” he teased. “Or did you *not* get off?”

“That’s enough, Alex,” Navarre said, but there was a hint of laughter to his voice.

At this time they all seemed to take a really good look at the both of us. The look on my sister’s face let me know she had taken in my disheveled hair and Navarre’s open shirt with a glance and knew *exactly* what hadn’t gone on.

“Your sister really does need to rest,” Isidoor said to me. “The potion wasn’t strong enough to completely dispel the effects of the drug. She’ll still be very tired and maybe even experience some short term memory loss, but nothing serious.”

“Well,” she said as she got shakily to her feet. “Let’s see if I remember this in the morning.” Without further ado she grabbed Alex and laid a kiss on him that should have melted her high heels. When she pulled back, Priscilla wasn’t the only one who staggered.

“Goodnight,” she said to the weretiger with a smile.

“Goodnight,” he said, still looking shocked.

After we slipped on our coats, Navarre put an arm around us both and walked us to the car. It had stopped raining, and the air was even cooler than before. I thought my toes might break off once I pressed the gas pedal.

I helped my sister in the car before turning back to the vampire.

“Goodnight,” I said.

I stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. His smile was everything I hoped for, and I watched him in the rearview mirror until he was out of sight.

“You kissed him on the cheek?” she asked skeptically. “Come on, go for broke.”

“Not everyone enjoys having their tonsils examined,” I teased.

“Okay, fine. Then what exactly did you call that?”

“A promise,” I said, smiling wickedly.

My dreams that night were a delicious torment. A warm body, slick with sweat was pressed against my own. It felt as if more than one pair of hands roamed over my skin. And the eyes that stared back into mine were the darkest I’d ever seen. Navarre was in this dream, I could feel him. But those were not his eyes.

* * * *

The next morning Priscilla happily informed me over breakfast that she still remembered kissing Alex. It would seem that she hadn’t suffered any lasting ill effects from the night before. As a matter of fact, she was dying to go back, especially after I told her the place had a spa.

We both got ready in my room for Karen’s wedding. It was going to take place just before lunch in her mother’s backyard. Half the town was invited. Zanna was planning to attend but she just wouldn’t be in the spotlight like we were. Even though she hadn’t gone to the bachelorette party, Priscilla was still in the wedding. She was one of the bridesmaids, and her pale yellow gown wasn’t nearly as embarrassing as she’d expected.

The matching gown I wore was strapless and close fitting with a short train. Priscilla’s dress was mostly lace with thin straps and a high waist line. Once we arrived, we went straight to Karen’s room where she rushed to hug us both.

“Where were you last night?” she asked.

We both looked at her blankly.

“Don’t tell me you forgot the rehearsal dinner?” The looks on our faces were answer enough. She burst out laughing. “It doesn’t matter. How do I look?”

“Beautiful,” we both said.

It was true. It wasn’t just her dress, or her elegantly coifed hair, it was the fact that she was so happy she glowed. Part of me envied her, but the other part wanted to run screaming.

I smiled to myself as I remembered my conversation with Navarre about weddings. He was right, I did *not* like weddings. But today wasn’t about me so I sucked it up and put on a happy face for one of my oldest friends.

I had never seen so many yellow flowers in my life, especially not this time of year. My elbow length satin gloves didn’t offer much protection from the cold. I tried to keep my teeth from chattering while we helped with some last minute flower arrangements.

While I helped Karen’s mother double check the catering, Priscilla helped the little flower girl get a piece of gum out of her hair.

“There you go, sweetheart,” she said, smiling.

“You mean you didn’t have to cut it out?” the girl asked. “My mommy always does. How’d you do that?”

“Magic,” Priscilla answered with a wink.

“We’re here for the wedding, not to scare children,” I teased.

“Do some more,” the flower girl said, bouncing happily in her little yellow dress.

“Oh, my God, it’s almost time,” Karen said and took us both by the hand, leading us back to her bedroom.

She started fanning and pacing the room.

“Honey, are you all right?” her mother asked.

“You do look a little pale,” Priscilla said.

“I think I’m going to faint,” Karen answered.

“Oh, no you’re not,” her mother said. “Just take some deep breaths. The same thing happened to me before I got married.”

“Were you like this too?”

It took me a minute to realize she was asking me. I really didn’t want to think of John at a time like this. It only made me miss him more. At least, it usually did. But all of the sudden, I remembered Priscilla’s words, “Someday it will make you smile instead of cry.” It looked like someday was today.

I turned to Karen with a smile and said, “Yes. I threw up twice that morning. I was so scared. Marriage is a big step and one you shouldn’t take lightly. But you know what? I never once regretted walking down that aisle.”

Karen’s eyes glazed over with tears as she reached for me.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

“You’ll be fine,” I assured her.

We stepped out of the room to let her touch up her eyeliner and Priscilla turned to me with an odd expression.

“What?” I asked finally.

“I just never would have figured you for a therapist,” she teased.

“I’m not a therapist,” I said, laughing.

Then she asked, “It was today, wasn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“The day you thought of John and smiled.” We both got a little misty-eyed before she said, “Damn, you sleep with one vampire and just forget everything, huh?”

“I didn’t sleep with him,” I said, swatting her lightly with my bouquet.

Before I could deny it further, Karen walked out into the hallway and said, “Okay, *now* I’m ready.”

The ceremony was beautiful. It was one of the nicest and least fake weddings I had ever attended. The bride and groom seemed to genuinely love each other and their smiles didn’t look artificial in the slightest. But I’ll be damned if I wasn’t glad when it was all over.

In fact, the weekend was shaping up just fine. Priscilla and I spent the rest of the day deciding what spa treatments we wanted to go by Lucy’s and get Monday night. We were still trying to decide Sunday morning when I heard a knock at the door.

“I’ll turn the pancakes,” my sister said. “You go get the door.”

I was a little surprised to see Marcus McClain when I opened the front door. I was also a bit unnerved when he didn’t return my smile.

“Come in,” I said. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“That would be great,” he said. “I hope I’m not intruding, but something has happened and I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“Do I need to leave?” Priscilla asked.

“No,” he said quickly. “As a matter of fact, if your grandmother is here, she might need to hear this also.”

“Go and get Zanna,” I said to my sister. Once she was out of the room I turned back to Marcus and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“My dream came true,” he said.

Chapter Eleven

It took a few seconds for the full impact of his words to sink in. Then my heart started to flutter and I had to prop against the counter to steady myself. Surely Marcus wasn't saying what I thought he was.

"Oh, no," I moaned as I sank back down into my chair.

"What's wrong?" Zanna asked as she and Priscilla reentered the room.

"Have a seat," Marcus said.

He joined us at the table and took a deep breath. It was as if he were preparing himself for something awful. Or maybe, he'd already seen something awful and he was trying to forget it.

"A woman was murdered this weekend," he said, confirming my worst fears.

We all gasped and Zanna asked, "Do we know her?"

"You might," he said. "Look, I'm not sure how to tell you all of this, so I'll just be straight with it. I didn't come here just to tell you about her being killed. I came here because of the *way* she was killed. I'm hoping that one of you could shed some light on the situation."

"Why would you ask us?" Zanna said.

"Because this woman appears to have been sacrificed in some sort of ritual.

Either someone was performing a spell, or they wanted to make it look that way."

"Oh, my gosh," Priscilla said, putting a hand over her heart. "That's so awful."

"How was it done?" I asked.

Marcus gave me a look that seemed to say, "You asked for it."

"First, there was some sort of strange circle drawn on the ground. She was tied spread-eagle to four stakes in the ground over this circle." He paused to look around like he was sizing us up, judging just how much we could take of the gruesome details. "Her blood had been completely drained through two small puncture wounds in her neck."

With these words Priscilla and I exchanged a look that I knew Marcus saw.

"You don't think that vampires did this?" Priscilla asked. "What would be the purpose in a ritual if they just wanted her blood?"

"I don't know," Marcus said. "The victim's heart was also removed, which is something I've never seen in a vampire-related death."

"Oh, my," Zanna said.

"It gets worse," he said, almost apologetically. Marcus took a sip of his coffee and looked as if he wished it were something stronger. "The victim appears to have also been tortured."

"Like having her heart ripped out was pleasant," Priscilla scoffed.

"More than was necessary for whatever the hell it was they were doing," he said.

"What else was done?" I asked, not sure I could take it.

"There was a large metal spike shoved up her rectum and the letters C-U-N-T were carved into her forehead."

"Someone killed this poor woman and then carved *cunt* into her forehead!"

Priscilla exclaimed.

“No,” Marcus corrected. “It appears to have been done before ... um, while she was still alive.”

“That’s disgusting,” I said.

Marcus nodded his agreement while I refreshed his coffee.

“But how can *we* help you?” I asked.

“First, let me make it clear that I don’t think *any* of you had *anything* to do with this.”

“You’re damn right we didn’t,” Zanna interrupted.

“But you are the only known witches in town and this does appear to have been some sort of ritual. Now, I can’t *make* you do this, but I would really appreciate it if any or all of you would take a look at some photos of the victim.”

“I’ll tell you right now I’ve never heard of anything like this before, but I’m willing to take a look,” Zanna said.

My sister and I looked at each other, and then turned back to Marcus.

“We’ll look too,” I answered. “But first I want to know something. Who was the victim? I don’t want to have to look at one of my friends or neighbors without warning, especially not like that.”

“Her name was Karen,” he said softly.

“Oh, God, no,” I cried. “Did she have blond hair? Was she tall?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“She just got married on Saturday!” I yelled. “This can’t be, it’s just too ...”

“This woman was forty-five years old,” he interrupted.

“What?”

“The victim, she was forty-five years old. She was the Human Resources director for the hospital.”

“Shit,” I said with feeling. I tried to get a grip on myself as I explained, “I have a friend named Karen who also happens to be tall and blond, but she’s twenty-nine years old.”

“There’s more,” Marcus said. “I’ve just come from talking with the victim’s daughter. She said she came to you for help. Sandra,” he said softly as he placed a hand on my shoulder. “Is she the other person you mentioned having bad dreams?”

“Jenny?” I asked. “Yes, she’s the one. But I sold her a house protection spell and a charm for her mother to wear ...”

“She got sick,” he said, cutting me off. “She explained everything to us. She took ill and couldn’t perform the spell. We found the necklace on her mother’s dresser.”

“Son of a bitch,” Priscilla spat.

“The last time Jenny saw her was Friday morning before she went to work. She appears to have been killed Friday night.”

Marcus gave us all another glance before pulling a folder out of his coat and opening it on the table. Priscilla took one look and ran down the hall to the bathroom. Zanna went pale, but otherwise didn’t show emotion. I was just glad I hadn’t already eaten.

“I don’t know who or what could have done this, or why,” I said.

“Neither do I,” my grandmother added.

“I’m sorry,” Marcus said, closing the folder. “I’m sorry to have upset you, I just

didn't know who else to turn to. We're at a complete loss. Maybe if you saw the markings in the circle without the body ... I mean, without her covering them up. Would one of you be willing to look at the crime scene?"

"I'll go," I said.

I didn't think my sister could take it and though she hadn't said, Zanna didn't look like she could either.

"Thank you," he said.

"When do you need me to go?" I asked.

"Is now all right? I don't mean to be pushy, but the sooner the better."

"I'll get my coat."

A few minutes later I was riding along in Marcus' unmarked police car, looking out on what should have been another beautiful day. It was the first time in years that I found myself looking past the leaves billowing by on the wind and ignoring the clear blue sky. I hadn't thought about Jenny any more since that afternoon. Maybe there was something more I could have done?

"You're not sitting there blaming yourself are you?" Marcus asked.

I jumped at the sound of his voice. I'd become so lost in my own thoughts that for a minute I'd been able to ignore him too.

"I just can't help but feel bad for Jenny," I told him. "She came to me for help and I ..."

"Did what you could," he finished. "You had no way of knowing what would happen. Hell, how do you think I feel? I've been dreaming about her murder and didn't even know it."

"By the way, have your nightmares stopped?" I asked.

"They had until this," he said. "Look, I appreciate you doing this. You really didn't have to."

"It's all right. I wasn't able to help Jenny, so I'd like to help find who did this if I can."

Marcus smiled at me and for a moment he looked like he had when we'd first met. It was only then that I realized how very much alone we were and how good he smelled. I had forgotten all about my attraction to the police chief when I was with Navarre, but sitting alone with him in his car, Marcus was a hard man to forget.

He was wearing another pair of well fitted jeans with a sweater and a black leather jacket. I could see the gun underneath his arm when he shifted in the seat to answer his radio.

"I'm on my way back," he said. "I'm also bringing Sandra Ashton with me. She's agreed to have a look at the scene, see if she sees something we didn't."

If they didn't want a witch on the scene, the man he was talking to gave no indication. After their conversation was finished, he ran a hand over his face and I noticed the light stubble on his chin. Marcus looked tired and he still managed to have sex appeal. I felt guilty for noticing how good he looked at a time like this, but not guilty enough to stop looking.

We arrived about twenty minutes later at a small shack in the middle of nowhere. It looked like an old garden shed, but it was completely empty except for the cops I could see standing around still taking photographs inside. Marcus took me by the hand and led me inside.

The one window in the place had been spray painted black to keep out the light. That's certainly something that a vampire would do. Even without the body lying in the floor, the scene was still shocking.

"I can feel what was done here," I whispered to Marcus. "This was dark, terrible magic." I tried to walk closer to the circle and it felt like something was pushing me back. "I can't go any closer," I told him.

"What do you mean? Are you all right?"

"It's not that," I said. "It feels like something is pushing me back. Someone doesn't want me to go near that circle."

"Shit. Come on then, let's get you home safe," he said, reaching for me.

"Wait, what's that?"

A scrap of something had caught my eye. It looked familiar. I'd watched enough crime dramas on television to know better than to touch anything. I didn't want to contaminate the crime scene.

Marcus put on a rubber glove and picked up the dried herb.

"That's wolfsbane," I told him. "But the victim wasn't a werewolf was she?"

"No, she wasn't."

I waited for him to put the herb into a plastic bag and hand it to another officer.

"So, what now?" I asked once we were on our way back to the car.

"I'm going to question the master vampire of our area tonight, see if he knows anything that might help."

"Who is it?" I asked.

"His name's Navarre. He owns a club called Lucy's."

My surprise must have shown. I could sense that he was powerful, but I'd had no idea that Navarre was a master vampire, let alone the master of this entire area.

"Why? Do you know him?" Marcus asked.

"We've met," I admitted.

* * * *

I didn't tell anyone where I was going that night. I didn't believe Navarre knew anything about the murder, but then again I didn't know him that well. Deep down, I really didn't feel that a vampire had killed Jenny's mother, but I couldn't be certain. Still, from what Marcus said she was killed sometime Friday night and I was with Navarre most of that evening. I felt myself blush when I remembered that I would have been with Navarre *all* of that evening if we hadn't been interrupted. With this realization I also instinctively knew that Navarre wouldn't compromise my honor by using me as an alibi. I decided I should hurry.

Most establishments like Lucy's weren't open on Sunday. But then again, there wasn't any place *exactly* like Lucy's around here. They were open every day of the week. People didn't stop sinning just because it was Sunday. Might as well accommodate them.

When I drove up I noticed the parking lot was just as full as it had been Friday night. I got out quickly and straightened my clothes as I walked to the door. I was wearing another pair of black slacks with a dark green slinky top I'd borrowed from Priscilla. I'd decided to wear my hair down, and it was wavy as ever. I'd also worn a black velvet coat which didn't cover nearly enough to keep me warm. Neither did the sheer green scarf I had on. My sister would have said I looked really pretty, but I felt

really stupid. I was freezing to death.

Once I was inside I went straight to Isidoor at the bar.

“Where is he?” I asked the fairy. “I need to speak with him.”

“Well, I’m sure he’d like to speak with you too, but he’s busy right this moment.

Why don’t you let me fix you a drink while you wait?”

“He’s talking to the police, isn’t he?”

Isidoor looked surprised. “How did you know that?”

“Because I saw one of their cars outside. Please, Isidoor, I may be able to help him.”

He stared at me intently for a moment before saying, “Down the hall and to your right, just tell the vamp at the door that I sent you.”

“Thank you.”

I followed his directions and came to a door just past the ladies’ room. The largest vampire I’d ever seen was standing guard outside. He looked like he’d been a pro wrestler before he was turned. His blond hair was as long as mine and his arms were almost as big around as my waist.

With as much courage as I could muster I stood directly in front of him and forced myself to look up at him.

“I need to speak with Navarre,” I announced boldly. “Isidoor sent me.”

Chapter Twelve

Police had a tendency to convict first and ask questions later when it came to vampires and werewolves. As cute as Marcus might be, he was still a cop. I didn't want to think badly of him, but I think it was somewhere in their handbook that if a vampire lived within fifty miles of a crime then they did it. If they managed to pin this on Navarre or any of his people, an executioner would be sent to carry out the sentence. Just the thought of anyone harming Navarre gave me the courage to stare down the big vamp at the door until he finally stepped aside.

"Thank you," I said, somewhat more confidently than I felt.

When I entered the room I found Navarre seated behind a large mahogany desk. The office was large and well furnished, but not enough to raise any suspicions as to how he came by so much money. Marcus was seated in front of him, leaning forward in his chair.

"I've already told you, I was here Friday night," Navarre said as our eyes met.

"And I suppose your employees would back up that story," Marcus said. "But aren't they also all under your protection?"

"Yes," Navarre answered softly.

"Then suppose they *didn't* back up your story. What would happen to them?"

"What are you trying to say?" Navarre asked. There was a definite threat in his voice and it gave me chills.

"Well, just that if no one can speak for you then ..."

"I was here," I blurted out from behind Marcus' chair.

He seemed very surprised to see me there. He looked me up and down, taking in my clothes with a glance. Though he seemed to appreciate the way I looked, he did *not* seem to appreciate what I'd just said.

"Sandra, you can't mean that you ..."

"I was with him Friday night," I said, moving to stand beside Navarre. I placed my hand on his shoulder as I turned back to Marcus. "I was here all night, and I didn't leave. You can check that with the bartender if you like. And I'm not under his protection, so I'm not obligated to him in any way."

"If you're not obligated to him, then why would you do this? You don't really expect me to believe that the two of you ..."

"Spent the night together?" I finished.

"Ms. Ashton and I are seeing each other," Navarre said smoothly.

"And you didn't think to mention this earlier? *Either* of you?" He looked from one of us to the other and I flinched when I met his gaze.

"I didn't want to drag her into something that didn't involve her," Navarre said.

"And I knew he wouldn't, so I came to tell you myself."

"Why didn't you say something before?" Marcus asked me more softly.

"Because my sex life wasn't relevant to this investigation."

We just stood there looking at each other for a minute. Then suddenly Marcus

walked behind the desk and took me by the arm.

"I need to have a word with you, alone." He looked to Navarre, who hadn't objected so far. I think it's because I hadn't. "This will only take a minute," Marcus said as he ushered me out into the hall.

We moved around the big bad vampire in the hall and to my surprise Marcus led me into the women's bathroom.

"You can't go in here," I said as he pushed me toward the sinks.

He held up his badge so that all the women in the room could see it.

"Get lost," he said.

In less than a minute we were completely alone.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked.

"Don't be angry with me," he said as he moved closer to me.

"Angry with you? I can't figure you out enough to be angry with you."

"Then we're in the same boat," he said irritably. Marcus reached for me, and I didn't stop him. He placed his hands on my shoulders and began to rub the velvet coat lightly. "Look, I can appreciate what you're trying to do. It's nice of you, taking up for him and all. But you don't want to get involved here."

"I'm already involved," I said softly.

When I tried to push away from him he stopped me.

"Sandra, you don't understand. This isn't about me being attracted to you."

"Isn't it?"

"No," he answered softly. "And it isn't about him being a vampire."

I gave him a skeptical look.

"Okay, so maybe it is, but not for the reasons you think."

I pulled away from him as I said, "Then explain it to me."

He ran a hand through his hair again in frustration, but this time the gesture no longer reminded me of my sister. It didn't even remind me how it made his bicep flex. It reminded me that he was wearing a gun and I wondered why Navarre had let him keep it.

"My mother was a witch, you know this," he said. "But what you don't know is that I'm psychic. You don't know it because I don't tell many people. If I did, I might as well buy a great big banner that says freak and put it on my car."

"Navarre didn't kill anybody," I said firmly.

"Maybe not, but there *is* a vampire involved with this somehow, I can *feel* it. I know you understand what I'm talking about. You're one of the few people who would."

"Have you seen this?"

"No," he said. "I just know it. They may not have been the one to kill her, but a vampire has something to do with this somehow ... and a shifter, too."

I turned to the sink and washed my hands just to have something to do. The cool water helped me to clear my head.

"I wish that I could help, Marcus. But I don't know what to tell you."

When I reached for the paper towels he asked, "Why didn't you tell me you were seeing someone?"

"Because you didn't ask."

I hoped I hadn't hurt his feelings, but now was not the time to admit that I barely knew Navarre. That I'd taken up for him because *I* had a feeling, too, and my feeling said he didn't have anything to do with this.

A few minutes later I walked back into Navarre's office and closed the door behind me.

"Where is the police chief?" he asked.

"He's gone."

When I said this Navarre rose to meet me and, before I knew it, he had me pressed against the door.

"Why did you do it?" he whispered against my lips. "Why would you lie for me? You don't owe me anything."

"Except my life," I corrected.

"So, you do this out of obligation?" The look in his eyes told me how hurt he was by even the suggestion.

"No," I said quickly. "I came here because I knew after you said how people didn't have any honor anymore ..." I paused to search for the right words. "I knew that you wouldn't tell him I was here because you didn't want to compromise me in any way."

"You're right," he said as he brushed his cheek against mine.

"I was here long enough to know you didn't have time to kill anybody," I said breathlessly.

"But you didn't spend the night," he said.

"No, but I would have if we hadn't been interrupted."

Navarre made a sound somewhere between a moan and a growl as he moved one of his legs between mine. He pressed me more firmly against the wall and kissed me. This kiss was without the preamble of a few nights ago. Before I knew it my arms were around his neck, pulling him down for more.

"Your debt was repaid when you gave me your blood," he panted. "Why did you come back tonight?"

"Can't a girl do anything nice and not have someone question it?" I teased.

"Say you'll be mine," he said softly as he brushed back my hair. "So that next time, we won't be lying to the police when we say you spent the night with me."

He ran one cool hand underneath my shirt and I gasped.

"Be yours? What does that mean exactly?"

"Date me, be seen with me in public, and every now and then ... go to bed with me." With his last words Navarre unbuttoned the top of my pants. "Once again, my darling, all you've got to do is say yes."

"But we barely know each other." It was a weak protest, but a valid point I thought.

"What's your favorite color?" he asked as he removed my coat.

"Pink. What's yours?"

"Green. When's your birthday?"

"February fourteenth." I sighed as his lips touched my collarbone.

"Mmmm, interesting," he said and his voice felt almost like it had crawled beneath my skin.

"You're contagious," I said, my voice a breathy whisper.

"Only if you taste my blood," he replied, still kissing my neck while one hand worked its way up underneath my shirt.

"No, not like that," I said. "It's your voice. It touches me." I pulled back to look

into his eyes as I said, "It does things to me your hands haven't done ... yet."

"That is just one of my master's many gifts," he assured me. "There are others that I'm sure you will find equally as pleasurable."

With his last word I felt hands caressing my body in ways he couldn't possibly manage with only two hands.

"I want more than that," I gasped, pulling back from him slightly. "I want more than to just be yours."

"What more do you desire?" he asked softly.

"I want you to be mine," I confessed.

He kissed me in response and I felt that small touch all the way down to my toes. Then reality started to creep back into my mind.

"No one knows where I am," I told him.

"Spend the night with me," he purred, "and you will not want to leave."

"That's what scares me. What if they get worried? I mean, a woman was killed just a few days ago."

"I'll have Alex call your sister. I'm sure she won't object."

All right. I didn't need to be convinced further. My resistance was weakening along with my knees and I wanted nothing more than to be swept off my feet. Besides, there were worse things than giving into your darkest desires, wasn't there? As I looked my darkest desire in the eye I decided that the answer was *yes*. There were much worse things than sleeping with a vampire.

His eyes turned once more to a solid emerald as Navarre lifted me against the wall. He buried his face against my abdomen, mirroring the way the werewolf had had me pinned when he rescued me. Oh, but this was so much better. For one thing, he wasn't strangling me. And for another, he was unzipping my pants with his *teeth*.

He pressed his face into my stomach and gripped the top of my lace panties with his teeth, pulling back so that they popped against my skin. I dug my nails into his shoulders where I had braced my hands.

"Don't tease me," I said.

"I never tease," he assured me.

Navarre released me slowly so that the front of my body was pressed against his as I slid to the floor. I had just unbuckled his belt when the door burst open. It took a moment for the tall blond vampire to understand what was happening and that he'd obviously interrupted something.

"I'm sorry," he said, averting his eyes. I realized then that my shirt had come off at some point too and I hadn't even noticed.

"What is it, Hunter?" Navarre practically growled.

"There's a crowd gathered outside. I didn't think this kind of thing went on anymore, but some of them have actually got torches."

"You're kidding me," I said at the same time Navarre yelled, "Shit! Shit, shit, shit!"

"I'll wait outside," Hunter said quickly and closed the door.

"Fuck me," Navarre said, angrily tucking back in his shirt. He buckled his belt with such force I'm surprised it didn't break.

"I was trying," I said.

For a moment, I regretted my words. Then Navarre smiled and we both started to

laugh.

“I am so sorry,” he said as he picked up my shirt and scarf from the floor. “I can’t believe we’re being interrupted again.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “You better go see about that whole angry mob thing going on outside. Someone must have spread the word about the woman being bitten.”

“Well, at least someone made it look that way,” he said.

“I don’t think Marcus would have said anything. One of the other cops must have been spreading things around town.”

When I said town, we both knew I meant Westley. Lucy’s was truly in the middle of nowhere, so Westley was the closest town around, and it was forty-five minutes away.

Navarre reached for the door and I put my hand over his.

“I’ll come with you,” I said, pulling on my coat.

“Why would you do that? This isn’t your fight,” he said.

“Like the werewolf in the alley wasn’t yours,” I replied sarcastically. “Come on, I can’t leave you like this. Don’t ask me to.”

“All right,” he said. “But stay behind me. I won’t have people threatening you.”

“Have you seen this shit?” Alex asked as soon as we stepped into the hall.

“No,” Navarre answered. “But we’re about to.”

The temperature had dropped since I’d first entered Lucy’s and the cold wind seemed to bite through my thin clothes. Staying behind Navarre wasn’t a problem because I was using him to block most of the wind.

Chapter Thirteen

I peeked around Navarre's shoulder at the crowd and knew a moment of fear. Hunter was right, some of them were carrying torches, but others were carrying guns and they didn't seem to care who saw them. This wasn't a protest, this was a lynch mob.

"What's the meaning of this?" Navarre asked the crowd.

A big man with red hair stepped forward.

"We were told that the woman who was killed over the weekend had a vampire bite on her neck," he said. "Now we came to find out which one of you blood suckers did the deed."

I heard Hunter hiss behind me and it didn't take a stretch of the imagination to know he was showing his fangs.

"That's not entirely true," Navarre replied calmly. "You see, I've also spoken with the police and assured them that neither I nor my people had anything to do with this. In fact, someone could have simply drained her blood in a way to make it *look* like she was bitten by a vampire."

"How do you know *your people* didn't do this?" the man asked.

"Because they are all under my protection and to do something like this would be very bad for their health."

The underlying threat in his words seemed to make Big Red back down a bit.

I felt a prickling sensation flow over me. At first I thought it was just the cold, but it was laced with magic. I stepped forward enough to see his face and noticed that Navarre's eyes were once again solid green.

"Vampires are not responsible for this," he said, and his voice seemed to be magnified. "We will help to find the killer. No one knows who did this, but your murderer isn't here. Go home, get a good night's rest and leave us in peace."

The crowd seemed a bit confused, but they began returning to their cars. I was impressed.

"Is that another gift from your master?" I asked.

Navarre only winked at me with his eyes still a solid emerald. After a minute he said, "I couldn't have them trashing the place or harming my customers. I hope you don't mind."

"Why would I mind?"

"Because it's completely illegal to use any persuasion of the mind," he said.

I knew he was just teasing me for my comments about giving unattractive customers a glamour. After the crowd had dispersed, Navarre put his arm around me, holding me close for warmth.

"That was impressive," I said as I leaned into his embrace. I couldn't resist pressing my face against his chest. The sight of a large angry crowd had upset me and I needed to be held. I would have felt weak to admit this to Navarre, but I could be honest with myself.

"This isn't the first time I've had to deal with an angry mob."

I laughed softly and he squeezed me tighter.

"You should be getting home," he said softly.

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about first and you too," I said, turning to Alex.

We all went back to Navarre's office and Alex got me a cup of hot chocolate.

"That should warm you up," he said, offering me the cup with a smile. I really liked Alex. I just couldn't help myself.

"Thanks."

"What's wrong?" Navarre asked.

He was standing propped against the large desk in front of me and Alex was sitting in the other chair to my left. They both leaned forward listening intently as I began to speak.

"What I'm about to say doesn't go any further." I paused for them to nod their agreement. "The police chief told me this in confidence," I began. I proceeded to tell them both about how he had come to me for bad dreams, and about Jenny too. "His mother was a witch," I said. "So, he knows what it's like to be different. He's not after any of you because of what you are. Well, not because of any prejudice. He's also psychic, but don't spread that around."

"Then can he sense who the killer is?" Alex asked.

"Not exactly. He said that he can *feel* that a vampire and a shifter are involved in this ... he just doesn't know how or to what extent."

"That could mean anything," Navarre said, and I agreed. "It could mean that whoever killed this woman was a vampire or a shifter, or it could mean that her daughter was dating one. Hell, it might even mean that their gardener is a werewolf. The problem with people who have visions, yet do not develop their talent, is shit like this. You get bits and parts of images all mingled together."

Alex shared his frustration. "Well, that's no help at all," he said irritably. "No offense, Sandra. I didn't mean to direct that at you. Why would he tell you this anyway?"

I hesitated before telling them, "Because he has a thing for me."

"Oh he does, does he?" Navarre said, raising one eyebrow in a mocking gesture.

"Well if he comes back around here, I've got something for that little shite."

Shite? Now I knew I had heard an accent. What was he, Scottish?

"You know he could have just said those things to keep you away from me,"

Navarre said angrily.

"He could have, but I don't think he would," I said cautiously. "He doesn't seem like that type of person."

Alex snorted. "We can all be that type of person sometimes."

"Did he or did he not warn you against me?" Navarre asked.

"He did," I admitted.

"And what do you think?" he asked me, all traces of an accent now gone. "Do you think I'm a killer or Alex?"

As he asked this, Navarre knelt in front of me giving me no choice but to look him in the eye as I answered.

"No," I said softly.

"And why not?"

“Because I’ve got a feeling about this, too, and my feeling says that you’re not a killer, either of you.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, patting my knee gently.

“Do you think that any of the witches and wizards staying here might have had anything to do with this?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Navarre said. “We usually don’t have such a large group anyway. They’re all here for a birthday party. Besides, I’ve known this family for years. They come from a highly respected bunch of witches and wizards over in England. They would be the first to punish someone practicing such dark magic.”

“It was just a thought,” I said. “I just can’t imagine who would do all those things to someone.”

“All those things?” he asked. “I was only told about the magic circle and the bite mark. Is there something else?”

I took a long drink of my hot chocolate before I told them the rest. I needed a moment to figure out how to word it.

“The body was ... violated,” I said finally.

“You mean she was raped?” Alex asked, looking horrified.

“Not exactly. They found a large metal spike shoved up her rectum.”

“Ugh,” Alex said.

“There’s more. Whoever killed her also carved the word ‘cunt’ into her forehead while she was still alive, before removing her heart.”

“That sounds more like a hate crime to me than a ritual,” Alex said shakily.

“Maybe it was both,” Navarre suggested.

“Do you know how much you have to hate someone to shove a metal spike up their ass?” Alex exclaimed. “What had this woman done to piss someone off that bad?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t know her, but her daughter admitted to me that she wasn’t very popular.”

“That’s no excuse,” Navarre said. He propped against the desk once again and ran a hand through his long red hair. “I have seen similar things,” he said hesitantly.

“Why didn’t you tell the police?” I asked immediately.

“Because it’s been hundreds of years since I saw anything like this,” he said.

“And it wasn’t even in this country. Besides, there are several rituals where something like this might be done. With the ... *extra* things done to the body there’s no way to be sure it was any of these. Someone may have just wanted it to look that way. There are a number of ancient rituals that call for the removal of the heart. The blood may have been just a bonus, or it may have been part of the sacrifice. There’s just no way to tell. Informing the police of this possibility would only have made it look like I was involved.”

Alex was sitting there, twirling a strand of his dark hair around one finger, obviously lost in thought.

“But why would he tell you something like that about a vamp and a shifter?” he asked again. “If he likes you, then maybe he was trying to warn you.” Navarre went to open his mouth and Alex held up a hand. “Let’s give him the benefit of the doubt for a minute. If he was trying to warn you, then maybe I need to question everyone more thoroughly.”

He looked to Navarre, and the vampire nodded his agreement. I had known

instinctively that Alex was more than just the lead dancer. He appeared to be in charge of all the shifters under Navarre's protection.

"But how can we really know for sure?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, we'll just have to wait and see," Navarre said. "Let me take you home. I would feel better if I knew you were safe."

"Calling when I get in wouldn't be sufficient?" I asked, half teasing.

"No," he said, turning another of his wicked smiles my way.

When we got to the car, I decided to let Navarre drive. I'd had enough excitement for one night to leave me a little bit shaky. He was beyond a doubt the sexiest thing I'd ever seen in my life. It still looked odd to me to see him wearing a thin silk shirt in November. Then again, cold weather didn't affect him the same way it did me.

One thing I loved about old cars was their lack of space between the driver and the passenger seat. As we drove I kept scooting closer and closer to the vampire. I couldn't seem to help myself. The heater was working fine, so I didn't exactly need him for warmth. Yet I still needed him. I needed to touch him, to feel him next to me. It was almost like being underwater and needing air.

When I finally got close enough to touch him he said softly, "Your magic calls to me."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I placed my hand on his inner thigh.

"When someone is made vampire, they inherit at least some of the traits of their master. My master was descended from a long line of wizards, and since there was magic in his blood, there is magic in mine. Your blood calls to me," he explained. "I can feel your magic. It's like pheromones to a werewolf. I would hope you feel the same."

What I wanted to say was, "You bet I do!" However, I replied softly, "Yes, I feel it, too."

It was nice to know that there was a rational explanation as to why I couldn't keep my hands off him. Besides, of course, that he was the sexiest dead man walking. I knew that technically vampires were dead, but Navarre felt very much alive as I rested my head on his shoulder and continued to caress his inner thigh.

The drive seemed short, but I think it's because I enjoyed the company so much. We pulled up beside the guesthouse and Navarre walked me to the door. He had just bent down to kiss me goodnight when someone shined a spotlight in our faces.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked as Navarre recoiled from the light.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Zanna asked angrily.

"Navarre," Priscilla said.

"You know him?" Zanna asked.

"Sure," my sister answered, obviously trying to lighten up the situation. "He's Sandy's new ... um, boyfriend."

She shined the light on Navarre once more.

"So, you're dating vampires now and nobody thought to tell me?"

For some reason, that flew all over me. How dare she discriminate against Navarre for something he couldn't help? How was that any different than when people had burned our ancestors at the stake?

"I'm a grown woman," I said, stepping in front of the vampire. "And I don't have to answer to you."

"No, you don't," she said. "But since a woman was killed not twenty miles from

here just two days ago, I'd at least like to know that you left the house on purpose and weren't kidnapped!"

"Now wait a minute," Navarre said, stepping in front of me. "Whatever your problem is with vampires, I can assure you that my intentions with Sandra are honorable."

"They are?" I said so that only he could hear.

"I don't know what bad experiences you've had," he said more softly as he took a step toward my grandmother, "but they were not with me."

He reached out and put his hand over the spotlight, lowering it to her side. Then, just when I thought she would hit him, Zanna burst into tears. It was so unexpected that for a moment nobody seemed to know what to do. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd ever seen my grandmother cry.

Navarre reached for her and, to my further surprise, she fell into his arms weeping as if for the dead. I had never seen anything like it. I moved closer to them and exchanged a puzzled look with my sister. She shrugged as if to say that she had no idea what was going on either.

Zanna started walking toward the front porch, and Navarre followed with his arm still wrapped tightly around her. Her sobs echoed across the yard as Priscilla and I fell into step behind them.

Once we reached the door Zanna looked surprised for a moment when Navarre didn't follow her. She looked him up and down again and said, "Well then, come on in."

Chapter Fourteen

Once we were all in the kitchen my sister and I watched while Zanna poured herself a shot of whiskey and propped against the bar.

Navarre stepped closer to her and asked, "Who has wronged you?"

"Not me," she said, pouring herself another shot. "My sister."

"Aunt Willow?" I asked. "But you said she died when I was little. You didn't mention anything about a vampire."

"To me she is dead," Zanna said harshly.

"What happened?" Navarre asked.

"She was dating a vampire. Of course, that wasn't as common back then as it is now. I knew that she loved him, but I just didn't know how long an immortal being could find a human woman attractive. After all, he would live forever and my sister wouldn't. The next thing I knew he seduced her into running away. He spirited her off in the middle of the night and I never saw my sister again."

She sat down her glass and covered her eyes, apparently unable to stop the tears. Navarre wrapped her in his arms and held on as if he were holding all of her pieces together so she wouldn't fall apart. It was very touching and unexpected.

"Whoever this vampire was, he was not me," Navarre whispered as he stroked Zanna's hair. "I still remember what it was like to be human, to have loved ones and to lose them. I haven't come to steal your granddaughter."

"How did you know she was my granddaughter? I never said."

"The resemblance is clear."

This was true enough. Zanna and I do look alike. However, she doesn't look old enough to be my grandmother. I still had a sneaking suspicion that Navarre could read minds.

"Then what have you come for?" she asked, pulling back enough to look at his face.

His smile appeared to have the same contagious effect on her that it did on me, for when he smiled down at my grandmother, her whole face lit up.

"I'd like to date her, if that's all right with you."

"I suppose I could get used to the idea. After all, you're not a total loss," she replied sarcastically.

Navarre laughed as he pulled back from her and I watched as she and my sister both shivered. It was nice to know I wasn't the only one who felt his power. That would have been really creepy.

"I am truly sorry about your sister," he said. "But I can't account for all the members of my race any more than you can account for all the members of yours."

"Very true," Zanna said with a sigh. "I just want someone who will be good to her. I suppose it really doesn't matter what else they are as long as they're kind. I'm sorry for interrupting and for the spotlight."

"The spotlight was actually my idea," Priscilla confessed. "I just didn't know

we'd be using it on you," she said to Navarre.

"That's all right," he said.

Navarre made a move toward the door and Zanna stopped him.

"No, wait. If you're serious about dating Sandra, then we've gotten off on the wrong foot here. Please, stay for a while. Unless you've got something more pressing to do?"

"Not at all."

Three hours later Zanna and my sister were laughing happily at Navarre's jokes and well on their way to being drunk. It was as if my grandmother had just needed to get all that stuff about Willow off her chest. Now she was her old self again and it didn't seem to matter any more that Navarre was a vampire. As a matter of fact, if someone were to just look in on that moment, I don't think they could have guessed which of us was immortal. Except, of course, when Navarre showed his fangs. It was the first time I'd ever seen him smile broadly enough to do so. It might have been unnerving to some people, but I took it as a comfort that he felt at ease enough with us to be himself.

It warmed my heart to see him getting along so well with my family. It had been a long time since I'd dated anyone, let alone brought them home to meet my relatives. I expected to feel a pang of guilt about John, but it never came. Instead I was filled with an incredible sense of warmth. As I looked at Navarre, happily mixing another drink for my sister, I realized how truly blessed I was. Not only had I found one man to share my life with, but the fates had brought me another. Not to take his place, but to pick up where he left off.

Until then my encounters with the vampire had been mostly of a sexual or *almost* sexual nature. But watching him that night I had another feeling. Actually, it was more of a deep and convincing knowledge that he had been brought into my life for a reason. I was sure he'd be a wonderful lover once we ever got around to going to bed together, but Navarre had been brought to me for more than just sex. Part of me wanted to know why we had met like we did, but the other part was scared to ask.

"I learned this one from Isidoor," he said, handing the drink to my sister. "And for you, madam," he said with a wink to my grandmother, "something special."

He turned back to the ingredients scattered down our kitchen counter and Zanna asked, "Who's Isidoor?"

"He's the bartender at Lucy's."

"Oh, your club," she said.

"And he's a fairy," Priscilla chimed in.

"Really? I would *love* to have an opportunity to discuss potions with the fae," Zanna said.

"That could be arranged," Navarre said. Then he finished the next drink and handed it to Zanna. "This is a very special drink," he told her. "Of course, I had to improvise some of the ingredients, but if I've done this correctly, it will put you on your arse."

There was that accent again.

She took one sip and her eyes grew wide. "Where did you learn this?"

"It's something we used to drink before going into battle," he said.

Navarre sat back down beside me and placed his arm around my shoulders as he said, "I was once a knight and a Scottish patriot." I looked to him questioningly and he

explained, "I fought alongside William Wallace."

"That's where I've heard your accent before," I said excitedly. "I knew it—you're Scottish!"

"But why disguise your native tongue?" Zanna asked.

"I've always loved a man with an accent," Priscilla teased.

"Because it helps to give me a bit more mystique. Not so long ago vampires were not popular, nor were they tourist attractions. The less people knew about me, the less reason they could find to hate me. Over the years it became easier to camouflage my accent."

I slid my arm around his waist as I said, "That explains a lot. I never would have guessed you were a knight, but it makes sense."

"I assure you, it wasn't glamorous," he said. "But we fought, and bled and died for what we believed in. Even if your task is not accomplished, there can be no greater freedom."

Zanna nodded emphatically and toasted the vampire with her glass. "I like him," she told me. "Not that you need my approval. You are a grown woman." Zanna wobbled slightly in her chair and laughed. "You were right about this drink. How the hell you drank this and then fought, I can't understand. You *must* tell me how to make it." She grabbed her head. "Oh, but write it down, I think I may pass out."

"It would be my pleasure," he said. "And I'm glad you like me. It has been a long time since anyone invited me in and just ... talked to me for a while."

"Ah, so you're used to about as much hospitality as we are," my grandmother said.

"Probably less."

A few minutes later, Zanna excused herself to go to bed before she passed out. She assured Navarre that it had been a pleasure meeting him. I was just as surprised at how their encounter ended as how it had begun. Priscilla got him some paper and a pen so that he could write down the drink recipe for Zanna before leaving.

As he went to leave Navarre asked us both, "You will come by the spa sometime this week, won't you? My treat."

"You drive a hard bargain," my sister said with a laugh.

The look in his eyes told me that that wasn't all he could drive hard. No matter how much I had enjoyed the evening, I regretted not having more time alone with him. I walked with Navarre out to the porch. He kissed me softly and moved back onto the top step.

"How will you get home?" I asked. "You drove my car."

"I'll manage," he said with a wink.

And just like that, Navarre took off into the night.

"He can *fly*?" Priscilla asked as she burst through the front door to stand beside me.

We both stood there for a moment, staring up into the starry sky for a trace of the vampire.

"You were watching us," I said. My tone was accusing, but light.

"You have to admit, it's hard to stop looking at him," she teased. "I just wanted to see if he gave you any tongue."

* * * *

The following afternoon, Priscilla and I took Navarre up on his invitation. As soon as the shop closed, we took off to go to the spa. Since Priscilla had never been to any of the levels beneath the surface at Lucy's, I took her to the elevator. I not only decided to skip the orgy on the second floor, but neglected to mention it entirely.

Once Navarre was awake he joined us while we got a pedicure. I was shocked to learn that my grandmother was on the seventh level.

"She's at the PFC?" I exclaimed.

"What's the PFC?" Priscilla asked.

"The Preternatural Fight Club. When I told her about it she was utterly fascinated," Navarre explained. "She couldn't wait to see it for herself."

"Are you sure she's all right down there? How long has she been there?"

"For a few hours now. About as long as you've been here. Last I heard she won a lot of money on a werewolf from New Orleans. He's quite the fighter."

I decided to put this strange news out of my mind. Apparently I still had a lot to learn about my grandmother.

"We came here to relax, remember?" Priscilla said to me. "Don't worry about it. If she wants to watch a bunch of preternatural beings tear each other to pieces then so be it." With these words she placed the cucumber slices back over her eyes as if nothing were amiss at all. I followed her lead while Navarre went upstairs to check on everything else.

After our mud baths and facials, Navarre and Alex insisted on taking us to dinner.

"But I don't have anything to wear," I told him. "I just came straight from work to go to the spa."

"It's not a problem," he said softly. "Unless, of course, you're trying to re-neg on our agreement."

"Agreement? I thought we were just dating," I teased.

His smile that was at first not quite friendly was now down right suggestive.

"You can call it whatever you like," he said and his voice caressed me with velvet fingertips. "But you agreed to be mine."

"Is this where you call me on the being seen with you in public part?"

"It is," he said with a smile. "Please come with me."

The way he said those words let me know he was thinking about more than just following him down the hall. That was fine by me, because so was I. Priscilla was getting her nails painted, so she wasn't likely to miss me for a while. As I watched Navarre walk toward the elevator I found that I envied his pants, because every time he moved they got to touch his ass.

Even though my experience with vampires had been very limited before I met Navarre, I was well aware of their sexual prowess. Exuding sexuality was simply part of the overall package. People supposedly found even less than perfect vampires "strangely attractive." No matter what they might show in horror movies, if you were afraid of a vampire it made feeding much more difficult. That's how they'd managed to keep their existence relatively quiet for so long before going public. If your victim really doesn't mind being an entrée, then your secret is safe.

Personally, I was all aquiver at the thought of being Navarre's main course, but I was also scared to death. My feelings were rarely wrong about people and I knew deep down that he wouldn't hurt me. I was also a little disappointed with that realization.

Somehow my underlying fear of him seemed to fuel my desire. There was much about vampires that I had yet to learn and I couldn't think of a better teacher than the one I continued to admire as we got into the elevator.

When we reached the eighth floor he started straight for his private elevator.

"We're going to your floor?" I asked. I hated myself for the genuine fear that was in my voice, but I couldn't hide it. I had thought of little else besides getting the sexy vamp alone. But now that it seemed we were fresh out of interruptions, I was afraid.

Navarre took my face in his hands, gazing deeply into my eyes. For a moment I thought he meant to hypnotize me, but he didn't. There was no magic in his emerald eyes as he looked down at me. However, there was something else. He let his emotions be known through that look, and I felt like an ass. I'd hurt his feelings.

"Don't ever look at me that way again," he said softly. "You can trust me because I have decided to trust you. If I say you are safe, then you are safe. Never question me and you will never have need to worry about your safety."

I wanted to apologize, but instead took his lead and let my eyes convey my emotions to him.

"It's all right," he said as we stepped into the elevator. "You never have to be afraid of me."

Chapter Fifteen

“How come you haven’t bitten me again?” I asked as the doors opened onto the ninth floor.

“Because you haven’t offered,” he answered simply. “Besides, the sharing of blood is a privilege and one you are not obligated to provide. I also wanted to get to know you beyond your blood type.”

“So you’re saying that when you looked at me you wanted to think about more than food?”

“Something like that.”

He smiled and our conversation from moments before seemed to be forgotten. I followed him past the large living room area and down a hallway to the left. The walls were decorated with large tapestries which must have been centuries’ old. We had passed a large open area that looked like a library just before entering the hall. Maybe I should have asked for the grand tour because as it was I had to walk fast to keep up. There were a few more open rooms—one looked like a study with another fireplace.

“Where do these lead?” I asked, pointing to one of the chimneys.

“Out of the top of Lucy’s around back.”

“You mean they’re nine floors long?”

Well, that was a stupid question. Of course they had to be, otherwise they wouldn’t reach the surface. Thankfully, Navarre didn’t make fun of my stupid question. He simply nodded in response as he took another turn to the right. There was a set of enormous doors at the end of the hall which he flung wide in one graceful gesture.

I found myself standing in the middle of Navarre’s bedroom and my heart nearly stopped. The first thing that caught my attention was the bed. It was huge. I wasn’t even sure how anyone could have gotten it down here. It was draped with fabrics the color of Navarre’s green eyes. A large canopy hung overhead and long sheer curtains of the same green enclosed the bed. It was also elevated slightly from the rest of the floor, almost like a centerpiece. Two large steps led up to Navarre’s bed and as I looked at them I took an unconscious step forward.

“What do you think?” he asked, bringing me out of my trance.

“It’s beautiful.”

I looked to my right then and noticed another massive fireplace. What was it with Navarre and fire? But, it probably got very drafty living so far beneath the ground. Maybe they were necessary if anyone else ever came down here besides him, or maybe he just liked to watch the flames.

“They remind me of home,” he whispered and I jumped.

I hadn’t realized he was standing so close behind me.

“When I was young we used to sit around large fires in the village while the old men would tell stories.” He sighed. “I like to watch the fire sometimes, and remember.”

Navarre took me by the hand and led me toward the bed which had fascinated me ever since I’d laid eyes on it. He pulled back the sheer curtain and I saw two dress boxes

resting on the satin sheet. I also noticed several large furs of some sort draped across the foot of the bed. They added a warm, yet savage feel to the room, which was also decorated with ancient tapestry and various antique pieces of furniture. I wasn't sure how I had missed the dress boxes the first time, but I was eager to find out what was inside.

Navarre opened the first box and presented it to me.

"Although I haven't had the opportunity to become as intimately familiar with your sister's anatomy, I took the liberty of guessing her size. Do you think she'll like it?"

"It's beautiful," I whispered as I reached out to touch the fabric. It was satin, strapless, and absolutely beautiful. The gown was a pale shade of orange, almost gold and it would go wonderfully with Priscilla's blond hair. "She'll love it," I said.

"Excellent. I'll have Alex take it to her. After all, he'll be dressed to match."

"You picked out his outfit, too?"

"Of course," he said as he walked over to the call box beside the fireplace.

After he had summoned Alex I followed him back through the living room to the elevator. He opened the doors and placed the dress inside. When he turned back around I said, "I don't mean to be rude, but what exactly is Alex to you?"

I knew the question seemed odd, but I still wasn't sure exactly what role the weretiger played. I wasn't jealous, just curious.

"In vampire terms, he belongs to me. He is my animal to call, my eyes and ears during the day and often times, breakfast."

Okay. "How about in non-vampire terms?"

"He's my friend," Navarre said, smiling as he led me back to his bedroom.

We walked back over to the bed where he held up the second dress box and turned it to face me. As he turned, he lifted the lid and my breath caught.

"What do you think?" he asked.

The dress he showed me was red, not a gaudy shade, but the deep rich color of blood. I lifted it from the box and realized that it was silk. The back of the dress dropped low and was trimmed with what looked to be diamonds. There were rows of them down the fabric. The seam which ran around the front and hung off each shoulder was also strung with diamonds. It was the loveliest gown I'd ever seen. It was also the most expensive piece of clothing I'd ever even looked at, let alone held in my hands.

"Wow." It was all I could think to say.

"I'm glad you like it," he said softly. "You can change in here."

I gave him a questioning look.

"I have a dressing room just through there," he said, pointing toward a door on the far end of the room. "The bathroom is on the other side."

"I suppose you have makeup in there, too?" I asked.

"I also took the liberty," he informed me with a smile.

"You had this planned all along didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You're not used to taking no for an answer are you?"

"No," he said, laughing softly as he left the room.

I hesitated for a moment. Even though I knew that Navarre was in his dressing room, because I'd heard him close the door, I was still hesitant to take off all my clothes. My underwear would show if I kept them on, the dress was cut that low. And wearing a

bra was out of the question.

“Bastard,” I said to myself.

He had to have known when he picked this out that I wouldn’t be able to wear anything underneath. I laughed as I snatched off my shirt. I was determined to change as quickly as possible. If Navarre thought he was going to come strolling back in and get a free show he was sorely mistaken. But, I had to give him credit for trying.

I had just pulled the dress up over my breasts when I heard him enter the room. Actually, I heard the velvet on his thighs rub together. I turned around and everything else was forgotten. Nothing could have prepared me for the sight of him walking toward me. Navarre moved with the inherent grace that all creatures of the night seem to possess. His outfit was an eclectic mix of centuries. The velvet pants he wore hugged his thighs like they were getting paid for it. He was wearing knee high boots, which glinted in the soft light. His shirt hung open in layers of ruffles until it reached his cummerbund. His long frock coat came to just below his knees, moving slightly with his every step. The ensemble was entirely black, and entirely ravishing. His long auburn hair was pulled back and as he drew closer to me I noticed he’d used a black velvet ribbon.

“Allow me,” he whispered as he turned me around.

It took me a second to realize he meant to zip my dress. However, it didn’t take nearly as long for me to remember I wasn’t wearing any underwear and that he’d just helped to cover up the crack of my ass.

Navarre’s smile was appreciative as he turned me to face him once more.

“Does it fit all right?” I asked, smoothing the fabric over my thighs.

“Perfectly,” he said. “Wait here.”

While I stood there fidgeting and searching in vain for a mirror Navarre returned with a small carrying case.

“Sit down,” he instructed, motioning me toward the bed.

“You’re going to do my hair and makeup?” I asked skeptically.

“Just sit down,” he said. A sarcastic smile curved his lips and I’ll be damned if it didn’t look as good on him as those tight pants.

I sat still while Navarre moved a small footstool over and placed it beside the bed.

“This might work better,” he said, patting the stool.

I took that as my cue to move. Navarre sat in front of me, with the makeup case beside him on the bed and I felt like I was going to have a panic attack. It wasn’t having a man or even having a vampire do my makeup that unnerved me—it was sitting directly between his thighs.

“Look at me,” he said softly and I blushed.

Okay, so I’d looked. Big deal. Actually, it looked to be a *very* big deal and I knew my blush was growing deeper by the second.

“Try not to blush,” he said with a teasing smile. “I don’t want to put on too much rouge because I can’t correctly judge your color.”

I snickered. “You couldn’t think of somewhere else to sit me besides right between your legs?”

“It seemed fitting.”

He winked and my cheeks felt like they were on fire. It wasn’t like I was some innocent. Why was it that Navarre made me react like a thirteen-year-old girl

sometimes? Then I reminded myself that, compared to him, I was little more than a child. If he had fought with William Wallace, that made him at least seven-hundred years old. What sorts of wicked things could he have gotten up to in all that time? “*Bad, girl,*” I scolded myself mentally. The last thing I needed right now was to be thinking of all the little tricks he must have picked up over the centuries.

Still, I couldn’t seem to think about anything else. I’d also be damned if I let his little intimate games get the better of me. As Navarre tilted my chin up, I scooted forward on the stool, placing one hand on each of his thighs. My knees were nearly touching him. I could feel the heat rising from his body underneath my hands and knew he had already fed tonight. I caressed him lightly through the velvet while Navarre applied some light foundation to my face.

I knew that I was luxuriating in the feel of someone else’s warmth flowing through his veins, but I didn’t care. He leaned forward, seemingly intent on dusting my cheeks and forehead with a light rouge. However, when he moved Navarre’s shirt fell open and the scent of his cologne drifted up to me. I breathed deeply and moaned.

“What are you wearing?” I asked.

“Clothes. Why, don’t you approve?”

“I meant your cologne,” I said, trying to make my voice sound steady. “It’s almost as good as your voice.”

Instantly I began to wonder what else about Navarre was as good, as intoxicating, and could reach just as deep within me as his voice was capable.

“Tell me,” he purred as he began to apply my eyeliner. “What does it make you feel?”

I took a deep breath, not only to steady my nerves but to breathe him in again.

“It feels like you’re inside of me,” I said. “It touches me like your voice, only softer, more subtle. It’s at once rich, yet simple. New and familiar.” I took another deep breath and with my exhale I confessed, “It makes me want to forget about dinner and find out what’s underneath those clothes.”

“Then it works better than I could have hoped,” he said, tilting my face slightly as he applied eye shadow.

“What do you mean, it works?”

“It’s a new fragrance I’m thinking of marketing,” he said.

“What’s it called?”

“Vamp.”

“That’s appropriate,” I said, unable to hide my smile. “I love it. I’m not even angry for being used as a test subject.”

He laughed and I was nearly overcome with the urge to push him back on the bed. Damn that voice of his. I was tired of waiting for the right place or the right time. I’d wasted too many years of my life looking for someone else that I felt comfortable going to bed with. And now that I’d found him and he was actually sitting on the bed, we were supposed to leave in a few minutes. Maybe I had ignored the fact that I’m a woman for too long. Maybe I’d let grief rule my life too strongly. Whatever the reasons I was reminded, almost painfully, every time I was near Navarre that I *was* a woman. A woman whose needs had not been met for quite some time. Not just the needs of my body, but the needs of my soul.

“Let Alex and Priscilla go to dinner,” I said softly, and was surprised at the sultry

sound of my own voice. "I've got what you need right here," I purred as I rose to my knees on the footstool.

"Open your mouth," he said.

I did as he asked and Navarre applied my lip liner, seemingly oblivious to what I had just said.

"Now turn around," he whispered after he'd finished with my lips.

I sat back down, feeling rejected as he quickly pulled my hair into a French twist. I felt him place some sort of comb in my hair to hold it in place. That was the quickest anyone had ever whipped my unruly hair into shape.

I felt Navarre slide one leg from behind me before helping me to my feet. He appraised his handiwork before leading me toward his dressing room and placing me in front of a full length mirror. I hardly recognized the woman before me. She was slender and elegant. I had never thought of myself as beautiful. Pretty, yes. But this was amazing.

"What did you do to me?" I asked.

"Nothing."

Then I noticed how well we went together. Vampires do have a reflection, by the way, and his was stunning. It shocked me to see how well we matched, not just our clothes, but *us*. He was tall and strong, where I was small and petite. My hair looked like ebony underneath the lights and his like fire. Both of us were pale. Once again the only visible imperfection he had was the scar on his chest which was mostly covered by ruffles. Even though you couldn't see it, my heart had a scar too. For lack of a better word, I looked like I belonged to him.

Chapter Sixteen

“I forgot something,” Navarre said after admiring our reflection for a moment.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out the most stunning piece of jewelry I had ever seen. The necklace was short and encrusted with diamonds. In the middle was an enormous tear-shaped ruby.

“Oh, my goodness,” I said as he put the jewels around my neck and fastened the clasp. “It’s ... breathtaking.”

“It belonged to one of the wives of Henry VIII,” he said, smiling as he continued to admire my reflection.

“Really? Well, don’t get your hopes up,” I teased. “I’m not known for losing my head over anyone.”

Navarre’s laugh was rich and deep, and it melted me to my toes. He put his hand on the small of my back and began to lead me toward the door. As we reached the hall Navarre turned to me. “Just so you know, that little exchange just now,” he said, gesturing toward the bed. “That was not rejection. If we hadn’t already made reservations and if I didn’t know Alex was waiting, you’d be lucky to get out of here in a week.”

I was stunned. It wasn’t until we reached the second elevator that I thought to ask, “Where are we going?”

“To dinner,” he said with a smile. When I looked uneasy, Navarre wrapped his arm around me and said, “You will enjoy yourself if you just relax. I wouldn’t take you anywhere I thought you might be uncomfortable.”

When he touched my hand I believed him. My psychic powers weren’t super strong, but his were and he let the truth of his words flow to me. I ran my hand inside his coat and around his waist. The feel of his body beneath the silk shirt was so warm and welcome.

“I’m cold,” I whispered.

Navarre looked down at me and I was instantly warmed by the look in his eyes. Whether it was hypnotism or just raw emotion that heated me from the inside out, I couldn’t say, but it was also welcome. He placed one hand on the back of my neck, gently tilting my face upward as he pressed a soft kiss against my lips.

“Are you guys hungry or what?” Alex asked as the doors opened. He took one good look at us and said, “I’ll take that as an ‘or what.’ ”

Navarre pulled back from me with a reluctant sigh and asked, “How are we doing on time?”

“Louis is sending the plane now. It should be here by the time we reach the runway.”

“Plane?” I asked.

“You mean he didn’t tell you?” Alex asked as he handed a black velvet wrap to Navarre.

“It was supposed to be a surprise,” the vampire replied flatly.

“Oops. I already told Priscilla.”

While Navarre put the wrap around my shoulders I took a good look at Alex. He was almost as tall as Navarre with dark shoulder-length hair, which he had secured with a ribbon tonight as well. The shirt he wore matched the color of my sister’s dress. It hung open like Navarre’s, but was devoid of ruffles. The rest of his ensemble consisted of black silk pants and a long frock coat, similar in style to that of the vampire’s.

“Where is my sister?” I asked as we walked through the club toward the back exit.

“I’m not sure,” Alex said, checking his watch. “It doesn’t take this long to pee.”

“She’s here,” Isidoor said.

We all turned to see him leading her down the hall toward us. The long orange gown swished around her ankles as she moved. It was form-fitting until about mid-thigh, giving her a sort of mermaid look. I noticed that Priscilla was wearing a shimmering scarf in place of jewelry and suddenly felt a bit overdressed. Obviously Navarre had meant for me to look as if I belonged with him, and clearly I did. I just wasn’t sure I liked standing out so much.

“She was having a bit of a bad hair day,” Isidoor explained. “Nothing that a quick potion couldn’t fix.”

“Thanks,” Priscilla said as the fairy kissed her on both cheeks.

“You too,” he said, pulling me toward him. As he kissed me, Isidoor explained, “Fairy kisses are good luck, but I don’t trust airplanes.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” I replied sarcastically.

“She’ll be fine,” Navarre said as he ushered the fairy back toward the end of the hall.

“Wow,” Priscilla said. “What did you do to my sister and why didn’t you do it sooner?”

“Gee, thanks,” I said. The sneer I gave her was more joking than nasty.

“You look great,” she said, smiling as she hugged me. “And where did you get this?” She touched the necklace almost reverently.

“It belonged to one of the wives of Henry VIII,” Navarre explained as he put an arm around each of us while Alex opened the door.

“I could see losing my head over jewels like that,” Priscilla commented.

Navarre and I exchanged a look before we burst out laughing.

“What?” she asked.

We all crawled into the backseat of Navarre’s limo while he told her about my earlier comment. Once they had finished laughing I asked, “Now where exactly are we going? I really don’t like suspense.”

“Miami,” Navarre replied.

“Miami?”

“Why, don’t you like to fly?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never flown before.”

“Well, better on a private jet than in coach somewhere,” Alex assured me.

“A private jet?”

“All right, fine,” Navarre said with a sigh. “I can’t surprise you people. The club we are visiting tonight is in Miami, like I said. It is owned by Louis the XIV and it is called *Decadence*. He’s sending his jet to pick us up at a small private airport not far

from here. We will dine and then we will dance.” With his last words Navarre made a dramatic flourish with his hand and a mock bow.

“Louis the XIV is a vampire?” Priscilla asked.

“The real one, yes. Not the one in the history books,” Navarre answered.

“Can we meet him?”

“I can almost guarantee it,” he said, smiling. “You see, for someone as old as myself, reservations are not just a courtesy, they are required.”

“What he means is Louis doesn’t want someone as powerful as Navarre just showing up,” Alex chimed in.

Navarre rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

“So, he goes by Louis?” I asked.

“Yes, and he’s a very nice man. I’m sure he’ll greet us at least briefly before going about his business. Louis and I have never had a problem. There is no reason to believe that he will be joining us tonight.”

We arrived about fifteen minutes later at a small local airport that catered to private planes. Priscilla and I stepped out and immediately looked toward a small black jet waiting on the runway. Down the side of the plane in an intricate swirling font the word *Decadence* was painted in red.

“It’s a little macabre,” she said, but not as if it was an insult.

“I kind of like it,” I said, taking Navarre by the arm as we walked toward the plane.

The inside didn’t look like a plane at all. It looked like a room from a dungeon, but much more extravagant. Lush red drapes covered the windows and there was a black coffin propped in one corner and held in place by chains. The seats were black and there was also a wrap-around sofa near the mini bar. Matching red pillows were scattered about the room in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some were suede, most were silk, but a few were made of faux fur.

“This Louis guy certainly knows how to travel in style,” Priscilla said.

Navarre sat beside me and helped me with my seatbelt. I laughed when I noticed that the clasp on the belt was in the shape of a bat.

“I love it,” I said. “He must have a sense of humor.”

“He does,” Navarre assured me. “Like I said, he’s a nice guy.”

I was so caught up in admiring my surroundings, especially the one sitting next to me that I forgot to be nervous. Normally the thought of being thirty seven thousand feet in the air would have bothered me, but not tonight. Once we had reached cruising speed Alex turned on some music and mixed us a couple of drinks.

“He’s a nice enough guy that he doesn’t mind you opening up his private bar?” I asked.

“Louis has money to burn,” Alex said with a shrug.

The flight wasn’t so bad. I hadn’t been sure what to expect, especially since it was my first time. I didn’t think I would ever truly enjoy flying, but it was at least bearable. On the way Alex kept us entertained by showing off some ideas he had for a few new dance routines. It beat the hell out of an in-flight movie.

He was showing us a move which involved a quick shake and then a turn when Navarre said jokingly, “Maybe you should have been a go-go dancer.”

“Speaking of going,” the pilot said over the intercom. “Fasten your seatbelts,

we're about to land."

We all laughed while Alex said incredulously, "He's been listening the whole time."

Another limo met us at the airport and in no time at all we were pulling up in front of the club. According to what Navarre had told us, *Decadence* was a very upscale vampire club. There would be no hiding around corners and biting unsuspecting people. Everyone here was willing and bloodletting was done in private. It also wasn't a hangout for your typical fang bait, those preferring the company of vampires for mostly sexual reasons. It was somewhere where the higher end of vampire society could bring a date and not be harassed.

The club matched the jet. The large brick building had been painted black and neon red letters spelled out the name across the black awning out front. A red carpet had been rolled out and there was a crowd being held back by a velvet rope.

"Don't any of these people have somewhere else to be on a Monday night?" I asked Navarre as he opened the door and took my hand.

"You're here, too," he teased.

"So I am." I sighed, and took another good look at the vampire as I looped my arm through his. "In case I forget to tell you later, you look wonderful tonight," I said softly.

He kissed my forehead and the crowd broke out in murmurs while cameras flashed.

"That wasn't for the cameras," he said, leaning forward to whisper in my ear.

I could hear Alex closing the door and the sound of my sister's heels clicking on the pavement, but I couldn't take my eyes off Navarre.

"Save it for later," Alex teased.

He patted Navarre on the shoulder and we started toward the door. I noticed that Alex deliberately hung back with Priscilla on his arm. I'm sure it was some sort of protocol I wasn't aware of. Still, I felt a bit awkward walking in front of them like I was something special instead of having them walk beside us. Maybe I could pick up an online class in vampire etiquette sometime. It would save me a lot of confusion.

We paused beside the door, but only for a second. The bouncer seemed to recognize Navarre. They both gave each other a curt nod and the doors were swung open while the crowd continued to take pictures.

"Do you think we'll make the news?" Priscilla asked in an undertone.

"Maybe," Navarre answered. "Now, aren't you glad I bought the matching shoes?"

"I owe you one," she said.

The moment we entered the foyer, a tall, dark vampire stepped forward to greet us. He was a few inches taller than Navarre, with hair as dark as mine, and eyes like the sky after a storm. He looked like he'd stepped off the pages of a Victorian novel, the dirty kind that priests hid underneath their beds. This new vampire was dressed in blue and gold. He had the look of royalty and I knew instantly that he must be Louis.

"Greetings, *mon ami*," he purred.

He and Navarre hugged briefly. They went through the motions of kissing each cheek, but didn't actually make contact. However, the gesture wasn't lacking in warmth or sincerity.

“Louis, it’s been a long time.”

“Too long,” Louis said. “And who are your lovely guests?”

“You mean you don’t remember me?” Alex asked.

Louis laughed and all of the sudden, I wasn’t nervous anymore. His laugh didn’t stir me in the same way as Navarre, but it made me feel warm all the same. Everything about him radiated the fact that we were safe in his establishment.

Navarre snickered, but otherwise ignored Alex as he replied, “This is Sandra Ashton, and her sister, Priscilla.”

“Ladies,” Louis said as he kissed both our hands. “It is a pleasure.”

Louis continued to talk to Navarre and motioned for us all to follow. The inside of the place looked like a palace. The floors were made of large white marble tiles and columns lined the halls. A massive staircase led to another floor and I couldn’t help but wonder what was up there, but I didn’t have time to ask.

We passed through what looked like an eighteenth-century parlor room before reaching the main part of the club. The dance floor was enormous. Booths were lined along the walls where people sat talking and drinking. The floor was sloped almost like a theatre and near the bottom there was a band.

“I would say that we have a live band,” Louis said as he placed an arm around my shoulder, “but every one of them is a vampire.”

I laughed as he turned back to everyone else and said, “Unfortunately, I cannot visit more with you this evening. I have pressing business elsewhere. I’ll have someone take you to the dinning room and I do hope you will visit us again soon. There is always a shortage of beautiful women on the dance floor.”

Louis motioned to one of the waiters before leaving the room with an elegant bow and a swish of fabric.

Chapter Seventeen

“I really liked him,” I whispered to Navarre.

“I told you so. Trust me.”

“Was he gorgeous or what?” Priscilla said softly.

“You know it doesn’t do any good to whisper in front of a shifter, right?” Alex asked.

Before she could reply the waiter who Louis had signaled asked us to follow him to the dining room. We went back through the main foyer and down another hallway to the right. As soon as we stepped through the doors my mouth dropped. It was the most lavish thing I’d ever seen. Golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling. At least a hundred tables were spaced throughout the room, with booths lining these walls as well. Everything was painted a soft cream color and trimmed in gold. Maybe saying that Louis had money to burn had been an understatement. As Zanna used to say, he had money to wipe with.

“Right this way,” the waiter said.

He maneuvered us through the crowd and over to a private booth which wrapped around a beautifully decorated table.

“I’ll have your menus right out,” he said. “Would any of you care for a drink first?”

Alex and Priscilla both ordered a cocktail. I felt a little strange ordering even a drink in front of the vampire, knowing that he couldn’t have anything.

Navarre seemed to sense my discomfort.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Didn’t you say you liked red wine?”

I smiled nervously and ordered a sweet merlot. Once the waiter left and Alex got up to show Priscilla where the bathrooms were, I explained how I felt to Navarre.

“I’m still new to this,” I said. “I’ve never really been around vampires and I’m not sure what’s appropriate behavior and what isn’t. I didn’t want to eat or drink in front of you, knowing that you couldn’t have anything. It felt cruel, for lack of a better word.”

He took my hand and squeezed it gently.

“It’s been a long time since anyone took such things into consideration where I am concerned.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. And to answer the question that you keep asking yourself, yes I *can* read your mind and you should be ashamed of yourself.”

The waiter returned with our drinks just then, so I couldn’t really react.

“I know you think that your powers aren’t strong, but you are mistaken,” he said once the waiter was out of sight again. “You’re not just a feeler, you are a full-blown empath. You just don’t know it.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I am both telepathic and empathic,” he explained. “When I was a child I thought I was going mad because I heard voices. It took me a while to figure out I was

hearing other people's thoughts. I bet you've always thought you needed to get a grip on your emotions, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, you've gotten a grip all right. Your shields are so strong it's ridiculous, but you aren't controlling your own feelings. Your keeping everyone else's from getting in."

"But ... I don't understand. How come I didn't realize this? And how come you do?"

Navarre put his arm around me as he explained, "Because I am very old and I know the signs. No one has as many intuitive feelings as you have described to me without being an empath."

"But why are you telling me this now?" I asked.

"Because I wanted you to know something else," he said with a smile.

"Which is?"

"If you take my hand, like this." He took my hand again and patted it lightly. "Not only can I sense your feelings, but if you let down your guard I can hear your thoughts. If you concentrate really hard, I can even ..."

"Taste what I'm eating," I interrupted.

"Exactly."

"That's amazing. Wait, can you really read my thoughts? *All* of them?"

This time it was not just his laughter, but his hands which caressed my arm.

"Only the ones you broadcast. I believe that people are entitled to their privacy. Especially in the times we now live where so little is private anymore. If you can't keep something to yourself in your own head I think that's a sorry state of affairs."

I agreed. Once Priscilla and Alex got back the waiter came over to take our order. Normally, I would have ordered pasta, but Navarre was in the mood for a nice rare steak. I wasn't sure I could stomach rare, so we compromised and I ordered the steak medium-rare with steamed vegetables on the side.

Priscilla kept giving me strange looks when I asked Navarre's opinion on dinner. I decided that now was not the time to explain. After we had eaten, we decided to take our drinks into the main room by the dance floor. Here we were escorted to another booth where a different waiter asked if we'd care for anything else to drink.

"And for you, sir?" he asked Navarre. "Something from the bank, something freely given, or something live?"

"Something freely given," Navarre replied. "Preferably drunk and AB negative."

"Very well," the waiter said with a nod and turned on his heel toward the back of the room.

"Do I even want to know what all those choices meant?" I asked.

"He was offering me something from the blood bank that they keep stored, something donated freely tonight, or for someone to come to our table and let me bite them."

I raised my eyebrows at the last part but didn't comment. I knew that Navarre had to feed in order to survive. I just didn't like the thought of him biting someone else right in front of me.

"Don't they serve vampires in the dinning room?" I asked, wondering why he hadn't ordered anything before.

“They do, but I thought it best not to drink blood while all of you tried to eat.”

“Oh.”

I had two more glasses of wine and was starting to feel a little light-headed. Navarre had been drinking fairly heavily as well and had gone to brush his teeth. He said something about it being bad form to kiss me with blood on his teeth.

When he returned a few minutes later he asked softly, “Would you like to dance?”

“Sure.”

Navarre helped me to slide out of the back of the booth where I’d been sitting. Alex and Priscilla hadn’t stopped dancing for longer than it took to gulp down a drink since we’d entered the main room. I loved to dance, but I hadn’t done so in years.

“Wait,” I said, putting a hand on Navarre’s arm to stop him. “I haven’t danced since I was in high school.”

“And what kind of dancing did you do?” he asked calmly.

“Mostly ballroom, but I can learn most anything. I was part of a dance group at school, but that was a long time ago.”

“Do you tango?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s show them how it’s done,” he said, nodding toward Alex and Priscilla.

As he led me onto the floor, Navarre exchanged a look with the band leader, apparently he told him telepathically what he wanted to play. The other vampire quickly dismissed the band and made a selection on a strange-looking juke box.

The song began to play and when Navarre took me by the hand I thought my heart would jump through my throat.

“Just follow my lead,” he said softly.

I tried to do as he said and concentrated on opening myself up to him. I felt the shields he had referred to begin to lower. Sure enough, he’d been right about that. I had just never realized that those shields were blocking everyone else’s emotions and not just my own.

As soon as I lowered my defenses, I felt Navarre’s power slip into my mind like pulling on a silk robe. He pulled me against him and it was as if I became a part of him. His movements were so fluid and natural and I moved with him. I let him take me ... let him wear my body as if it were a cloak. The vampire guided me not just with his steps, but with his mind.

Halfway through the dance he told me, “You can open your eyes now.”

And when I did I was startled at the emotions I saw when he looked at me. However, I didn’t just see them, I felt them. Not that I had doubted his word, but this definitely proved Navarre was right about me. I knew with that look that he wanted me. He wanted to throw me down and take me, right there on the dance floor. But Navarre wanted more than just my body or my blood. He craved me. I could feel it more strongly than I’d ever felt anything in my life. He longed for the press of my flesh against his and the scent of my hair. He wanted to meet the dawn in my embrace and awaken to my touch. If I didn’t know better, I would say that he was falling in love with me.

Maybe all of the alcohol-laced blood he had consumed that night was getting to him. Maybe he revealed more than he had intended to. Or maybe ... he wanted me to

see. Before I knew it the dance was finished and I was brought back to reality. As soon as the music ended it was like I came out of a trance. To my surprise, everyone was clapping, including my sister and Alex.

“Not bad,” the weretiger said as he followed us back to our booth. “Not bad at all.”

“It was great,” Priscilla said. “I think you’ve improved since high school. Pity you don’t have a regular partner to practice with.”

“I think I do now,” I told her, still staring at the vampire in amazement.

We all continued to dance and drink until late in the night when Navarre informed us that we had barely enough time to make it back home before sunrise. We arrived at Lucy’s twenty minutes before dawn. Navarre kissed me goodnight and went inside, leaving Alex to drive us home.

“I’m starving,” I said as we trudged wearily into the kitchen.

“I’m too tired to eat,” Priscilla said.

She plopped down at the table and took off her shoes.

“Good grief, my feet hurt.”

I looked to where she had her elbows propped on the table and saw a note. I picked it up and read, “You girls get some sleep. I can handle the shop today.” It wasn’t signed.

“That’s sweet,” I said.

“Yeah, especially since I’m too tired to work today, anyway.”

“You mean hung over,” I teased.

“Not yet, I’m still drunk.”

I looked at the clock as I told her, “It’s four-thirty now, which means that Zanna isn’t even up yet. She wrote this before going to bed. So, I’m gonna go shower, change, and cook breakfast in my own kitchen so I don’t wake her. Want to meet me there in about twenty minutes?”

“Sure.”

I hurried through to the guesthouse, knowing that if I slowed down I would fall asleep. As exciting as the evening had been, no amount of remembered thrills could keep me awake for long. Priscilla and I had closed up the shop early to go to the spa, but we’d had a hell of a day before that. Since the murder, protection spells were flying off the shelves faster than we could put them together. We were also selling a lot of incense to keep away evil spirits.

My feet were sore from dancing and my back ached from wearing heels. Normally, I dressed for comfort. I slipped off the dress and hung it carefully in my closet. Since I wasn’t wearing anything underneath, I removed the comb from my hair and started toward the shower. As I walked past the mirror I noticed the exquisite necklace Navarre had given me. I probably should have left it with him since I didn’t own a safe. I slipped the necklace off and placed it carefully into my jewelry box before getting in the shower.

The warm water was nearly enough to do me in. I didn’t know how I was going to stand up long enough to cook breakfast, but I was starving. By the time I got out I didn’t even bother with pajamas, I just put on my robe and padded barefoot toward the kitchen. The smell of fresh coffee and bacon greeted me and I nearly cried with relief. Priscilla was standing over the stove wearing a pair of boxer shorts and an undershirt.

“Aren’t you cold?” I asked.

“It feels good,” she said. “Can you stir the eggs for me?”

Once we were seated at my small kitchen table she asked, “So, how long can you stand it?”

“Stand what, lack of sleep?”

“No,” she answered around a mouth full of eggs. “How long can you stand being around a hunk like Navarre and not sleeping with him?”

I laughed. “Hey, it’s not like I’m the queen of restraint or anything. As a matter of fact, if we hadn’t been interrupted so many times that little formality would be out of the way.”

“Little formality, huh? Are you telling me you aren’t nervous about going to bed with a vampire?”

“Why should I be? He’s just a regular *stiff*.”

“Ugh,” Priscilla said, making a face. “That has got to be the worst joke I’ve ever heard.”

“Give me a break, I’m tired. But to answer your question, yes I am a little nervous. But I trust Navarre. Besides, you’re one to talk. I can’t contract vampirism just from having sex with Navarre. There has to be an exchange of blood. You, on the other hand, with your shapeshifter fetish could get scratched during foreplay and end up howling at the moon.”

“Only if he’s partially transformed,” she corrected.

“Still, that sounds more dangerous to me.”

Chapter Eighteen

When I woke up it was the middle of the afternoon. I couldn't remember the last time I had slept so soundly. I threw back the covers and pulled on an oversized T-shirt and turned on the television. I was brushing my teeth when the news came on.

"Last night the remains of a shape-shifter were found ten miles from where the body of a local woman was discovered just days ago."

"No," I gasped.

As the reporter continued to talk my knees gave in and I collapsed onto the bed. What she was saying was just too terrible. This couldn't be true. Maybe someone had put something into my drink last night and this was all a hallucination. But as she continued to speak I knew it was true, I just didn't want to believe it.

"Oh, my God," I kept mumbling as I rummaged through the closet.

I pulled on the first pair of jeans I saw and threw on a jacket on my way out the door. I was already in the car when I noticed I was still wearing fluffy red slippers.

"Fuck it," I said, starting the engine.

I didn't know what else to do or where else to turn. I was going to Navarre.

"He should be awake by the time I get there," I said to myself as I checked the clock for the fifth time.

When I arrived it was still early, especially for a club, but the doors were unlocked. Isidor was behind the bar polishing glasses when I burst through the doors. He seemed a little taken aback by my appearance. When he raised an eyebrow at my fuzzy red slippers, I said, "Don't ask. Isidor, I need to see Navarre." He gave me another strange look and I added, "Please, it's urgent."

With these words the fairy seemed to drop all pretenses. "What has happened?"

"Turn to Channel Seven News—you'll know in a minute. I'm going down."

I didn't wait for him to reply, I just went straight for the elevator. It didn't even occur to me until I reached the eighth level that I couldn't go any further without Navarre. The panel by the door was set to match his fingerprints. No one else ever went this far without him.

I propped my head against the wall and started to cry. I couldn't believe what had happened. My hand, which was now wet with tears, slipped and I bumped my head on a small knob. Hey! There was a call box above the panel.

I pressed the button hopefully and said, "Navarre, it's Sandra." When there was no response I tried again. "Please, I need to see you. Something has happened." I hated myself for the desperation in my voice.

I was just about to start crying again when I heard a clicking sound followed by the vampire's smooth voice.

"It's open," he said.

The doors opened and I stepped inside. As soon as the elevator opened I was running across the tile. My slippers didn't make a sound, but I knew he heard me. I saw Navarre as he entered the room and couldn't seem to keep myself from crying. He was

standing at the entrance to the hallway at the edge of the large living room. It was obvious that he had not been awake long and that he had probably been sleeping naked. He was wearing a dark green robe which opened in front to reveal his chest, and as he walked toward me, a tantalizing expanse of thigh. His long hair spilled forward as he reached for me and I fell into his arms.

“I knew you were coming,” he whispered as he squeezed me tighter.

“How?” I asked, still nearly choking on my tears.

“I’ve had a heightened awareness of you ever since I took your blood.”

“Oh, Navarre,” I wailed. “He’s dead. Verne is dead.”

“I know,” he said softly, stroking my back and hair. “I just heard the news.”

“He must have been killed while we were in Miami. While we were dancing and having a good time he was being tortured,” I cried. “It’s just too horrible.”

“Does your sister know?”

As he asked this, Navarre lowered us both to the rug where I crawled onto his lap, wrapping myself around him like a distraught child. It was bad enough to have someone I *didn’t* know murdered. But I liked Verne. Even though I barely knew him, I had liked him.

I shook my head in response to Navarre’s question.

“I’ll have Alex tell her,” he said. “I think she liked Verne. Not as much as she likes Alex, but there was definitely some chemistry between them. So, you came straight here?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I didn’t say anything to anybody. I came straight to you. I’m sorry, I just ... needed you.”

That sounded desperate to me, but Navarre seemed to understand.

“I know what you mean,” he said. “Ever since we met I seem to need you, too.”

I pulled back enough to look up at him and was surprised to find his eyes full of both compassion and desire.

“It’s very disconcerting,” he said, a slow smile curling his lips. “I haven’t needed anyone for quite some time.”

“So, why now? Why me?”

He moved closer, his lips hovering above mine as he replied, “I have no idea.”

Navarre kissed me and with the soft touch of his lips my sorrow was forgotten. Poor Verne and his torment was barely more than a cobweb in the back of my mind as I ran my hands up and down Navarre’s arms. I could feel the power flowing through him, not just the raw power of his body, but his magic. He was so firm beneath the smoothness of his robe. I continued to caress the fabric, enjoying the way he felt underneath as the vampire deepened the kiss.

“There is so much death in this life,” I gasped. “I have seen too much death.” I sat up enough to wrap my legs around his waist as I took Navarre’s face in my hands. “I want to live,” I breathed against his lips. “If this night is all I have left, then I want to know it fully.”

“Yes,” he said with a sigh. “No more interruptions. Not tonight.”

Navarre rose to his feet with me still wrapped tightly around him as his lips devoured me. In a moment our kiss became a mixture of teeth, and tongue, and fangs. I always felt a little light headed when he kissed me, but this was different. I glanced at the floor and found that we were floating down the hall. The doors to his bedroom flew

open as if kicked by some unseen force. I barely had time to register how amazing this was before Navarre tossed me gently onto the bed.

“Wait,” I panted as he ran one hand up my thigh. “I want to see you by the firelight ... all of you.”

I had never been shy, but still I was surprised at my boldness. Navarre slid from the bed, his robe making a soft slippery noise as he moved over the covers. I watched as he moved gracefully toward the fireplace. There was wood already stacked for a fire. He reached out his hand toward the logs. His hair began to rise slowly from his shoulders, almost like it was full of static electricity. I jumped when what looked like a small bolt of lightning shot from his fingertips and ignited the fire.

Navarre turned to me slowly and I was both frightened and aroused by the sight of him. His hair billowed about his shoulders as if it were blowing in the wind. His eyes were once again a solid emerald and his fangs were now clearly visible when he smiled.

“Forgive me,” he said and his voice vibrated with power, “but I grow impatient for the feel of you beneath me.”

Something inside of me rose to the challenge of his words, even as I rose to my feet.

He reached for me and I took a step forward as I replied, “Who said you could be on top?”

He laughed and it was a sexy, wicked sound which seemed to wrap itself around me. By the time I reached Navarre, all of my earlier fears were gone. I was no longer afraid of the vampire, even though he was the most powerful being I had ever encountered.

I hungered for the feel of his body against mine and I, too, was growing impatient. I reached out and pulled the sash on his robe. As it fell open I resisted the urge to look down and instead focused on his eyes. I knew that he could take me with his power any time he wanted to, but he didn't. In fact, it is never a good idea to look a vampire in the eye, especially one as powerful as Navarre.

I pressed both my palms against his chest as he continued to look down at me, hungry and waiting. His skin practically burned into my hands and I knew it must be due to his magic, for Navarre had not had the chance to feed yet tonight. I also noticed that his heart wasn't beating.

I ran my hands up and over his shoulders, causing his silk robe to fall to the floor. His hair still crackled with what I could only describe as electricity as I touched it tentatively with my fingertips. Something in my touch seemed to calm him. His hair became like spun silk in my hands and as the firelight played across his features I could no longer resist my desire to see the rest of him.

The sight of his bare naked flesh was more than I could have imagined. He was beautiful in a way that words could not describe. Every curve was where it should be, every chiseled feature was exquisite in its placement. I also noticed that though he hung large and full, he was not yet aroused.

“I need blood first,” he purred, answering my unspoken question.

“Then take it,” I said.

I pulled the T-shirt over my head and tossed it into the chair by the fire. The shock of cold air against my skin reminded me that I wasn't wearing a bra. But I had come too far to be shy about things now. I kicked off my slippers as well.

“This is a dangerous game you play, my darling,” Navarre said.

He took a step forward, but did not touch me.

“There is a reason we do not often feed from the same source more than once.”

“And why is that?”

“Because it creates a bond—a blood link between us and the donor.”

“What about Alex?”

“He chose to serve me.”

“And this is my choice as well,” I said softly.

I trailed one hand across my breast, indicating to him exactly where I would like to feel his bite. Images came to mind, ancient paintings of the Nosferatu. They had been depicted throughout the centuries creeping into bedrooms, seducing the innocent, possessing them with a bite just above the heart.

“To offer the blood of one’s heart is a sacred thing,” Navarre whispered.

One moment we were standing nearly a foot apart and the next I was in his arms. More than one set of hands seemed to caress me as the vampire buried his face against my breasts. But he did not bite me, not yet. His lips wrapped around one nipple, pulling it gently between his teeth. I cried out and he asked, “Is that pain or pleasure?”

“Both. Don’t stop.”

Even as my mouth went dry, I felt my pussy becoming wetter with his every touch. He sucked harder, drawing more of my flesh into his mouth. I ran my fingers through his hair as I pressed him against me. It had been too long since I had felt anything close to this level of desire. He flicked his tongue across my nipple, sucking at the same time and I almost came.

I was so wet I thought my jeans must be soaked by now and I knew through his touch that the vampire could sense my arousal. He could smell my desire, even if he weren’t touching me. If he knew it already, then why bother hiding? This was not the place for shyness, nor was it the time to withhold a part of myself.

He unzipped my jeans slowly, releasing me only long enough to pull them to the floor. As he knelt before me and untangled my feet from the pants, Navarre looked up at me. His eyes were still completely emerald, completely vampire. However, the look on his face was very human. Lust, it would seem, was interpreted the same in all species.

He continued to look at me as he ran one hand up my thigh and one long finger inside of me. I moaned and threw back my head as his mouth claimed me. He pulled my flesh into his mouth, just as he had done with my breast, sucking until the point of pain, but not quite beyond the realm of pleasure.

His tongue found my clit and I growled, “Fuck, yes.”

It’s not usually my style to growl or use the f-word in the bedroom. However, I wanted this so bad I was beyond caring. I wanted to be possessed by him *completely*. There was no turning back from what I felt, even if I had wanted to.

Navarre lifted me from the ground with a hand on each side of my butt and lowered me into the chair. His tongue never left my clit and now his rhythm grew faster. I wanted him so bad that I hurt. I ached to have him enter my body and I wouldn’t be satisfied until I felt him splitting me in two. And knowing that he could read these thoughts set me off even more.

He lifted his head from between my legs and his body trembled with desire.

“Navarre,” I panted. “I’m not taking any birth control.” I hated myself for the

reality check, but part of me was just too damn practical to forget.

He smiled. "I've been dead for over seven hundred years, I think we're safe."

"Then, I want you to have me," I said. I caressed my left breast again as I added, "All of me."

Without hesitation this time, Navarre lowered his head to my breasts. I felt a sharp pain as his fangs penetrated the flesh just above my heart. But just as soon as I felt the pain, it was gone, replaced instead with pleasure. If he didn't hurry up I was going to come and I wanted him inside of me when that happened.

I felt him spread my legs wider, pressing himself against me. I could feel him growing harder as he placed his cock just at the entrance of my body. He began to slip inside my pussy and I moaned, yet he would not penetrate me fully. Navarre drank deeply of my blood as he continued to grow. Then, just when I thought I couldn't stretch any more, he took me completely and I screamed. It had been a while since I'd been with a man and my muscles were incredibly tight.

He grew still for a moment as he buried himself deep inside of me. Then, slowly, he began to move. As he pumped in and out of my pussy I could feel the tension building. My back arched as I ground my hips against him, rising to meet his every thrust. I growled, snarling like a wild thing in a cage as I dug my nails into the smooth skin of his back.

"Make me come," I commanded.

And with these words Navarre took one last pull of my blood and release like I had never known flooded my body. I felt my muscles spasm around him, gripping him, pulling him down inside of me with a ferocity I had not expected.

He lifted his head from my breasts and my blood stained his sultry lips. I pulled him to me regardless, plunging my tongue inside of his mouth, mimicking what his body was doing to mine. I tasted my own blood and it only made me want him more. I lifted my hips higher, wrapping my legs around him.

"Say my name," I whispered hoarsely against his lips. "I want my name on your tongue when you come. Speak my name and know that it's *me* who touches you, *me* who holds you, and my body that commands your desire."

He pulled my head back, wrapping my hair around his hand as he whispered, "Sandra," against my lips.

Chapter Nineteen

As he spoke my name, I felt the vampire's heart begin to beat again beneath my palm. And with his release, his eyes were normal once more. I would say that they no longer held magic, but that's not true. They held magic, only of a different sort.

Wow. I had never experienced anything like that in my life. I know that women always say that sort of thing to a new lover, but I *really* hadn't. It was so far beyond physical and yet almost too primal to be emotional. It was the best sex I had ever had and the look on Navarre's face told me he was reading my thoughts.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"I'm great," I said. "But I'll be better after a shower."

He laughed and it did me good to hear. Navarre helped me to stand as he said, "A bath would be better, trust me."

I propped against the chair for balance and watched as the vampire walked across the room. Damn him, he was still the most graceful thing I had ever seen. Every move, every play of muscle across his backside was like a dance. Well choreographed for maximum effect.

He pulled one of the large furs from the bed and brought it back to wrap around my shoulders. My first thought had been to tell him I wasn't cold, but I looked down to see goosebumps on my arms. Maybe I was wrong.

"I'll only need a few moments to prepare it," he assured me as he rubbed my shoulders for warmth. Then he winked and said, "I'll be right back."

When I saw him walk through the door to his dressing room I was confused. How could we take a bath in there? Oh, well. I didn't give it another thought as I walked unsteadily toward the bathroom.

I opened the door and stared open mouthed at my surroundings. Navarre's bathroom was fabulous. The walls were white and unlike the rest of the walls, which were made of some other sort of rock, these appeared to be marble. The floor was also white marble with golden veins running through it. There was a double vanity to my left where I paused to look at my reflection.

My long hair looked wild as it spilled over my shoulders. I clasped the fur to my chest with one hand and just above this I saw Navarre's bite. Two small red dots, with a trickle of blood beside each. It looked like red paint against my pale skin. I soon left the mirror in favor of other necessities. I laughed when I found that the toilet had a golden handle.

While I was there, I couldn't resist looking around. Besides, the cool tile beneath my feet somehow helped to slow my heartbeat. I was still awfully worked up. I felt drained, no pun intended. And at the same time, I had never felt so alive.

There was a large linen cabinet in front of the ornate commode, which was stained white to match everything else. Everything was beautiful, but I wanted to know what was at the back of the room, for it seemed to drop out of sight. Where I thought there should have been a bathtub, I found steps. And at the bottom of these steps was a

shower big enough for five people. I would have inspected it more closely, but I didn't think my wobbly knees were up to steps just yet.

By the time I was done freshening up and stepped back outside, I found Navarre waiting for me. He was draped across a Victorian-style chaise lounge at the foot of the bed and looking as delicious as the apple must have to Eve.

"Everything all right?" he asked softly as he rose to meet me.

"Fine."

"Then step right this way," he said, placing his hand against the small of my back.

Navarre led me through his dressing room. Where I would have expected the door at the back to connect to another bedroom, I was instead taken into the largest bathroom I had ever seen.

A massive rectangular tub was sunken into the floor. A pillar extended to the ceiling from each of the four corners. The ceiling was lower in this room than in the cavernous living room, but still probably thirty feet high. The walls were also carved from rock here, but they were a pale shade of tan, almost like clay except lighter. There was also a stone bench at each end of the pool, made to look more comfortable by the large red velvet pillows tossed almost carelessly across them. There was another, larger linen closet in this room and another door at the back.

When Navarre caught me looking at this door he said, "The sauna is through there."

He took my hand, causing the fur, which had been wrapped around me, to fall to the floor. I could see steam rising from the water that was covered in rose petals. In fact, you could barely see the water past the lovely crimson flowers. Navarre took a step down into the water and it reached to his knees. He helped to lower me down so that I was sitting on the second step. The water here reached my chest.

I watched as he took the final step down and relaxed back into the water. I was lost for a moment, watching him float among the rose petals.

"How did you do all this in just a few minutes?" I asked.

"Vampire speed."

"Mmmm," I said as I took a deep breath. "Did you pour your cologne into the water?"

"I will also be marketing a line of bath products by the same name," he informed me and I could hear the smile in his voice.

As I watched the vampire luxuriating in the suds and rose petals it occurred to me that he had not expressed the same enjoyment of our lovemaking as I had. I was beginning to feel unsure of myself. Maybe I had done something wrong.

"Navarre," I said softly. "It has been a long time since I ..."

My words trailed off as he emerged from the pool. Water and rose petals flowed over his body and steam began to rise where the hot water had touched his skin. His long hair hung in silken tendrils, clinging to his face and neck as he moved toward me. Navarre slid up the steps, resting a hand on either side of my hips and moving so that I had no choice but to separate my thighs.

His lips nearly touched mine as he said, "It has been a hundred years since I've made love."

"Well," I replied shakily. "At least you haven't lost your touch."

His smile reached his eyes and my heart.

“Nor have you,” he assured me as he brushed a stray hair back from my face.

“How old are you, Navarre?”

“Seven-hundred-and-forty-four this month,” he replied.

“I’ve always had a thing for older men.”

With this admission Navarre closed the distance between us, penetrating me with both his tongue and his long hard shaft. I moaned as he entered me and threw back my head, giving him access once again to my throat. He pressed his face against my neck and kissed me gently as if he were savoring the feel of my flesh beneath his lips.

“Do you regret being with me tonight?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then open your eyes,” he said softly.

When I did I realized I was crying. Navarre cradled me in his arms as he continued to move inside of me. He kissed my forehead and wiped his face across my tears. It had been so long since I’d loved anyone but John. Even though he was gone, he had remained with me all these years. But something inside of me was trying to break free. It was the part of me that had missed being loved in return. I had kept that part of my heart hidden for so long that it hurt to be free. The good thing was that I knew that Navarre could feel my emotions. I knew that he could feel the storm raging within me and he accepted it. He didn’t pull away.

“You can trust me with your heart,” he whispered.

And I did. He had told me before that if he said I was safe, then I was safe. I had never felt as cherished as I did when he held me that night. He lifted me against him in the water and I wrapped my legs around his waist while Navarre rose to his knees. We were still deep enough in the pool that our bodies were mostly covered. I braced my hands against his shoulders and began to move up and down, sliding our bodies together as I rode him.

He lowered his head to press a kiss to the bite marks on my chest and I felt my muscles tighten around him. The vampire let out a startled gasp as I lowered myself fully onto his shaft.

“If I trust you with my heart,” I panted, “then what do I get in return?”

“All that I am,” he whispered against my lips.

I kissed him hungrily, then said, “Good, because I won’t have you re-neging on our agreement.”

Navarre smiled enough to show fang as he rolled me in the water until my back was against the side of the large tub. He moved his arms underneath my thighs, lifting me higher and spreading my legs further apart. Water splashed between our bodies as he drove himself deeper into my pussy. I could feel him from my lips all the way to my womb, completely filling me. Navarre kissed me deeply and as his tongue moved around mine I could feel my muscles growing tighter. Orgasm was already just a heartbeat away and as he thrust into me one last time, I came again. By the time we were finished this time, my entire body was shaking and I knew I wouldn’t be able to stand.

“I’m sorry,” he said, lowering me once more onto the steps.

“What for?” As I asked this I tried to sit on my own and found that I wasn’t able.

Navarre supported me with an arm around my back as he answered, “I have taken too much from you tonight. Forgive me.”

“I’m all right,” I protested. “Really.” But I could feel my eyelids trying to close.

“You know, great sex has never had this effect on me before.”

He laughed. “Only great, huh? Well, it’s not just the sex, it’s the loss of blood. Talk to me while I wash your hair. You need to stay awake for just a little while longer.”

Navarre moved with me through the water to the other end of the tub where he had shampoo propped beside one of the stone benches.

“I feel like I’m in shock. Isn’t that only supposed to happen when you’re hurt really bad?”

“Pain and pleasure sometimes have similar effects on the body,” he said softly.

Navarre sat on the second step this time and placed me between his legs as he began to wash my hair. I turned slightly in his arms and ran my fingertips over the scar on his chest.

“I have a scar on my heart too,” I said. “It’s just not as visible.”

“I know,” he said. “I could taste your sorrow on my tongue. Tell me about him. What happened?”

Navarre listened quietly and rinsed my hair while I told him about John. I didn’t leave anything out. I was completely honest with him, right down to wanting to use the Necronomicon to resurrect him.

“But Zanna stopped me,” I said. “And I’m glad. I can’t believe what I almost did.”

“It is natural to want to hold onto those we love,” he said.

“Yes, but the man I loved was already gone. Whatever would have come back ... it wouldn’t have been John.”

“You are wise for one so young,” he replied and his smile was kind.

“Have you ever been married?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “But that does not mean I am opposed to commitment.”

I laughed and it took more energy than it should have.

“Stay with me,” he said as he lifted me from the water and sat me on one of the stone benches.

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn’t planning on going anywhere and he stopped me.

“Not just tonight,” he said softly. “But for a little while, until I think it is safe for you to go home.”

His concern was truly touching. “But what about my sister and Zanna?”

“I’ll have someone watch the house. I would offer to let them stay here also, but I think they would refuse.”

“You’re probably right.” I sighed. “Although Priscilla might not mind staying with Alex. Zanna is just too stubborn.” Navarre got some towels from the linen cabinet, and as he began to dry me another thought crossed my mind. “Why would you think we would be in danger any more than anyone else?”

“Just a hunch,” he answered with a shrug.

I wasn’t buying it. Even though I hadn’t known him long, I could tell that he was lying. Maybe it was my empathic abilities, or maybe Navarre was just a bad liar.

“You’re not very good at lying,” I said as he knelt down to dry my feet. “You’d think that in seven hundred years you’d have a chance to get the hang of it.”

I could tell he wanted to smile when he looked back at me, but he fought the urge.

“Navarre, what are you not telling me?”

“It’s nothing,” he said as he wrapped my long hair in a towel and began to dry himself.

“I want to know.”

“I could be wrong,” he said flatly. “You would worry for nothing. I don’t have any proof.”

“I want to know,” I insisted.

My teeth had started to chatter. When Navarre noticed this he wrapped the fur back around my shoulders.

“Right now?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, teeth still chattering.

“But you are weak.”

“I want to know.”

“You should rest.”

“Navarre,” I whined.

“All right fine,” he said.

I watched as the vampire opened another closet and took out a long black robe. The back of this rich looking garment touched the floor and the lapel was a deep emerald, which matched the satin ruffles at the cuffs. When he turned to walk back to me an expanse of one sculpted thigh was revealed with every step. I suppose that if you took large steps with legs that long, you simply couldn’t help revealing something. I didn’t object when he took me in his arms. Not just because I didn’t have the strength, but because I wanted to be near him.

Navarre sat me on the rug in front of the fire, which I was surprised to find still burning. He placed more wood on the fire before bringing over two large pillows. Once I was reclined comfortably, he brought another fur from the bed to cover me. My teeth were still chattering, but I did feel better.

“I’ll be right back,” he said softly and left the room with a swish of fabric.

Chapter Twenty

He left the bedroom doors open and a draft blew up the hall. Good grief, this place was drafty. I snuggled down further in the furs and turned my attention to the fire. A few minutes later I felt Navarre sit down beside me. I must have dozed off. He'd even closed the doors and I hadn't heard a thing.

He helped me to sit up and I snuggled up against him as he explained, "Keep in mind, this is only a theory."

I looked down at the book he held. It was leather-bound and very ragged and old looking.

"What is it?" I asked.

We both knew I wasn't referring to the book literally. Of course, I knew it was a book. But it gave off a strange, otherworldly energy. It was a feeling I didn't like at all.

"It's the grimore of a very old, very dark wizard."

I shivered, but this time it wasn't entirely because of the cold.

"But how come you've got it?"

"Because I killed him. He was intent on sacrificing a friend of mine, and this I could not allow."

"What happened?" I asked. I scooted closer to Navarre, not just for warmth, but because something in his words scared the shit out of me.

"There is a spell in this book," he said as he began to turn the ancient pages. "It calls for the blood of a human, and the blood of a shifter, among other things."

"But what is it for?"

"To resurrect the demon known as Razael, one of the fallen."

I gasped, bringing a hand to my throat. "But why would anyone want to attempt such a thing?"

"The same reason people have done countless stupid things for centuries." When I only raised an eyebrow in response he said, "Power."

"What kind of power?"

"The wizard who first attempted this believed that he could capture the power of the demon in a stone. This stone was supposed to be able to contain him, much like trapping a djinn, which is also a bad idea. According to this," he said as he pointed to one of the pages, "whoever wore this charm would be granted untold power. He would become some sort of demigod."

"What else does it say?" I asked, because I couldn't read the language the book was written in. The font was intricate and swirling, and completely foreign to me.

Navarre turned the page and I gasped when I saw the drawing. It was a magic circle, eerily similar to the one I had witnessed when Marcus took me to the scene of the first murder. Then I looked closer and noticed a few subtle differences. Some of the symbols had been changed, not that I knew what they meant.

"You see, there are slight differences in this and the circle you described to me," Navarre said.

“Marcus didn’t show you the picture?” I asked.

“No, but your mental images are fairly clear,” he said, not even bothering to hide the fact that he read me like a book. “In this ritual, the blood would be drained, as well as the heart removed.”

I coughed a little to keep from throwing up.

“The thing that has me confused is the bite marks. It just doesn’t make any sense for a vampire to be participating in something like this, if this *is* what is going on.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because,” he said softly, “the blood of an immortal is also required.”

“What else is required?” I asked shakily.

“I don’t know,” he said. “As you can see, this was the last spell written in the grimore and apparently he hadn’t finished recording it when he died.”

“Shit. What about the charm, the one to capture the demon?”

“I never found any such thing,” he told me as he closed the book. “Maybe he hadn’t finished creating that, either. Besides, I’m not even sure what it would look like.”

“Is this why you think I might be in danger, because you don’t know what else is required for the spell?”

“Yes. There is magic in your blood as well. Even though I found no evidence to suggest it, a witch might also be needed as part of the ritual.”

“What about wolfsbane?” I asked suddenly. “Is there any mention of it in there?”

“No,” Navarre said, shaking his head in apparent confusion.

“I found a piece at the scene of the first murder,” I told him. “Marcus bagged it as evidence, but he didn’t know why it was there either.”

“Maybe the killer was already gathering it to help him capture a werewolf,” he suggested.

“Poor Verne,” I whispered.

Navarre wrapped his arm around me as he said, “You really should rest.”

“Wait, you said you didn’t think that any of the witches and wizards visiting here had anything to do with the murders.”

“I still don’t,” he said. “Especially since they have already gone home.”

“So they weren’t even here when Verne was killed?”

“No.”

“But ... I don’t know of any other witches close by.”

“Neither do I,” Navarre said as he lifted me from the floor. “Like I told you, it’s only a theory.”

“Well, it’s more than the police seem to have,” I said as he opened the sheer curtains around the bed. Navarre pulled back the covers and helped me to get comfortable. He piled the furs over me as I breathed deeply of his scent on the pillows. I blinked and by the time I looked back he was already walking toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Not far,” he assured me. “I have some business to take care of. Rest,” he commanded softly and I felt my eyes begin to close.

I would have preferred to have Navarre next to me, but I didn’t have the strength to argue.

Once I was asleep, I had almost the exact same dream as a few nights before. There were some differences, the most noticeable of these was another man. I was

pressed between two men this time. Sweat covered our bodies and I moved easily between them. One of them was Navarre and the other I didn't know. Other than the feel of their hands on me only two things stood out, blond hair and those same piercing dark eyes I had seen before. The strangest thing was ... I had feelings for them. I felt so close to them, and yet they were strangers to me. Navarre was barely more than a stranger to me. But somehow I knew, even in the midst of my dream, that he shared this vision with me. And neither of us understood it.

* * * *

It was much later when I was startled awake. I found the vampire wrapped tightly around me, and I snuggled back against him. He was warm, inviting, and completely naked. I rolled toward him and pressed my face against his throat. He moved slightly and I wondered what time it was and what had awakened me.

"Navarre, are you there?" It was Alex's voice coming through the call box.

I huddled down deeper in the covers and tried to ignore him.

"Sandra? Is anyone awake down there? For fuck's sake, the police are here!"

That got my attention. I tried to sit up, but Navarre's hand on my midriff stopped me.

"Why are the police here?" he asked groggily.

"They want to ask about Vern."

"Do they know Sandra is here?" he asked.

"They know she isn't at home, because they went there first," Alex said.

"So, are they looking for Sandra or me?" Navarre asked.

"Both. Can you come up?"

Navarre rolled over and looked at the clock. I was surprised to see it was four o'clock in the afternoon.

"Draw the blinds," he said. "I'll be up shortly."

"Sandra," Alex said softly. "I know this might be awkward, but could you come too? The police chief is really insistent on wanting to talk to you."

"I don't mind talking to him," I said. "But I don't have anything to wear."

My only options were the clothes I had left here before going to Miami, which were dirty, and the oversized T-shirt and jeans I had come here in the day before. Neither really appealed to me. I wanted to at least preserve some semblance of dignity when I spoke to Marcus. There was no law against spending the night with your boyfriend and for lack of a better word, that's what Navarre was. However, I didn't want to talk to the police looking like I'd been thoroughly tumbled in bed only moments before.

"Navarre sent me for some of your things," Alex informed me.

"They're in my dressing room," Navarre added.

"Oh," I said. "Well, I guess I'll get dressed."

I slid from the bed and nearly stumbled down the two steps to the floor. Navarre was instantly at my side to support me.

"Will I be all right?" I asked.

As I looked up into his emerald eyes I wondered if I would still stay if he said no. If I was honest with myself, probably so.

"You'll be fine," he assured me. "You're just still weak from the loss of blood. I am truly sorry for taking so much. I got a little carried away." His sheepish grin

absolutely thrilled me.

“You mean I did all that for you?” I teased.

“You certainly did.”

He continued to smile at me, and the world seemed like a better place. I still wasn't sure what to think about Navarre. There was so much to him that I didn't know. But one thing I knew for sure, he was still there when I closed my eyes. In fact, it would seem that his lovely visage was permanently imprinted on my mind.

I was a bit steadier on my feet by the time we reached his dressing room. This space was as big as my bedroom, but to the vampire it was only a closet. He even had a small decorative settee in one corner in case someone wanted to watch whoever was standing in front of the mirror.

He gestured toward what looked like a medium sized treasure chest.

“I hope you like what I picked out,” he said.

“But you said that Alex went to get some of my things.”

His smile was wicked as he answered, “These are your things.”

I gave him a skeptical look as I knelt down and opened the chest. It was full of clothes, but right on top was the laciest, most scandalous collection of underwear I'd ever seen.

I held up one black bra that looked to be more sheer lace than anything else.

“Demi bra,” he explained. “I think it would make your breasts look positively luscious.”

“I know what it is,” I said with a sarcastic smile. “What I don't know is where the rest of it went.”

He laughed. “The matching panties are right here,” he said, holding up what looked like a piece of lace and string.

I had to admit, they were gorgeous. I just wasn't so sure of how I would look in them.

“I know that you like to dress for comfort, my darling. However, a body like yours was meant for greater things.” He bent down to pick up an aqua blue bra. “Don't give me that face,” he said softly. “Just try it. I guarantee it is not as uncomfortable as you imagine. If you hate it, you can wear whatever you like.”

I took the bra from him, along with the matching panties, which were trimmed in black lace. I slipped on the panties first, then the bra before turning toward Navarre. The look on his face said it all. He whispered something in a language I wasn't familiar with before saying, “You look ravishing, my dear.” He licked his lips suggestively and I laughed.

“We've got to hurry.”

“Very well,” he said with a sigh. He reached into the chest and tossed me a black sweater. It was beautiful and soft. I ran a hand over the fabric as he said, “See, I didn't abandon your preferences entirely. You could at least give me a little leeway on the underwear.” He winked before tossing me a pair of jeans.

“You got my favorite jeans.”

“Yes, even though they have holes in them,” he said, rolling his eyes in mock irritation.

As I buttoned the jeans and ran a comb through my hair I asked Navarre, “What are you going to wear? We've got to hurry. I'm sure Marcus isn't waiting patiently.”

I watched his reflection in the mirror as he pulled on the long black robe he had worn the night before with the emerald green trim.

“You’re going upstairs in nothing but a robe?” I asked incredulously.

He raised one eyebrow and slipped on a pair of black silk pajama pants underneath.

“Fuck the police,” he said. “This is my home. I’ll dress how I wish.”

Well, whoopee. I wasn’t about to argue with that. Navarre did put on a pair of slippers and brush his hair before we walked out of the room. Unfortunately, he and Alex both had gotten plenty of underwear, but neglected to bring any of my shoes. I was forced to wear my fuzzy red slippers upstairs to greet Marcus.

Navarre pushed the button for the elevator and I asked, “What were the hearts for?”

“Beg pardon?”

“The hearts. They were removed from both victims. What for?”

“Oh. There was only a vague mention of it in the grimore. I believe they were supposed to be burned as part of the final sacrifice.”

I shut my eyes really tight, trying to fight back the images that came to mind.

“Navarre, if they show us any pictures, I don’t think I can look. I don’t want to remember Verne that way.”

He put his arm around my shoulders while we rode to the next level. Lucy’s was almost dead this time of day. Very few of the vampires who boarded there were awake as early as Navarre, and most of the shifters were either cleaning or working in the restaurant on the third floor. Just the thought of food made my stomach growl.

“We’ll get you something to eat as soon as we’re done,” Navarre assured me.

“I’m sorry for not thinking of it before, but I sometimes forget the necessities of humans.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I haven’t felt much like eating before now.”

Chapter Twenty-One

By the time the elevator opened on the first floor, Marcus was livid. It was obvious just by taking a look at him. I didn't need any mind reader skills to figure out what was wrong either. Well, most of it at least. He was jealous. There were two other officers with him and they both took a step back as Navarre entered the room. Ooo, these guys were definitely a poor choice for backup. They were both terrified of vampires. Not only that, but they were broadcasting it so loud I knew Navarre must be picking it up if I was. I could feel what they were feeling, but he could feel it and hear it. Thanks to Navarre tipping me off about lowering my shields, I was picking up all sorts of things. I was also still kicking myself in the butt for not realizing how simply I could have done this in the first place.

"It's the middle of the afternoon," one of the officers mumbled.

"So it is," Navarre replied.

The two officers were obviously put off by the fact that Navarre was awake before dark. And Marcus was put off by the fact that he'd come upstairs in his pajamas. It was a subtle statement, yet its meaning was clear. This was his property, and so was I.

"I know you're not here for a social call," the vampire said. "So, what can I do for you?"

"I assume you've already heard the news?"

Navarre nodded.

"Then you can start by telling me where you were Monday night," Marcus said. He glanced my way, but didn't direct any questions toward me yet.

"I was in Miami," Navarre answered.

"All night?"

"I returned here shortly before dawn."

Marcus ran a hand through his hair and sighed with frustration. I could tell that he was certain Navarre had some sort of involvement in this because of the bite marks on both victims. And if it wasn't Navarre, then he was convinced he knew who it was.

Marcus looked toward me now and said, "I suppose you were with him again?"

"Yes, I was and my sister, too." He made some sort of sputtering noise and I explained, "Not like that. We were with him in Miami. So was Alex." I gestured toward the weretiger.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but can anyone back up your stories besides relatives or dates?" He directed this question at all of us.

"Louis Philippe will back up our story," Navarre said, and the policemen all gasped. Apparently, they were familiar with Louis.

"You've got vampire royalty willing to vouch for you?" Marcus asked. He was obviously surprised.

He just stood there staring at us for a moment before turning to leave.

"Marcus, wait," I said, taking a step forward. He turned back to me and I asked, "Was it the same as last time? Did someone do ... all of those horrible things to Verne?"

His expression seemed to soften when he looked at me and I could tell he regretted having to explain the details.

“No,” he answered softly. “The victim was tied over a similar circle, but not exactly the same. His blood was drained and the heart was removed. Those were the only similarities.”

I paused for a moment and tried not to cry when I said, “But, he was a werewolf and it isn’t too far from the full moon. How did they manage to restrain him?”

“Silver chains and wolfsbane,” he answered.

“How’s his brother?”

“You know him?” he asked.

“He’s only an acquaintance, but I couldn’t help but think about how this must have affected him when I heard.”

Marcus took a deep breath and asked, “Will you step outside with me for a minute?”

I looked back to Navarre and he nodded.

Once the doors closed behind us Marcus said, “Jules is really shook up, but that’s not why I wanted you to come out here. Are you really serious about this guy? I mean, he’s immortal, doesn’t that bother you?”

“What? You can’t be serious. You brought me out here to ask about who I date? That’s none of your business.”

“I know it’s not, and I don’t normally act like this. I like you, you know that. But I literally can’t get you out of my head and I don’t know why.”

I tried to turn back for the door, but Marcus’ hand on my arm stopped me. He turned me to face him as he asked, “Can you honestly tell me that you aren’t attracted to me? Can you say for certain that you haven’t wondered what would have happened if I’d kissed you that day, instead of just wiping dirt off your face?”

I looked up into his blue eyes and wondered if Marcus could feel what I felt. Then I reasoned that maybe if I touched him, he could. I placed my hand against the side of his face, rubbing my thumb back and forth across his four o’clock shadow.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I have wondered and I do find you attractive.”

“But?”

“But I think I am falling in love with Navarre,” I answered honestly.

I saw regret pass over his features before he asked, “You’re not letting him bite you, are you?” I tried to leave again and he pulled me back once more. “They say it becomes an addiction, like a drug. I’m just trying to make sure that what you feel is real and you’re not just hooked.”

“Are you asking out of concern or jealousy?”

“Both. You know, relationships between humans and vampires are not exactly high on the list of lasting relationships.”

“Neither are relationships with cops,” I said.

This time, he let me go.

After the police left, Navarre went with me to the third floor where I ordered breakfast and took it back to the lowest level to relax as best I could. He sat with me on the floor of the living room while I ate.

“I know that the thought of being stuck here for a while may not be entirely appealing to you,” he said. “But I do feel you would be safer with me, at least for a

while.”

“But what if I need to go out for something?”

“Then you’ll take Alex with you, or one of the other shifters. Since a vampire was called for in the ritual also, I’m keeping a closer watch over those under my protection. They have been ordered to keep out of sight as much as possible.”

I sighed heavily. As much as I liked being around Navarre, he was right. I didn’t like the prospect of having to stay in one place.

“Is there a gym?” I asked.

He pointed to a passageway off the right side of the living room. “Help yourself.”

Navarre watched me eat and I knew by the feel of him in my mind that he was reading my thoughts. “Surely the prospect of being alone with me for an extended period of time is not so terrible?”

“No,” I answered reluctantly. “It’s not you really. It’s just that I like to get out and do things. I like to stay active.”

“Oh, I assure you, my darling, you will be active.”

* * * *

Navarre was a man of his word. One week later I lay beside the large heated pool while he rubbed me down with hot oils. Candles burned as the soft smoke of incense rose to the ceiling. The scent of him filled the air, rising from the water to float through the room. His long auburn hair tickled my back as he leaned over me and I was lost momentarily to the feel of his hands against my bare skin.

Staying in for a week hadn’t been nearly as difficult as I had thought. In fact, it didn’t feel like a week had gone by at all. It seemed like just yesterday I had agreed to stay with him. And yet here I was one week later, falling prey once again to his gentle touch.

Navarre’s hands continued to roam over my body and however sensual the act, it was not sexual. He caressed my curves reverently. For the first time in my life I truly felt like my body was a temple and Navarre had come to worship. His touch brought my mind back to the dreams which had continued to haunt me. I now knew by his own admission that Navarre definitely shared these dreams. But just like myself, he had no idea who the other two men were. As erotic as these visions were, it was becoming frustrating to not know whose hands were on my body when I closed my eyes.

He sighed and his breath caused goosebumps over my back. “All right, you win. Let’s go out tonight,” he said.

“Really?” I asked, rolling over. “But I wasn’t going to complain.”

“I know,” he said with a smile. “You’ve been so accepting of my decision. But, I know you like to get out.”

I sat up and hugged him. Even though I had enjoyed our time together, he was right, I needed some fresh air. A night on the town should do just the trick.

“Where are we going? Back to *Decadence*?”

“Not tonight. I’ve got someplace else in mind. As a matter of fact, it isn’t too far from here.”

“Can we take Priscilla? She’s been cooped up for a week too.”

This was true to a certain extent. She and Zanna had still been working at the shop, but were only allowed to go to work and home. If they needed groceries or other supplies, Navarre had several shifters under orders to do as they asked. He wasn’t taking

any chances with my family. He'd also sent one of the dancers, a werewolf named Jack, to take my place temporarily at the shop. Of course, he couldn't perform magic, but he could help run the register.

"Of course," he said. "Unfortunately, Alex won't be able to join us this time. He's been helping me keep a tighter rein on things around here and I need him to stay."

"Then who will be her escort?" I asked.

"Leave that to me."

For a moment I wondered what he would wear, and then frowned at the thought of the vampire putting on clothes. He snickered and I knew he was reading my mind again. I couldn't help it. There had been barely a moment when he hadn't been naked this past week and I had grown quite accustomed to the sight. I don't think I could ever get tired of looking at him.

I should have known better than to wonder if he had something for *me* to wear. I think Navarre shopped for me while I slept. He helped me slip into a pale silver dress. It reached to just below my knees, but was cut higher in front, coming up in a V shape at about mid-thigh. It dipped low in back, and clasped around my neck in front and, naturally, it was sleeveless. Vampires weren't affected by the cold like humans so they only thought of fashion instead of practicality when it came to evening wear.

"It's beautiful, but I'll freeze," I protested.

Navarre placed a beautiful fur wrap around my shoulders in response to my complaint.

"What about my hair?" I asked.

"This place is more casual than *Decadence*, leave it down," he said as he ran a hand through my long wavy locks. "Besides, I like it this way."

I watched while Navarre finished getting dressed after helping with my makeup. It wasn't that I couldn't do it myself, I just liked sitting between his legs while he did it for me. Call me the queen of cheap thrills if you like, but it was the highlight of my day.

When he turned to face me, Navarre held out his arms, inviting me closer. He looked so good that I found it hard to decide if I liked him better with clothes or without. He was wearing another black suit, which was embroidered with silver. His shirt, another which hung open with ruffles in front, was also silver. I absolutely love those ruffled shirts. For a moment I wondered if Navarre knew this, and that's why he wore them so often.

"What do you think?" he asked as I put my arm around his waist.

"I think that once we get back, I'll enjoy taking you out of those clothes."

"You've had me all to yourself for a week, woman. Are you insatiable?" he teased.

When it came to Navarre, I certainly was. "I'm not sure," I answered. "I think I may be closer to a necrophiliac."

He laughed. "You're sick," he said as he led me to the elevator.

We met my sister upstairs standing next to a vampire I had never met. Priscilla stepped forward to hug me and Navarre asked, "How are you?"

"Looking forward to getting out," she said. "I nearly shit my pants when you called."

Navarre laughed. "I aim to please."

"You look great," Priscilla said and hugged me again.

“You, too.”

She was wearing a golden, strapless dress, which reached to just above the knee. I noticed she also had a matching shawl. When I raised an eyebrow at the ensemble she gestured toward Navarre and said, “He picked it out. Hey, I’m not complaining. This is the first time you’ve ever had a boyfriend who shopped for *me*.”

I turned my attention back to the vampire who was standing behind her, and dressed to match. He was wearing a black suit with a silk shirt made of the same shimmery golden fabric as my sister’s dress. His hair was nearly as long as hers, and just as blond.

“Sandra, this is Robert,” Navarre said.

I extended my hand in greeting to the new vampire and was a bit surprised when he kissed it. I could tell he wasn’t very old, at least not by vampire standards. I’m not sure how I knew that, I just did.

“It’s a pleasure,” Robert said with a smile, and his blue eyes sparkled.

My, he was handsome. I couldn’t help but smile.

“Shall we be on our way?” Navarre asked.

As soon as I looked back at Navarre, Robert’s good looks were forgotten. My heart froze in my chest. I wanted to lick the bare skin at the opening of Navarre’s shirt. I wanted to run my fingers through his hair, and leave some of my own teeth marks on his lovely ass.

Holy shit. I was shocked by my own thoughts. *Was* I becoming addicted? Was it vampire magic, or was he just that good looking?

My sister and Robert started toward the back door and Navarre took my hand. He leaned in close as we walked and I breathed in his cologne. I was going to buy a shitload of stock in Vamp just as soon as it hit the market.

“With you,” he whispered, “I am as close to human as I am capable of being.”

He let me know with those soft words, that it wasn’t magic. At least, not the deliberate kind.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“The Bucket of Blood?” I asked incredulously as our driver pulled around back to park. “You brought us to a club called *The Bucket of Blood*?”

I wasn’t exactly angry, just really shocked by the name. Besides that, the place looked deserted, that is until you reached the parking lot. The front of the building looked like it should be condemned. However, once you rounded the corner into the parking area, it was nearly overflowing with cars.

“Calm down,” Navarre said, laughing. “It isn’t as bad as it sounds. This is a vampire club, exclusively. No shifters or other preternatural beasts of any kind. Unless of course, they are accompanied by a vampire.”

“What about us?” Priscilla asked. “Won’t we kind of stick out?”

“Not at all,” he assured her. “You ladies are our guests. You’re with me and around here that means hands off.”

Once we were parked, Navarre helped me out of the backseat and I asked, “Why does it look deserted out front?”

“The club owner, Nicholas, makes it look that way to keep people out.”

“Humans, you mean?”

“Yes. Once we’re inside, you’ll find it anything but deserted.”

I gripped his arm tightly as we walked around the building with Priscilla and Robert trailing behind us.

“Navarre, I’m nervous,” I whispered. “I’ve got a strange feeling about this place.”

“I’m sorry, my darling,” he said softly, stroking my hand where it rested on his arm. “I’ve never had any problems here before. Nicholas and I get along well.”

“Is he one of yours?”

“Originally, no. He moved here from Europe many years ago and asked for my protection.”

“And?”

“And I granted it to him. He keeps to himself and has never caused any trouble.” He stopped at the corner of the building and turned back to me. I heard Priscilla and Robert stop as well to keep from running into his back. “Do you wish to return?” he asked.

I could tell he was serious. Navarre wasn’t being sarcastic. If I objected that strongly to the place, he was willing to pack up and go home. That should have been a comfort, but it just made me feel guilty. He had planned a little outing for us and I was ruining it for no reason.

“No,” I answered finally. “It’s probably just because I haven’t been here before. You saying it was exclusively vamp and all made me nervous. I just don’t like standing out in a crowd.”

“Then you should have been born uglier,” he teased.

Navarre leaned forward and placed a soft kiss against my forehead before

continuing toward the door. As soon as we stepped inside a tall dark vamp approached us. He looked like he was going to say something, then recognized Navarre and thought better of it.

“Enjoy your evening,” he said, and bowed as he swung the doors wide for us to enter the club.

“That was bizarre,” Priscilla whispered to me as we stepped inside.

“Wow,” I said, looking around.

The Bucket of Blood was nothing like I had expected. I felt like I had stepped back in time. It looked like an old juke joint from the 1920’s. Not the kind respectable people went to, but the kind that flourished during prohibition. The kind where the mob hung out and moonshine was delivered to the backdoor. They were even playing blues music.

I had to admit as I turned to Navarre, “I like it.”

He smiled as he took my wrap and Priscilla’s and handed them to another vamp by the door. We were shown to a booth near the back of the room. On the way there, we had to walk across the dance floor. People brushed against me, both human and vampire and I liked it. The place practically vibrated with enough sexual energy to jumpstart a generator.

Bloodletting was not done entirely in private here. In some corners you could see vampires feeding on their willing victims. It felt like watching someone have sex. I wanted to turn away, was in fact slightly embarrassed, yet I looked anyway. By the time we reached our table I found that my heart was fluttering, my hands were cold and my cheeks felt flushed. I was extremely aroused.

We had just barely ordered our drinks when Robert turned to me and asked, “Do you dance?” I couldn’t seem to speak, but nodded my response. “May I?” he asked Navarre.

“Mmmm,” Navarre answered, gesturing toward the dance floor. “I’ll just keep your sister company,” he teased, putting an arm around Priscilla.

I laughed. I knew he was only joking around. Robert I wasn’t so sure about, but he seemed genuine enough. I let him lead me onto the dance floor and we found a place in the crowd. You couldn’t dance without touching, not only your partner, but whoever else was near you.

We were barely an inch apart when the next song began to play. It was slow, smooth, and mellow. There’s just something about good blues that gets underneath your skin and into your soul. This music was no exception. I took a deep breath and my breasts brushed against his chest, causing my nipples to harden. I gasped as a shock of pleasure ran through me and I pressed my hands against Robert’s chest.

We began to move to the music, slowly at first. Then as the beat of the music grew faster, so did our rhythm. Our bodies moved together, bumping and grinding along with the rest of the crowd. He turned me around and pressed against me with his hands on my hips. I tossed my head from side to side, causing my long hair to hit him in the face with every movement. He didn’t seem to mind. In fact, as Robert’s hands began to roam over me, I found I didn’t mind that either. I had never danced this way before. I had never felt this sweaty, grinding, pulsing beat in my bones before.

I’m not sure how long we danced, but the song had changed. The band was good. They had a way of making each song, though unique, sort of blend with the one before it.

This way, you never had to stop dancing if you didn't want to. And we didn't. My eyes were closed and Robert had his arm around my waist when I felt another pair of hands on my body. They ran up and over my ribs, they even ran over Robert's arm before cupping my breasts.

I felt Navarre's lips against my throat as my head rested back against Robert's chest. Robert still held me, though it was Navarre's hands that roamed up and down my thighs. Before I knew it my dress was nearly around my hips and I had one leg wrapped around his waist as we danced ... all three of us.

We moved in time to the music, rocking and swaying as if we were a part of each other. I became lost in a sea of red and gold as their hair spilled across my face. Ever since I had slept with Navarre, something had awakened inside of me. I was aware of it before, but I had never felt it more strongly than I did tonight.

Robert put one hand against the side of my face, turning me so that his lips could touch mine while Navarre buried his face against my throat. I could feel Navarre's hands against my hips, leading me to the pulsing rhythm while Robert had one hand on my face and the other on my thigh. His lips were gentle, yet they devoured me. Just as before, I knew without question that all I had to do was say yes. I had no idea what I would be agreeing to, but I had never been so close to screaming the word.

I felt someone else's hands on Navarre's back and I stopped. When I looked around him I found another woman trying to dance up against him. I knew instantly that she was human, so I didn't have a problem speaking up.

"He's mine," I said, pulling Navarre toward me by the front of his shirt. The short blond quickly shifted her lusty gaze to Robert. I reached back, placing my other hand on his thigh as I said, "This one, too."

"Lucky you," she said before turning away.

As I spoke those words a thrill ran through me. It was almost like casting a spell. It was that same feeling of completion I had when the work was done. What had I said? The music stopped for the band to take a break and we all walked back to the table. Despite what had just happened, nothing seemed awkward. I did feel guilty though for stealing Priscilla's date. That is until I looked to the right and saw her making out with some strange vampire at another table.

I shrugged and sat down between Navarre and Robert.

"What would you like to drink?"

I hadn't even noticed the waiter. I blinked at him a few times before answering, "I thought I already ordered something."

"You did. The waiter who took your order was so busy staring at the blond that he forgot what you ordered."

"Oh," I said, laughing. "Well, she's at the other table this time, so I guess I'll have some ice water."

"Not that blond," he said with a wink, and left to get my water. Robert laughed at the look on my face.

When the waiter returned, I took the glass and emptied it in one go. I was drenched in sweat. I had *never* danced like that. All of my muscles trembled and I felt like I was on fire. I took one of the ice cubes from the glass and ran it across my collarbone.

Just then, I looked up and saw a tall, dark vampire coming toward us through the

crowd. His hair was shoulder length, and he had one of those pointy little goatees that have always reminded me of the devil. He was elegant, yet more so than the rest of his species. If I had to guess, I'd say he had been some sort of nobility or royalty during his human years. His smile was pure sin and when he spoke, so was his voice.

"Navarre, so good of you to stop by," he purred.

"Well, if it isn't St. Nicholas," Navarre said with a laugh.

"It's a joke. I assure you, no one has ever been less like a saint," the dark vampire said as he extended a hand toward me in greeting.

Just one touch and I knew what he was. *Incubus*. The word flashed through my mind, along with dozens of erotic images when I touched his hand.

"This is Sandra Ashton," Navarre said as Nicholas bent to kiss my hand. "Her sister is at the next table over."

"Ah," Nicholas said thoughtfully. "Tall blond in the corner?"

"That's the one."

He laughed. "Something tells me she doesn't want to meet me right now. But you," he said, turning back to me, "you have a very special gift."

"She doesn't know," Navarre said. His voice wasn't harsh, yet it said in no uncertain terms that Nicholas needed to shut up.

"I meant no harm," he said, putting up his hands in a defenseless gesture. "It was only an observation."

When I looked a question at Navarre he said, "I'll explain later."

I felt strange, but not the least bit embarrassed at what had just happened on the dance floor. Even though I was there with Navarre and could no longer deny that I was falling for him, it felt completely natural for me to be close to Robert. Apparently it felt natural for Navarre too, because he didn't object. Honestly, I think it turned him on. It was the craziest damn thing I'd ever seen. Still, I scooted closer to Navarre just in case.

In the next few minutes I drank two more glasses of ice water while Nicholas and Navarre talked. I didn't pay much attention to what they were saying. I was too busy watching the bodies moving on the dance floor.

"You want to go back?" Robert asked as his hand casually grazed my thigh.

"In a minute," I said. "I need to find the restroom first."

"Down the hall, past the bar, and to the right," he instructed me with a smile.

He slid out of the booth to let me pass and I walked over to Priscilla's table. I stood directly in front of her and propped my hands on my hips. After a minute she must have felt my eyes in the back of her head.

"Oh," she said, quickly righting her dress. "I didn't see you there."

"Who's your friend?" I asked.

The vampire who was practically wrapped around her looked to be shorter than Navarre, blonder than Robert, and almost as charming as Nicholas. Not bad.

"This is Raoul," she said, smiling. "He's French."

The vampire just smiled at me while I helped my sister to her feet.

"Be right back," she told him before turning back to me.

On our way across the room she asked, "What is wrong with you?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Did you see what happened or were you too busy trying to swallow Raoul's tongue?"

"Hey, that's not fair. I only noticed him when your little dance floor ménage got

me so hot I had to ... shit!"

"Excuse me?"

Priscilla started hopping around and I realized she had stubbed her toe. Still, I couldn't help laughing.

"Wow. I've never gotten anybody hot enough to shit before," I said.

I continued to snicker while she cussed on our way to the bathroom. Once we were inside I asked, "So, are you mad?"

"At what?" she asked, examining her big toe.

"At what happened with Robert. I mean, he *was* supposed to be your date."

"Be serious," she said, waving off the comment. "You should know by now that I prefer shifters. Besides, we've only just met. You can have him if you like." She winked at me and I felt myself blush.

"So, what about Raoul?" I asked. "He's not a shifter."

"He makes me think of gravy," she said seriously.

"*Gravy?* What are you, on drugs?"

"No," she said, putting her shoe back on. "You know how I love potato gravy?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I just want to pour it all over him and sop it up with a biscuit."

I doubled over laughing.

"That's probably the most backwoods, hick thing I've ever heard in my life. Could you be more disgusting?"

But even as I asked this I cackled with laughter. We both did. A few women who were already in the bathroom gave us strange looks as they washed their hands.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“What about Alex?” I asked a bit more soberly.

“Oh, I’m just having some fun with Raoul,” she said. “I’m not gonna to fuck him.”

“Does he know that?”

When I asked we both started laughing again. We hadn’t had a fit like this in a long time.

“Seriously, you shouldn’t just mess with people,” I said.

“And what do you call yourself doing, hmm? Are you taking them both home tonight?” she asked.

At her words I felt like ice water had been splashed in my face. Priscilla stopped laughing when she saw my expression.

“I was only teasing,” she said. “Don’t get mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I told her. “But I don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?” she asked.

“I don’t know if I’m taking them both home tonight. I guess that’s why I’m so shaky. I’m not sure what’s going on, of what happened, or what I felt.”

“What did it feel like?” she asked.

“Like magic,” I said. “And power. It was the most powerful feeling I’ve ever had. I wanted to claim them, but more than that, I wanted to *own* them. I wanted to brand my name into their minds so that I became their only thought. I wanted to commit unspeakable acts with them both, right there on the dance floor.”

With this admission I buried my face in my hands while Priscilla said, “Holy shit. Whatever you’re on, I want some.”

“That’s just it, Pris. I’m not *on* anything. I haven’t *done* anything. I don’t know what’s happening to me, but it’s getting worse.”

“And finding attractive men attractive is bad *because*?”

“I’m serious. This isn’t like me. I never even slept around in school, you know that.”

“So, maybe you’re overdue,” she suggested. I looked up, about to scold her for not understanding, but found that she was serious. “I’m for real,” she said. “You haven’t been perfect, but you’ve held back a lot. Maybe now that you’re with Navarre and his uber sexy vampire friends you just can’t deny your inner wild woman any longer.”

“Inner wild woman?” I asked skeptically.

“Hey, it was the best I could come up with. You know what I mean. Whatever it is, I’m sure you’ll be all right.”

We talked for a few more minutes before using the facilities and stepping back outside. On our way back up the hall we decided to make a pit stop at the bar. I wasn’t ready to go back to Navarre and Robert just yet. I didn’t know where the night might find us and I wasn’t sure I wanted to find out.

When I looked their way I saw Nicholas putting his arm around Navarre and

motioning for Robert to follow. Robert waved, acknowledging that he saw me and then nodded toward Nicholas. I got it. They'd be back in a minute.

"Vampire business?" Priscilla asked.

"Must be."

Priscilla and I hopped onto the two closest barstools to wait and ordered a drink. We were sitting there, minding our own business when I felt someone's hand on my arm. I looked to my right and saw a vampire who might have been attractive if it wasn't for the sneer he was wearing. Were they all six-feet tall or over? What was there, some sort of height requirement like the army? His dark hair was slicked back and he had a light stubble on his chin. His eyes were dark and so was the look he gave me. He was dressed like a biker, all leather from head to toe. Like I said, he would have looked good in a rugged sort of way if it wasn't for that sneer.

"You ladies looking for a good time?" he asked.

His voice was rough. It touched me the way Navarre's voice could, but in an entirely different fashion. I felt utterly violated.

"You mean people still use that line? What were you, turned in the eighties?" I replied, snatching back my arm.

Priscilla looked at me wide eyed and whispered, "What are you doing?"

"I don't know," I answered softly. I wasn't sure what had come over me. I just knew that I did *not* want him touching me.

"Well," the vampire said, turning sideways as he scooted back my barstool. "Let me put it to you this way. You're leaving with me." He looked at Priscilla and licked his lips. "Both of you. One way or another."

Priscilla slid off of her stool and stood behind it. He laughed and something went off inside of me. Like hell we were going with him!

"No-fucking-way," I gritted out.

I stepped down off my stool and found myself nearly standing on top of him. I kicked the barstool a few feet back behind me and the room went still. I wasn't a total pushover, but I was no she-woman either. I practiced tai-chi off and on, but mostly for its calming effect. Normally, my idea of exercise was riding my bike or doing yoga. But it didn't matter. I would fight and I would die before I let him touch me, or my sister. It wouldn't have mattered if I was a black belt because I was no match for a vampire.

"The way I see it," he said, taking a step toward me, "is that you're here without an escort. And babe, that means that you are anybody's meat."

"We've got escorts," Priscilla said from behind him.

"Well, where are they?" he asked, taking another step toward me.

To my discredit, I retreated with every step he took. I needed a weapon, and the only things I had that came close to sharp objects were my high heels. I slipped them off as I backed into the barstool I had kicked behind me.

He was getting closer. I needed to stall him until help could arrive, so I started talking.

"I haven't been in a fight since I was sixteen," I said. My voice was stronger than I felt. "But I kicked that guy's ass. He was about your size," I said as I reached behind me. I wrapped my right hand around the top of one of the legs on the stool, but I never took my eyes off the vampire in front of me.

"Big words for such a little woman," he growled.

Some more vampires stepped forward and by the look of them, I knew they were with him. More bikers. One woman and four men. Where was Navarre? For that matter, where was Nicholas? This was his bar! If I survived the night I was going to sue.

Fortunately for me, the vamp in front of me radiated malice. Why was this fortunate? Because it made his first move easy to predict, otherwise I'd never have been able to match his speed. I brought the stool around and cracked it against the side of his head, shattering it with the force. It broke open the skin across his cheek.

"You fucking bitch," he yelled, pushing me back a few paces with the tip of his finger.

I still had one of the legs of the stool in my hand and was intent on using it as a club when I heard Navarre's voice from across the room.

"She's mine!" he yelled.

"You should keep your human on a shorter leash," the other vampire spat.

Then, several things happened at once. The biker picked up one of the splintered wooden legs and Robert jumped in front of me. The biker shoved the wood straight through Robert and straight into my rib cage.

"No!" Priscilla screamed as she lunged forward, stabbing the female who was with them in the eye with her high heel.

More bikers came surging in from the front door. There must have been a whole gang outside. Robert snatched out the stool leg which impaled us both and jabbed it through the skull of the other vampire. I heard something roar behind me and as I collapsed to the floor, a Bengal tiger went running past.

"Alex," I gasped as he began to maul the female vamp who was trying to get to Priscilla.

I pressed a hand to my bleeding side as the air began to crackle with electricity. Navarre was getting closer and he was really pissed off.

"You have spilled my blood," he said menacingly. His voice carried throughout the room as if he were using a microphone and it seemed that a shadow was cast over us all, even in the darkness. "If this matter does not concern you, get out now!"

They didn't have to be asked twice. I was nearly trampled as vampires everywhere ran for the door.

In a flash they were gone and he continued. "*I am the master here!*" he yelled. "Those who dwell here will obey *my* command or they will die."

I turned to look at him and was shocked by his display of power. I had known that Navarre was strong, but I truly had no idea how strong. He had removed his coat and his shirt and hair were once again blowing in a breeze that only he could feel. The air about him began to visibly crackle with electricity and I watched as he rose nearly a foot in the air. His eyes were solid emerald, and his fangs were fully extended.

"You will all meet your end here tonight," he hissed. "The question is, who's first?"

One of the other vampires stepped forward at the back of the room, close to Navarre. He was tall, older looking and blond. They must have been communicating mind to mind, because neither spoke until Navarre said suddenly, "You dare to challenge *me*? Do you know who I am? I am Navarre, Lord or Argyle, commander of armies, and master of the elements. I am directly descended from the original. His blood flows in my veins *and so shall yours!*"

He had barely uttered the last words before he was on the challenger. In one deft move, Navarre ripped out the biker's throat and threw it at the next vampire to charge him while he side-kicked his would-be challenger into the wall, literally.

I pressed harder on my side to try and slow the bleeding while Priscilla helped me to my feet. We had to get out of the way. The Bucket of Blood was quickly becoming just that. Truthfully, I wasn't in any pain yet. I was already hyped up on adrenaline when he stabbed me and now I was in shock.

Robert stepped in front of us, shielding me once more with his body.

"You're bleeding," I said, holding a hand against the exit wound in his back.

"I'll live," he said over his shoulder while he kicked another charging vampire in the face.

One of the bikers tried to crawl over the bar and Navarre was instantly upon him. He jumped on top of the counter and proceeded to stomp the retreating vamp right through the bar and into the floor. Blood drenched his face, streaming down his chin and onto his shirt. The shirt was now ripped completely open and blood also covered his bare chest.

As I looked up at him I realized something—Navarre was completely at home ripping people apart. And much to my horror, I was okay with that. They deserved it. They had attacked two human women for no reason and stabbed me. They fucking stabbed me with a wooden stake! Lucky for Robert, it appeared to have missed his heart.

"Get them out of here," Navarre ordered.

Lightning flew from his fingertips and slammed into a vamp who was just about to attack Nicholas from behind. I watched as the incubus turned and ripped both arms from his attacker before falling on him like a rabid dog.

Robert reached behind him, placing one hand on my thigh while Priscilla held onto my shoulders. I appreciated him trying to save us, but as best I could tell they had all the exits blocked. We were surrounded and bleeding, not a good thing in a room full of angry vampires.

Robert turned to me and his pale blue eyes glowed. "I *will* get you out of this," he promised.

Another female vamp made a dive for us and I nailed her right in the chest with the splintered leg from the barstool. I hadn't even realized I was still carrying it. She fell to the floor where Robert stomped her to make sure the stake went all the way through.

"Okay," I panted. "Now I hurt."

I doubled over as Priscilla asked, "Now you hurt?"

Robert smiled his appreciation at me. I tried to return the gesture, but winced instead against the pain. As I collapsed Robert knelt before me, catching me in his arms. He scooped me up like I weighed nothing and started looking for a way out of the room.

"Grab my shirt," he said to Priscilla. "And don't let go."

A leg flew past us, along with some other unrecognizable parts and I nearly retched. The only thing that kept me from getting sick was the thought of doing so all over Robert. Despite the circumstances, I would have been utterly humiliated to vomit all over my rescuer.

He turned toward the back of the room with me in his arms. Robert had only taken a step before he jumped suddenly and Priscilla screamed.

"Just a minute," he said and sat me down in front of my sister.

She helped to support me while Robert turned around. When he did, I screamed along with Priscilla. He had what looked like a hatchet sticking out of his back. Robert reached back and pulled the weapon free with a grotesque slicing sound.

“A tomahawk?” he asked incredulously.

The biker who had thrown it just shrugged in response. Had I not been bleeding to death, I might have laughed at the look on his face.

“You just assaulted me with a fucking tomahawk?”

Robert threw the weapon back and landed it right between the other vampire’s eyes. Naturally, being a vampire, this didn’t kill him. Priscilla and I backed behind one of the few remaining tables while Robert proceeded to chop the biker to pieces. I turned my head to keep from getting sick. I thought about nice things, pleasant things that didn’t smell like blood. It seemed to be working for me, but my sister wasn’t so lucky. She barfed on the head of a vampire who fell at our feet.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” she gasped. Then the vamp turned around and hissed at her. “Well, fuck you then, I’m not sorry!” she yelled.

Before the vampire could strike, Navarre came out of nowhere and grabbed him, flinging him across the room with such force that he bounced off the far wall.

“Gross,” he said, wiping his hand down his pants. Unfortunately, he had grabbed the vamp by the hair.

“Sorry,” Priscilla said.

“I thought I told you to get them out of here,” he said to Robert.

“I’m trying, but in case you haven’t noticed we’re trapped.”

Navarre took a quick look around. “Good point.” He turned toward the left side of the room and reached out toward the vampires who were standing near the door. He focused all of his energy and, just like the logs on the fire, they burst into flames. “Go that way,” he said. “You remember where Nicholas’ office is, take them there.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Robert scooped me up again and turned to Priscilla. “Do you think you can stay here for just a few seconds? I swear that’s all it will take and I’ll have you both safe.”

She nodded and he handed her the tomahawk. “If one of them comes this way, don’t miss.”

In the blink of an eye he ran past the burning vampires and had me in the hallway. He kicked in the door to one of the side rooms and sat me down.

“I’ll be right back.”

In less than a minute he was back with Priscilla and I nearly cried when I saw that she hadn’t been harmed in the few seconds we’d had to leave her alone. Robert knelt beside me and wiped my brow with his hand, brushing back my hair.

“You’re getting colder,” he said softly.

“Well, it’s fucking freezing outside,” I said through chattering teeth.

His smile looked more concerned than mirthful.

“Come on,” he said, scooping me up again. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Priscilla took hold of his shirt again without being asked and Robert took us to a staircase at the back of the building. I’m not sure how far we went underground, because I passed out somewhere along the way. I couldn’t tell you anything about Nicholas’ office, except that the ceiling was lovely. I blinked heavily and saw Robert beside me. He was holding my hand and Priscilla was crying. Why was she crying? I was still alive. I wanted to tell her not to cry, but Navarre and Nicholas burst in the door before I could say anything.

“How is she?” he asked as he took Robert’s place beside me.

“Not good,” Robert answered.

I opened my mouth, intent on telling Navarre that I loved him before it was too late, but that isn’t what came out at all.

“You’re so fast,” I whispered. “How come you didn’t get there in time?”

To my surprise Navarre started to cry. I didn’t know that vampires could cry before then.

“When I realized that they had you, I froze,” he said softly, kissing the back of my hand while he spoke. “I was so afraid of losing you that for a moment I couldn’t react. I’m so sorry.”

“Am I going to die?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” he said, taking me into his arms.

I heard Navarre giving orders to Nicholas then, but I couldn’t understand them. The next thing I knew I was laying on a bed somewhere. I heard voices outside the door. Navarre was telling Alex to take my sister home.

“Don’t tell your grandmother,” I heard him tell her. “She’ll have me staked.”

“You promise she’ll be all right?” Priscilla asked.

“Only if we act quickly,” he said.

I turned my head to the right and saw Robert lying beside me. He reached out

and took my hand.

“It’s going to be all right,” he said softly.

I realized then that Robert had lost a lot of blood trying to save me. He would die soon too if he didn’t have help.

Nicholas leaned over me and shined a soft light into my eyes.

“Navarre, we must hurry,” he called.

Instantly, Navarre opened the door and closed it on my sister with another hurried apology. He leaned over me and ripped the front of my dress open.

“It’s nice to know you still find me attractive with a hole in my side, but now is hardly the time,” I mumbled.

“She’s making jokes at a time like this?” Nicholas asked.

“Warped sense of humor,” Navarre said. Then he looked back at me. “I’m sorry, my darling, but I need to see the wound in order to clean it properly.”

He examined my injury more closely and I averted my eyes. I didn’t want to look at a hole in my side. I groaned when he touched me and he apologized again.

“It looks like Robert’s blood is helping it to heal,” he said to Nicholas.

Apparently having the stake go through Robert first was a good thing, but not for Robert. From what I heard them saying, if I survived I wouldn’t have a scar because of his blood. But that also meant that his blood now flowed through my veins, however small the dose.

“They will both need a transfusion,” Navarre said. “Bring in more vampires.”

Nicholas gave orders to someone in the hall and returned to the side of the bed.

“I’m going to need you to stay awake just a little bit longer,” Navarre said to me softly. “Nicholas and I will give you our blood. It will help you to heal.” I made a face and he said, “Otherwise, you will die.”

“But why not just your blood?” Nicholas asked.

“Because no one can serve two masters. I have drunk from her too recently for her to only take my blood. To do so would risk turning her and that is something I will not do against her will.”

“But to take *my* blood, with her abilities ...”

“We have no choice. No one else is powerful enough to save her. There are only the two of us, and Robert can’t afford to lose anymore blood,” Navarre said.

“Do I have a say in this?” I asked weakly.

“Of course,” they answered together.

“I want to live.”

“You must go first,” he said to Nicholas.

I watched as Nicholas rolled back his sleeve and bit his wrist.

“Gross,” I whispered.

He sat down beside me and lifted my head, pressing the wound against my lips. At first I fought him. It wasn’t because I was unwilling, it was just instinct. As much as the thought of drinking his blood unsettled me, I wanted to live. I opened my mouth and felt the warm liquid flow inside. It wasn’t at all what I had expected. In fact, it didn’t even taste like blood. Every child who’s ever lost a tooth knows the taste of blood, but this was different. It wasn’t the copper/penny flavor I had been thinking of. I was both terrified and excited to find that Nicholas’ blood tasted like candy.

I drank more deeply, placing my hand against the back of his arm in order to get a

better angle. I flicked my tongue across the small bite and Nicholas moaned.

“Yes,” he gasped. “Drink, but not too fast.”

Even in my injured state his words stirred me. It was arousal of a different sort to be sure, but I was still aroused. And from the sound of his breathing, so was Nicholas. When he pulled away from me I fell back against the bed, gasping for air.

Navarre quickly took his place. I watched as he too bit his wrist and placed it against my lips. However, I didn’t hesitate to drink from Navarre. The taste of his blood was also not what I had expected. Navarre tasted like a sweet red wine and I drank hungrily from his wrist.

“Stop,” he panted as he pulled his wrist away.

“Now what?” I asked as I fell back against the bed again.

“Now you must rest,” he said.

Navarre leaned over me and his hair fell across my face. I looked up into his emerald eyes and tried not to be afraid. If he said I was safe, then I was safe.

“You’re safe,” he whispered.

“What have I done, Navarre?”

“Only what you had to in order to survive,” he assured me. “This will not turn you, it will heal you.”

I looked to the right again and saw Robert feeding from other willing blood donors.

“But I’m naked,” I said to Navarre.

He seemed to understand what I was talking about. The room was full of people and I was topless.

“I’ll get you cleaned up,” he said, “and covered up.”

Navarre got a washcloth and a pan of water to clean the splinters from my wound before it started to close. As soon as he touched me I passed out.

* * * *

I awoke to the smell of fresh clean sheets and my own hair tossed across my face. It was still damp and cool next to my skin. For a moment I felt strangely disconnected from my body. I remembered dancing with Robert and my heart started to beat faster. Then I remembered Navarre joining us and it nearly pounded through my chest.

As soon as I had an awareness of most of my parts I figured out I was resting on my left side. Immediately my hand went for the hole that should have been in my right side. However, where the injury was supposed to be I found someone’s hand resting against my ribs.

It was a man, naked and warm against my back. I would have rolled over to see, but all I could move was my right arm. Everything else felt too heavy to lift, like I was in some sort of deep state of hypnosis. I didn’t feel threatened at all. As a matter of fact, I felt so comfortable that it worried me, especially since I couldn’t move enough to tell if I had on any underwear. One quick touch let me know I still didn’t have on a top of any kind. But Navarre had been true to his word. I did seem to be clean, and the cover was up to my throat.

Another odd thing was that I couldn’t seem to fully open my eyes—the lids were just too heavy. I could only squint a little and that required a lot of effort. I didn’t know if the light I saw was the sun or a lamp. Finally, I gave up and took a deep breath. When I did this I was immediately greeted by the smell of Navarre’s cologne, or maybe it was

his body wash. Whatever it was, I knew who was in bed with me.

I must have drifted off again, because the next moment I was aware the hand which had been resting on my side had moved to my breast. I still couldn't move much, but the fact that the vampire was awake let me know it must be at least near dusk. That meant I had been out for a whole day.

This time, I didn't even try to open my eyes. I felt so good. I was pretty sure that someone who had just been run-through with a barstool leg shouldn't feel good. But I felt great. As Navarre pressed his lips against my back I shivered. A warm, prickling sensation flowed throughout my body. It was unlike anything I had ever felt, but came closest to feeling like magic. It felt almost like building energy to perform a spell, yet it was closer to being a sexual build-up.

His lips were so warm, warmer than a vampire's lips should be so soon after awakening. But then I reminded myself that he would have had to feed after healing me. That would account for the warmth. He ran his hand over my hip, sliding down my underwear as he went. Well, at least that question had been answered.

He rolled me onto my stomach as he continued to kiss a heated trail down my spine until he reached my butt. He licked across one cheek, biting it playful before pressing his naked body against my back.

As he lay against me, his hair fell across my face and I breathed deeply of his scent once more. I sighed as he slid down my body again. For the next several minutes his hands roamed over me, massaging me, awakening my body after the trauma it had suffered. But that wasn't all his touch had awakened. Part of me wondered what had changed, but another part insisted that I had always been this way.

I didn't think that was true, but I wasn't going to argue. Especially not once he slipped one finger inside of me. To my surprise I was already wet and waiting for his touch. I had no idea how I could be aroused so soon after being impaled, but I was. In fact, just the word "impaled" made me long for other sorts of wood and I knew just the place I'd like to put it. My pussy ached for him and when he moved his finger I gasped. Maybe it had something to do with taking Nicholas' blood. After all, he was an incubus. Surely that must have had an effect on me.

It was like I had told Priscilla, something was different about me. I wasn't just hornier, I was more awake, more alive than I had ever been. My whole body had been summoned as if from a great distance to enjoy my senses to their fullest.

I arched my back, sticking my butt more in the air so that he could reach me easier. As I did this I felt him sit up and press his mouth against my pussy. Wow. This was different. He was already good, but now he was trying something new. If I hadn't known better, I'd have sworn that his tongue was battery operated. He licked back and forth across my clit before running his tongue down the length of my slit. He ate me like he was starved for the taste of my flesh and I wriggled against him, hungry for more.

"Fuck," I gasped into the pillow. There it was again, not my usual bedroom language, but ever since I had been with Navarre, that had changed. As my sister had said, with him I was a wild woman. Or at least, wilder than I used to be. Then suddenly I remembered Robert's hands on me as we had danced. I thought of both of them touching me and about the dreams I had been having. It nearly sent me over the edge.

"I want you," I moaned. "I want you inside of me." When he didn't immediately stop what he was doing I panted, "Don't make me wait."

Navarre rolled me over and my hair spilled across my face once more, almost like a blindfold. My eyelids still felt too heavy to lift, even though my body was shaking off its lethargy. However, the thought of using my hair as a blindfold really set me off.

“Yes,” I whispered as he untangled my panties from my feet and spread my legs. “Keep my eyes covered, and hold back my hands,” I told him.

He pulled more hair across my eyes. And as he held one hand above my head, restraining my wrists, he used the other to guide himself into me. He moved slowly, letting me feel every inch of his cock. I growled and arched against him. Damn, he was hard. Something must have set him off, too. Maybe it was the violence, maybe it was all the blood, or perhaps a little bit of both. Whatever it was, he felt like a shaft of granite inside of me, stretching the walls of my pussy to the limit.

I whimpered as he withdrew from me, teasing me. He rubbed the tip of his cock against my clit, causing me to arch against him even more. But he held back, only entering me one inch at a time before withdrawing again. I still couldn't move much, but what strength I could muster I used to try and wrap my legs around him and pull him closer.

But my efforts were no good and he continued to taunt me with his shaft.

“Bastard,” I said playfully. “What are you waiting for? Don't you want me?” I asked, arching against him again. He pulled in and out once more and I practically screamed, “I want you to fuck me so hard we break this mattress.”

And he tried. What surprised me even more than the force of his lovemaking was the fact that I could take it. Not only could I take it, but I begged for more. I wanted it hard and I wanted it fast. I felt the tension begin to build low in my spine and spread throughout my thighs, causing my whole body to tense. I felt like I might snap with the pressure and then release flooded me. He let go of my hands and I scored his back with my nails.

It was now that his hair spilled across my face and as he climaxed I opened my eyes. I'm not sure what startled me more, the amazing sex we'd just had, or the fact that the hair spilling across my face was blond.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Robert?”

I snatched up the sheet as I pushed away from him and fell off the bed.

“Shit,” I groaned.

It wasn’t so much Robert I was cussing at this point, but his shoe that I had landed on.

“Please,” he said, reaching out for me. “Don’t be like this. Don’t reject me now.”

It wasn’t just his softly spoken plea that changed my mind about running out the door, it was the intensity of the emotions stirring in his pale blue eyes. I had hurt him and for that I was truly sorry.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered as I took the hand he offered.

Robert helped me back onto the bed and I sat curled up with my face resting against my knees. I didn’t want to make him feel worse, but I started to cry anyway.

“Don’t,” he said softly, “please don’t.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me onto his lap. I buried my face against his chest as he rocked back and forth with me while I cried. I couldn’t seem to stop. I cried like someone had just given me terrible news. I hadn’t cried that hard since my parents had died.

After a minute I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed the side of his face. Something about Robert made me want to touch him, but not the way I had before. I held him tight as I asked, “What have I done?” When he didn’t respond I asked, “How did this happen?”

“I only did what you asked me to,” he said.

“But you smelled like Navarre,” I accused. “You tricked me.”

“It’s his goddamned soap,” he said, turning so that his feet hung off the bed and his back was to me. “He gave some to Nicholas as a gift. After the fight last night, once I could move, that is, I needed to bathe. Nicholas had to help me, because I was so weak. I used his soap.” For a moment, neither of us knew what to say. Silence hung uneasily between us until Robert said softly, “I thought you knew it was me.”

The pain in his voice tore at my heart. Whatever happened, Robert didn’t deserve to be treated badly. He thought I wanted him and had only done what I asked. I rose to my knees behind him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. Deep down, I think I had known. But I wasn’t sure how to say that to him. I wasn’t sure what to say at all. I had wanted Robert, had in fact considered taking him to bed with Navarre and myself only the night before. It was just that this was so shocking. I think Navarre would have been alright with extending such an invitation, given his reaction to our dance. But I couldn’t imagine how he would react to this.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“Let’s take a shower,” he said, patting my hand gently. “This room smells like sex and so do we. Besides, there are some things I think you should hear.”

He rose from the bed and reached for me. I hesitated.

“You mean take a shower *together*?”

He laughed. “You’re going to object after what just happened?”

He had a good point. I was still unsteady on my feet, so I let Robert help me into the bathroom.

“Wow,” I said as he lowered me onto the closed toilet seat. Nicholas’ bathroom was just as impressive as Navarre’s.

“This is one of the guest rooms,” Robert informed me. At the look on my face, he added, “Nicholas has an even bigger bathroom.”

“What is it with vampires and huge bathrooms?” I asked while he turned on the shower.

“You saw what happened last night. If you had to deal with something like that even once, you’d never feel clean.”

“I guess not,” I agreed.

I *did* have to deal with it to a certain extent, but not the same way that Navarre and Nicholas had. When Robert helped me to my feet again I looked in the mirror at my side. There was only a pale pinkish circle where the hole was the night before.

“You won’t have a scar,” he assured me as I ran my fingertips across the smooth new skin. “My blood was on the stake when it went into you. It has helped you to heal.”

I turned to him then and didn’t even care if I sounded stupid or weak. Last night I had gotten a true taste of Navarre’s power and I didn’t want to be on the receiving end of it.

“Robert, I’m scared.”

“Of what?” he asked, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“Of everything. Of what I felt, of what I saw, of what just happened. I feel like I can’t breathe.”

“It’ll be all right,” he said, hugging me to him again. “Let’s get in the shower. It will make you feel better.”

“I don’t think I can stand much longer,” I answered honestly.

“All right then,” he said. He walked over and turned off the water. “Let’s get in the tub. You need to get your circulation going.”

“Oh, I think it’s going just fine,” I answered.

While Robert ran some water in the tub I propped against the sink and splashed some cold water on my face.

“I’m different,” I gasped, taking a good look at my reflection.

“It’s the blood,” he said.

Robert stepped up behind me and pulled back the hair from my face so that I could get a better look. My skin was clearer, almost translucent. My hair looked darker and shinier underneath the lights. My eyes were brighter, and my lips were even more cherry red than before.

“But how?” I asked. “Shit, I can’t breathe.”

Robert helped me to sit beside the tub. He turned me so that my feet were hanging down in the hot water while he added some soap and bath oil.

“It isn’t permanent,” he assured me. “If you don’t take any more vampire blood it should wear off in a few months.”

“A few *months*? But what will I do until then? I obviously look different.”

“You look beautiful,” he said as he sat down beside me. “Look, I told you when

we came in here that there were some things I thought you needed to hear. Hopefully, it will help to explain some of this.”

“Go on.”

“I was still feeding when you passed out last night. Though I was weakened also, I was awake enough to hear what was going on.”

“Did something happen to me in my sleep?” I asked.

“No, just calm down,” he said softly.

Robert helped me into the water as he said, “Navarre cleaned you up as best he could and wrapped you in a blanket while Nicholas donated some of his blood to me.”

“Nicholas let you drink from him, too?”

“They both did,” he said. “Navarre moved you to the sofa while Nicholas had the sheets changed. Everything had gotten covered with blood when we all came into the room. While all of this was going on, Nicholas helped me take a quick shower, after which I made it back to the bed and passed out.”

“But I thought you said that ...”

“Just listen. I could still hear them when I came to, only they didn’t know it. The conversation started out normally enough. Navarre offered to pay for the damage to the club, but Nicholas refused. He said it was his fault for not having enough security.”

I sighed heavily.

“I’m getting to the point,” he insisted. “Alex was back. He had taken your sister home. Apparently the bikers went to Lucy’s first looking for Navarre. As soon as they left, so did he, but in a different direction. He came here to warn us, but was too late.”

“So, that’s how he got here.”

“Yes. He was telling us this last night before everything went to hell. Just as he was finishing his story they noticed that something was wrong and Navarre heard your mental cry for help.” He paused until I looked at him. “And so did I,” he said. “He wasn’t lying to you, he did freeze. He yelled for me to go help you and grabbed his side like he had been stabbed. I think he was feeling what was about to happen to you. He still moved faster than a human, but for Navarre it was slow. You already know what happened when we got there.”

I nodded. “But what about after I passed out?”

“While I was laying there I heard Nicholas question Navarre’s decision again about the blood. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to help you, he was concerned. You see, Nicholas is ...”

“An incubus, yes, I know,” I interrupted.

“But how could you?”

“I could feel it when he touched me.”

“Then they are right to be cautious,” he said. Robert reached over and took my hand in both of his. “Do you remember hearing Nicholas refer to your abilities?”

“Yes.”

“He was talking about how strong your love spells are.”

“How do you know about that?” I asked. “We’ve just met.”

He sighed. “I hate the expression, but it *is* a small world. Look, the point is his blood could be dangerous to you, more so than any other vampire.”

“Why?”

Robert seemed to be searching for the right words. “Okay,” he said finally. “You

already know that vampire blood can heal physical injuries if you take it in small quantities. You found that out last night. And, you also know that if there is an exchange of blood between vampire and human, that you could be turned. That's why Navarre didn't just give you his blood, he needed someone else to donate to ensure that you weren't changed against your will. The only ones powerful enough for their blood to be able to heal you were the three of us and I was bleeding to death."

"So why not give me just Nicholas' blood instead of both?"

"Because to have taken only his blood would have doubled the effects."

"What effects?"

"With the abilities you already possess, if you were ever to be turned, you would be a succubus. The taste of his blood just brought you one step closer."

"No," I gasped, pulling back from him.

"That's why your love magic is so strong, it's a part of who you are. And in death, it would only grow stronger."

"But I'm not a slut," I protested. I was near tears again.

He laughed softly. "Sweetheart, that has nothing to do with it."

"There's more, isn't there?" I asked.

"If you were to ever turn, not only would you be a succubus, but your powers would rival that of Nicholas, possibly even that of Navarre only in a different way."

"This is too much to take," I said, putting a hand over my heart. I closed my eyes and focused on taking deep breaths while Robert rubbed my back. "I always associated succubi with being slutty," I said in between breaths. "I was always taught that that was bad."

"Desire is not a bad thing," he said. "But to act on selfish impulse is another matter entirely. A succubus, like her male counterpart feeds not only from blood, but from sexual desire. In a way, they are revered among the vampire community for their ability to feed without blood if they have to."

"Oh no," I whimpered.

"What is it?"

"When I woke up, when I first was aware, I was starving."

"Then we'll get you something to eat," he assured me.

"No, Robert, you don't understand. I'm not hungry anymore."

It took him a while, but Robert finally helped to calm me down. Once I could breathe normally again I asked, "Where are Navarre and Nicholas? What if they walk in and find us here?"

Of course I was going to be honest with Navarre about what had happened. But I didn't want him to find out by walking in on us naked.

"They won't," he assured me. "They're not here."

"How do you know?"

"Because Navarre is my master and I can sense him. I don't know where he is, but he is not here. I also have a stronger sense of Nicholas after taking his blood, and he isn't here either."

"What about Alex?"

"Asleep outside the door."

"Why were you in bed with me?" I asked.

"I think Nicholas left me there to cure your hunger pains."

“I think I need to have a little chat with Nicholas,” I said grimly. “But what am I going to say to Navarre?”

“We’ll tell him the truth,” Robert said. “I’m not saying he’ll be happy about it, but Navarre would never hurt you. He would have died for you last night if he had to.”

“And you nearly did,” I said. “I never thanked you.”

His smile reached his eyes for the first time all night as he said, “Yes, you did.”

Even though we were chest deep in warm water, I was still shaking. I couldn’t seem to stop completely.

“It’s from the loss of blood,” Robert explained. “Even though it was replaced, your body has to get used to the new blood in your system. Come here,” he said. Robert sat me on his lap with my back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and I felt like I was sitting in a sauna. He was so warm.

After a minute I finally started to relax. “What were you before you were turned?” I asked.

“A human,” he said teasingly.

“No, I mean what did you do? Who were you?”

“I owned a fencing school in Great Britain. My father was a sword maker, so it just sort of fell into place.”

I turned in his arms so that I could look at him and with my fingertips I traced the contours of his handsome face.

“How old were you when you were bitten? Twenty-five?” I guessed.

“Thirty,” he said with a smile. “But thanks. I take it the years have been kind to me?”

“So, how long ago was it?” I asked.

“A hundred years,” he said.

I went stiff in his arms.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

The most horrible thought had just occurred to me. Sperm could survive for a hell of a long time in vampires. At the moment of death, sperm production stopped. However, what was there took its time in getting out of circulation, so to speak. The oldest known vampire to have still fathered a child had been dead for ninety years. One hundred wasn’t very far off.

Robert shook me gently and I realized he was still waiting for my answer.

“We didn’t use any protection.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Robert's eyes went wide. Obviously he knew what I was getting at.

"I've been dead for a hundred years," he said softly. "Surely you don't think that ..."

"We'll leave that part out," I said quickly. "I don't want to hurt Navarre any more than I already have. We just won't go there."

Robert nodded his head slowly, like he was still thinking about what I had just said. "All right, but what if ...? I mean, how long before we will know?"

"At least another two weeks. Shit. Like I need anything else to deal with."

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"It's not your fault," I said. "As a matter of fact, I don't want you to take any of this as an insult. I can't even imagine what you must be going through. Nicholas just left you there as what, bait? And then you thought that I knew and I fell off the bed to get away from you. Robert, I am so sorry."

"I must admit, no one has ever had that reaction to me before."

I couldn't help laughing. "Please don't think that ... that I don't find you desirable. Because that's not true. The problem is—I'm in love with Navarre. I've been trying to find a way to tell him and now I've got to find a way to tell him this." I gestured to the two of us.

"You know, vampires really don't look at relationships the same way humans do," he said comfortingly. "Like I said, Navarre won't be happy about it, but you'd be surprised what you learn to tolerate in a century's time. Let alone in seven centuries. There comes a point that the things you once thought would bother you simply don't matter in the great scheme of things anymore. Besides, he *did* join us on the dance floor."

"But, Robert," I sputtered. "You can't be suggesting that we do this again."

I had been thinking similar thoughts, but didn't know how to go about voicing them. If that were to be the case, Navarre would have to be in complete agreement.

"Maybe, and maybe Navarre would like to join us."

"But I'm in love with him," I protested.

"So that means that you would deny yourself pleasure? I don't understand. What has loving Navarre got to do with the three of us having a relationship?"

I looked him in the eyes. I was just about to ask if he was serious when I understood that he was.

"Vampires really don't see things the same way we do," I said with a sigh. "You see to me, loving someone means that you're faithful to them."

He laughed. "You could be faithful to the both of us. Sweetheart, I'm telling you it's in your blood. Let me ask you something. Have you ever found a man that measured up?"

"How do you mean?"

"In general. Has one man ever truly satisfied you or were you just so in love with

him you thought that he did?"

I almost slapped him, but thought better of it. "A long time ago, one man was all I needed."

"Ah, but you said it yourself, that was a long time ago. What about since then? Anyone meet the challenge?"

My mind drifted again to the strange images in my dreams. At least now I knew who the blond was that I had been dreaming of. But in that dream there were three men. Navarre was one, Robert was the second ... who was the third?

"No," I answered softly.

"And do you want to know why?"

"No."

"Well, I'll tell you anyway."

"It's because it will take more than one to satisfy your desire," Nicholas answered from the door.

"You said he wasn't here!"

This time I *did* slap Robert.

"That was fast," he said to Nicholas. "I just felt you arrive."

"I was eager to see how things worked out," Nicholas said, smiling wickedly.

"Don't be so self-righteously offended," he said to me.

Nicholas held out a robe as I got out of the tub and I let him put it on me.

"We've been picking up some supplies and cleaning up," he said. "I take it you two are feeling all right?"

I slapped Nicholas as hard as I could, and to my surprise I drew blood. He licked his busted lip, still smiling at me.

"What's the matter?" he asked smoothly. "Didn't you like what I made you for breakfast?"

"You bastard," I said, and slapped him again. "You made me hurt him," I said, pointing to Robert. "He thought I knew." I felt tears stinging my eyes and hated myself for it. I didn't want to show weakness now. "You made me hurt Navarre, and you made me hurt *myself!*"

"Come now," he replied casually. "Don't tell me that sleeping with Robert offended your delicate sensibilities."

"And you're about to make me hurt you," I growled.

He laughed. "It's true, Navarre would not have approved of what I did, but your reaction proves my theory."

"So, Navarre *doesn't* know." It was a statement, not a question.

"Oh, he knows you were both here. He just thought you had clothes on." I tried to hit him again, but he stopped me this time. "You didn't just fuck him, did you?" he asked. His dark eyes were intense and I found I couldn't look away. "You woke up hungry, didn't you?" I nodded. "And now you aren't hungry anymore." It wasn't a question.

He released my wrist, but slowly.

"No human, I don't care how gifted a witch she is should be able to do what you did tonight. You fed from his desire."

"But that's not possible," I gasped. "I'm not a vampire."

"No, you're not."

"I hate you," I hissed.

"No, you don't," he said softly. "You hate the fact that I may be right. My methods aren't what you would approve of either. But there are times you just can't pussy your way out of things."

Robert laughed and I gave him a harsh look.

"Dry off, and come to my chambers," Nicholas ordered. "I would like to speak with you, alone."

"What about, Navarre?"

"He'll be along shortly. He had some business to attend to at Lucy's."

"What does it matter if I'm dry or not?" I said sarcastically. "Lead the way."

"Very well," he said. "Robert," he added with a nod in the other vampire's direction.

We left the room, and I followed Nicholas two more floors down before we reached his sitting room. I assumed it adjoined the rest of his chambers, but I had no desire to see his bedroom. By the time I sat down on his large velvet sofa I was seething.

"How dare you do this to me?" I spat. "You just took it upon yourself to put a naked man in the bed with me with no thought as to the consequences!"

"So, it was that good?" he asked.

"What? How dare you?"

"If it was good enough to make you feel this guilty then I should have set up a camera."

"I could be pregnant!" I yelled.

Nicholas seemed to sober at this. "All right," he said. "I'll grant you I should have left some condoms by the bed. But I hold to my decision."

"Which was to sabotage my relationship with Navarre."

"Which was to prove a point," he corrected.

"And what was that?"

"First of all, I do not believe you are pregnant, but we shall have to wait and see. Second, you have a rare gift."

"So you've said. Now explain yourself or I'm going looking for some stakes and a mallet."

He laughed and the sound was harsh against my ears.

"You really would, wouldn't you?" He sighed heavily and took a seat beside me on the large sofa. I felt a little stupid for doing it, but I still scooted to the other end. "In our culture there are legends of people who are destined to become vampires. They exhibit the traits sometimes, even in life. These individuals, if turned, are capable of becoming powerful master vampires. But more than that, they will only have a half life if they remain human."

"What do you mean a half life?"

"They will never truly be whole, they will not find their calling, be fulfilled, or whatever the hell you want to call it. They were meant to be vampire. The point I was trying to prove, my dear, is that you are one of those people."

"No, I can't be."

"It isn't such a bad thing," he assured me softly. "You could be eternally young and beautiful. Don't beat yourself up so much about Robert. Navarre won't like it, but I'm sure he'll understand. I'll take the punishment if there must be one. It was worth it."

There aren't many left of our kind."

"*Our* kind? You mean me and you? Oh hell, no. Don't go putting me into the same category as you."

"I've looked a long time to find another like myself. You see, I inherited my abilities from the original, the same vampire who gave Navarre his electric personality," he said with a laugh.

"So you are descended from the same line."

He nodded. "It was all worth it to find you," he said. "However, I didn't plan on Robert falling in love with you."

"What did you say?"

"Oh, surely you read it in his eyes. You won't be getting rid of him any time soon. But cheer up, you might enjoy having two lovers."

"You are a sick son of a bitch, aren't you?"

"Some have said," he acknowledged with a smile.

"I don't believe you. None of this bothers you, does it?"

"Not really. But, I'm not the heartless beast you imagine me to be."

He slid closer to me and rested his arm on the sofa behind me. It was clearly an invitation and I clearly had no intention of taking it. Still, even though I was angry with Nicholas there was something about him. He was a bastard, but he was absolutely ravishing. Only my temper kept me from leaning back into his embrace. His shoulder length hair was dark and wavy like mine, and as he stroked his goatee a slow smile curved his lips. Just thinking about his lips brought images to mind that I had no desire to think about.

"Not a beast, huh? Prove me wrong."

Nicholas leaned forward, resting his elbows against his knees. When he did this, my thigh brushed against his. But I couldn't move. I was already at the end of the sofa. I was out of room to escape Nicholas.

"You've heard of the Count of Monte Cristo?" he asked.

"It's a great book."

"It's my life's story," he replied.

"You mean that you're the real ...?"

"Names have been changed to protect the guilty," he said with a smile.

"But what happened to you? He, I mean *you* survived that story."

"About a month after that story ends our carriage broke down. I was run through by bandits before I could turn around. All the swordsmanship in the world won't stop a blade from going in your back if you leave it exposed. They murdered my wife. It was hours before my master found me there, bleeding to death. At first, he didn't want to turn me. I don't care what people say about him, he does have a heart. He warned me that I would be cursed as he was. But then I told him what had happened to me."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He offered me the chance for revenge. I took it. You already know my weakness for vengeance." I just sat there looking horrified as he continued. "You know the funny thing about it all?"

"I'm sorry, Nicholas, but I fail to see any humor in your story."

"You know how everybody says you can't take it with you in regards to wealth? Well, my money was the only thing I was able to keep. I am two hundred and fifteen

years old, and my wealth is the only thing which remains of my former life.”

“Your wealth and your scars, you mean.”

“What’s that?”

“Your scars remain as well,” I said softly.

He seemed pleased by this. “So, you did pay attention to the story.”

“Nicholas, I am truly sorry for your losses, but this doesn’t justify what you did to me.”

He snorted. “You are a self-righteous one, aren’t you? I say I have done you no harm. Whatever happened tonight, you enjoyed it. The only thing you have a problem with is whatever is going on in your head about it all.” He leaned toward me and I jumped. “Would it make you feel better if I dispel this pregnancy nonsense right now? I can feel if there is a life inside of you. Predators have a way with things like that.”

I didn’t want to accept his help, yet I knew he could see the relief on my face at the thought of not having to wonder. He could have put his hand down the front of the robe I wore, but instead he chose to run his hand up my thigh before placing it over my abdomen.

“Give me a minute,” he said softly.

“I don’t care what you say, Navarre will be furious. I betrayed him and someone will have to pay the price for that.”

Nicholas laughed. “Few will ever know love and betrayal as I have. What more can he do to me?”

“We shall see,” Navarre answered from the door.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Navarre,” I said, jumping up from the sofa.

I ran to him, but stopped just short of touching him. I wasn’t sure if Navarre still wanted me to touch him anymore and that hurt worse than I could describe. I looked down at the floor, unable to meet his eyes. He put a hand on my chin and gently lifted my face to his.

“Go upstairs with Robert,” he said softly. “He has your clothes.”

I wanted to ask questions, but didn’t dare. Navarre slowly lowered his hand from my face and I walked past him into the hall. I was still looking at his back when the door closed. I knew he had closed it, but he hadn’t used his hands.

“*Go upstairs,*” I heard him say in my mind. “*I will be up shortly.*”

I wasn’t waiting around for him to tell me again. I was halfway up the first flight of stairs when I heard Nicholas screaming. That scared me enough to run the rest of the way. When I reached the room where I had spent the day I ran inside and slammed the door, gasping for air as I propped against it.

I saw Robert sitting on the sofa with his head resting against his hands. He was dressed again. Apparently Navarre had brought us both a change of clothes. He was wearing black pants and a white tunic. He looked great, but he wouldn’t look at me. Something about that frightened me. As I heard Nicholas scream again I wondered what might have been done to Robert’s face.

I moved toward him slowly and he still didn’t speak. I knelt in front of him, separating his legs so that I was directly beneath his face. I reached out to touch his hand with trembling fingers and he moved.

“Shit,” I screamed. “You scared me to death.”

He looked awful, but he hadn’t been hurt. What made him look bad was more emotional anguish than physical.

“I told him,” he said softly. “I told him everything.”

“Everything?”

“Please understand,” he said, reaching out for me. “He *is* my master. Better for me to tell him now than for him to find out on his own later.”

A fine tremor ran through my limbs and Robert pulled me against him. Nicholas screamed again and I jumped.

“What is he doing to him?” I asked shakily.

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to.” After a few minutes he said, “He brought you some clothes.”

I didn’t give a thought to being naked in front of Robert anymore. I let the robe fall to the floor and picked up the clothes Navarre had brought. I was shaking so badly at this point that I couldn’t button my jeans.

“Can you help me?” I asked Robert.

He fastened my pants and pulled a large pink sweater over my head. Navarre must not have thought I needed any underwear, because he hadn’t brought any.

“He remembered my favorite color,” I said softly, looking down at the sweater.

“I want to ask you something,” Robert said quietly. “Even though you thought I was Navarre, you felt something, didn’t you?”

He reached for me and I placed both my hands on his chest, like I had done when we were dancing the night before. Like I had done in my dream. Maybe Nicholas was right about me. I realized then that I didn’t feel guilty for being with Robert. I felt guilty for not including Navarre. But I wasn’t sure how to express that to Robert and now was not the time. I looked up into his eyes and couldn’t stand the pain I saw there, because I knew it was my fault.

“I feel something now,” I answered honestly, “and my eyes are wide open.” He smiled at me and it felt like my insides were melting. I could *not* be having these feelings for someone else. Navarre had done nothing to deserve this, yet I couldn’t deny what I felt when Robert held me.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Nicholas screamed even louder than before and it chilled me to the bone.

“He’s going to kill him,” I said frantically.

As angry as I was with Nicholas, I didn’t want him to die. He hadn’t actually harmed us, at least not physically. I agreed that he deserved to be punished, but those screams were getting worse.

“You’d be surprised what you can live through,” Robert said grimly. When I only shivered and pulled him closer he asked, “You’re actually concerned for him after what he did to us?”

“It’s not just that,” I blurted out. “It’s that he can tell ...” I decided I should shut up before I said too much. I didn’t want Nicholas to die before I found out if I was pregnant or not. He knew that he just hadn’t gotten the chance to tell me.

“Tell what?” Robert asked.

“Nothing,” I lied. “My thoughts just got all mixed together. So, you told Navarre everything, huh?”

Robert let his hand slide down to my abdomen as he said softly, “Yes, everything. I’m lucky it isn’t me down there screaming.”

I took a deep breath before saying, “I need to sit down. This is all just too much to take.” Robert helped me to sit on the couch again and I asked, “What did he say? Was he angry?”

“I’m not sure,” Robert said. “He didn’t say anything. He just listened while I went on and on about everything.”

“On and on? Just how much detail did you give him?”

“Enough,” he said.

“Shit.”

“Sandra, I know that you and I barely know each other, but with his permission, I’d like to change that. There’s something else I want to know.”

“What?”

“If you are pregnant ... what will you do?”

That was a good question, because I had no idea. I looked at Robert and the question was clear on his face. Would I keep his child or have an abortion? It felt like he was asking if I planned to kill *him*. I reached out and took his hand and started to cry. This was a man who nearly died for me and yet he barely knew me. How could I hurt

him more?

"I don't know what to do," I whispered.

Nicholas screamed again and I cried harder. I let Robert embrace me and took as much comfort as I could from his nearness. I don't understand how someone who was barely more than a stranger could be such a comfort, but he was. It felt like I had known him all my life. His touch, which was completely new to me, was as familiar to me as my own face.

"I can feel him," I said softly.

"Feel who?"

"Nicholas. I can feel a part of his agony," I cried. "But I can feel Navarre, too."

"What does it feel like?" Robert asked. "I just want to know what to expect when he comes back."

"It feels like a scream, like an awful, agonizing scream. Not the kind that comes from your body, but the kind that comes from your soul."

"Fuck me," he exclaimed.

"That's what got us into this mess," I said. And before I knew it, I started laughing. "I'm sorry, Robert. I must be hysterical. I think I'm cracking under the pressure of everything. There's a killer on the loose that still hasn't been caught. Navarre doesn't think it's safe for me to go out alone. I'm living with him, but I've slept with you. Nicholas thinks I would make a great vampire, and now I might be pregnant. I just don't know how much more I can take. If one more thing happens to make my heart skip a beat I think I might drop dead."

"Well," he said. "I hate for people to die disappointed."

Before I could say anything else, Robert kissed me. It was the softest, most tender kiss I had ever received. It was filled not only with love, but longing, and a passion long denied. I knew without being told that Robert had never felt this way before. He had never met anyone who affected him the way I did and he was afraid of losing that feeling. His arms tightened around me and I let them. I wanted more of this kiss. I wanted more of *him*.

"We're going home," Navarre said, bursting through the door without warning.

We both jumped apart guiltily and I knew that my face was red. Navarre went to reach for my coat lying across the bed, but withdrew his hand suddenly. I looked down and noticed that his hands were smoking. He clenched his fist tight as he said, "Get your coat. It's cold outside tonight."

He didn't even look in our direction. He just left Robert to help me with my coat and walked away. Once we were in the hall, I looked toward the stairs. There was no more noise coming from below, but part of me wanted to run to Nicholas. I wanted to see him, even though I was afraid of what I might find. It wasn't just because he had the answer to my burning question—it was because I had taken so much more of his blood than Navarre's. I was connected to him, whether I liked it or not.

"Come on," Robert said as he tugged my wrist. "He's leaving us."

We had to hurry to reach the car, afraid that Navarre might change his mind and drive off without us. We took the back exit, so I had no idea what the main part of the club looked like after the fight. For that matter, what did they do with all the bodies?

As soon as I asked the question I heard Navarre's answer in my mind, "*We had Alex drag them out to meet the dawn. Ashes to ashes, as the saying goes.*"

Boy, he was in a foul mood. He reached the car ahead of us and opened the back door. Robert got in first, but I stopped in front of him, willing Navarre to look at me. I wanted to know what had been done to Nicholas.

Finally he looked me in the eye and said, "He'll live."

Apparently, that was all the response I was going to get. To my surprise, we didn't have a driver. Navarre drove and that unsettled me even more.

"He's going to dump our bodies somewhere on the way home," Robert speculated.

"No," I said. "He just didn't want to have to ride back here and look at us."

We rode the rest of the way in silence, with Robert and I holding hands for comfort. Once we arrived at Lucy's, Navarre went inside without speaking, again leaving us to follow. Robert took the stairs to his room and I got in the elevator with Navarre. His emotions were making the air crackle again and my hair was starting to stand on end from the electricity. Damn it, I was sick of being afraid.

"Am I safe here, or should I leave?" I asked bluntly, turning to him in the elevator. "You tell me now," I said, taking a step closer to him. "If you're going to hurt me, then hurt me. But whatever you're going to do, let's get on with it, because I don't like to wait."

The air began to crackle a little less fiercely as he answered, "You're safe."

When we arrived on his floor Navarre shot lightning from his hands clear across the room, scorching one of his plants as he lit the fire. Then he walked toward the coffee table calmly as if nothing had happened and picked up my cell phone.

"Your sister has called six times," he said, holding the phone out to me. "She won't take my word for it when I say that you're all right."

"Am I all right?" I asked.

For the first time since everything had happened, his smile was kind as he replied, "You're all right."

I took the phone from him and called Priscilla. She was so glad to hear my voice that she started to cry almost hysterically. We talked for just a minute before she asked, "What's wrong?"

I had never been good at lying to her, but I wasn't ready to get into the whole story just yet.

"I still need a lot of rest," I said. "I'm just really tired."

"Okay. I won't keep you then. Oh, but one more thing. Ms. Adams sent a thank you note."

"For what?"

"Remember when you told her to thank you when her husband came back? Well, he's back, so she sends her regards."

"That's nice," I said wearily. "Look, Pris, I'm exhausted. I'll catch you later, okay?"

"All right."

* * * *

Navarre had left the room while we were talking. I wondered if he'd gone to torture Robert, but quickly put the thought from my mind. Even though I had bathed just a few hours ago, I wanted desperately to take a hot shower.

I went back to the bedroom and tossed my clothes across the foot of the bed.

Next, I made my way into Navarre's bathroom and took the steps down into the enormous shower. I turned on the water and just stood underneath it until it warmed up. I was too much in shock to jump from the cold. The big shower just reminded me how alone I was as I looked around at all that empty space.

I rested my head against the tile and thought of Nicholas again. Since I had taken Navarre's blood the night before he seemed to be able to communicate with me more freely. I wondered if I might be able to do the same with Nicholas. I had barely finished the thought before I heard, *"My, aren't you a sweet thing? Showing concern for someone like me, when you would have killed me with your looks earlier tonight."*

"Don't be such a prick, Nicholas. I just wanted to know how bad off you were."

"I'll live. But, that's not really what you wanted to know, is it?" When I didn't respond, he said, *"Don't be a pussy. I tell you what, if you come back and ask me in person, I'll tell you. Otherwise, you can just wait and find out for yourself."*

"Fuck you."

"Not tonight, I'm a bit under the weather."

I put back up my shields just as strong as I was capable of. That was quite enough of the incubus prowling around in my thoughts. I leaned more heavily against the tile as the water grew hotter. It was almost to the point of being painfully hot, but it helped to distract me from everything else. I was surprised when Navarre's arms wrapped around me, but I didn't jump. He pressed his body against my back and held me to him as if I were the most precious thing in the whole world.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"I'm sorry," I said.

"No, I'm sorry. I was the one who didn't listen when you said you had a strange feeling about the place. I was also the one who made the mistake of trusting Nicholas with your safety."

I put my hand over his arms, gently rubbing back and forth while the hot water ran over us. I knew that he could snap me in half if he wanted to without even breaking a sweat. But he didn't. He held me as if I were made of glass. Robert was right. Navarre would never hurt me.

"Before this happened, I was trying to think of a way to tell you that I love you. Now, I don't know what to say," I confessed.

Navarre turned me in his arms and tilted my face up to his.

"Do you still love me?" he asked softly.

"Yes."

"Then nothing has changed," he said. Navarre kissed me then, and it thrilled me all the way down to my toes. "I love you too," he whispered against my lips. "Nothing is going to change that. We'll get through this," he promised. "You'll always have me."

"What about Robert?" I asked hesitantly. "He really got shafted in all of this." When Navarre started to smile I said, "You know what I mean. And you had the nerve to tell Nicholas that *I* had a warped sense of humor."

"I'm not going to torture him, if that's what you mean."

"No, but that's a comfort."

He sighed. "Do you care for him?"

"Yes." I wasn't going to lie to him. I agreed with Robert on that, better that he heard it from me.

"Then, we'll see," he said. "But understand that to even consider such a thing is not something I do lightly. I've participated in similar things before, but I have never shared someone I loved with anyone else."

"You've done things like that before?" I asked. That was probably a stupid question, but I wanted to know.

"In seven centuries you do get bored sometimes." He laughed at the look on my face. "I've done a lot of things." He stepped back and reached for the shampoo. "If Nicholas is right about you, and I suspect he is, the bastard, then I'd better get used to the idea. Besides, I could more easily share you with someone else who loves you than a stranger."

"So, you think he loves me too? Nicholas was convinced of it."

"I've known Robert for a hundred years and in all that time, he has never claimed to love anyone else. He told me what he felt for you straight out. That took a lot of courage and I admire that."

"What do you mean about getting used to the idea? I'm not sure that I'm *used* to the idea. As a matter of fact, I know I'm not."

Navarre continued to lather up his long red hair and for a moment I thought he wasn't going to answer me.

"Even if you are never embraced by one of us," he began. "And it has never been my intention to steal you away from your family. Now that this trait within you has been fully awakened, you will always crave the company of more than one lover."

"So, I'm doomed," I whined.

Navarre laughed as he handed me the shampoo. "There are worse types of damnation." I started to lather my hair, but apparently I was doing it all wrong because he took over, turning me to face the water as he massaged my scalp. "As much as I loathe the thought, perhaps you should speak to Nicholas again sometime. He might be able to give you a better understanding of things. But not any time soon. He's in no condition to entertain guests at the moment."

"What *did* you do to him?" I asked, turning back to face Navarre.

"Enough," he said. "The problem with Nicholas is that he is powerful. He's still young for a vampire, though his powers are almost fully realized. Those who inherit the more sexual powers of the original tend to also be the most powerful of our kind."

"Will he ever be as powerful as you?" I asked.

"No," he answered softly. "I too realized my powers early. I have inherited the most balanced mix of our master's powers that most have ever seen."

"So, what are you then? The next best thing to Dracula?" I teased.

"Something like that."

While Navarre continued to soap me up I asked, "Did you enjoy it?"

"Knowing that you had sex with someone else?" he asked.

"No."

"Having him tell me about it was even worse."

"I'm not talking about any of that," I said, sighing with frustration.

"Well, I can't read your mind with all those shields up, so what are you talking about?"

"The slaughter. Did you enjoy it?" I asked more seriously.

He seemed to consider the question for a moment. "Yes. Do I enjoy tearing people limb from limb? Not particularly. However, the feeling of crushing my enemies under foot ..."

"Gets you hard, doesn't it?" I interrupted.

"Sometimes," he admitted with a smile. "Understand that I knew what it was like to be a warrior, almost before I knew what it was like to be a man. This is who I am," he said, backing me against the wall. "Is that something you think you can live with?"

"I think so," I whispered as I slid my arms around his neck.

Navarre moved one thigh between mine, brushing his leg against my pussy. Even after all that had just happened I was almost instantly aroused.

"Tell me the truth," I whispered, "Are you angry with me for being with Robert? After the way you reacted on the dance floor ..."

"No. I am angry that Nicholas usurped my power and made the decision to test his theory without consulting me. I was also upset at the effect this had on you and it is for those reasons that he was punished."

"But what about Robert?"

Navarre leaned closer and I could feel his cock brushing against my leg.

“As for the sex ... I’m just angry that I was left out.”

I was speechless. When Robert said that vampires didn’t look at sex the same way he wasn’t kidding. Navarre kissed me softly and whispered against my lips, “The only one who betrayed me is Nicholas.”

He put his hands on my waist and lifted me as he spread my legs wide. I watched the power flicker behind his emerald eyes like electricity as he lowered me down onto his shaft.

“Robert is the one you have been dreaming about,” he said as he thrust into me.

“Yes.” I clung to him as he pressed me harder against the wall. “But who is the other?”

Navarre reached between our bodies and started to rub my clit with his thumb.

“When we find out, should we invite him too?” he teased.

But I couldn’t respond. He moved in and out of me with slow deliberate strokes as his thumb moved faster over my clit. When he lowered his head to take one nipple into his mouth, I came. I felt my muscles spasm around him, harder than I had expected. Navarre pressed me into the wall, pushing into me as far as possible while he came.

Much later, when we were resting by the fire I asked, “If Robert lives here and works here, how come I’ve never seen him before?”

“Because he works on the second floor.”

I was resting back against Navarre’s chest, so I turned around to look at him. I wanted to see if he was serious. He was smiling like some sort of villain.

“The vampire orgy level?”

He laughed and it felt good to my ears. “He admits people to the level, he doesn’t participate.”

“Oh. So, he’s kind of like gatekeeper to the orgy?”

Navarre snickered as he answered, “Something like that.”

We sat there for several more minutes in silence, gazing at the fire. I remembered what Navarre had said about the flames reminding him of his childhood. Then it occurred to me that his was the only story I didn’t know. I knew he had been a knight and that he had fought alongside William Wallace, but that was about it. It seemed odd when I thought about it. I had just met Robert, but I knew about his past. Hell, I knew Nicholas’ life story, I had read the book.

I turned in Navarre’s arms again and ran my fingertips over the scar on his chest.

“Tell me about it,” I whispered.

“I got that scar when I was thirty-three,” he began. “The year was 1296 A.D. and we had just been defeated in the Battle of Dunbar. I was lying there bleeding to death when I saw him, walking among the dead. I called out for help and he came to me. I knew him for what he was when I saw him. He removed the sword which still pierced my chest and pressed his mouth against the wound.”

As he said this, Navarre placed his hand over my heart and I closed my eyes. Instantly I was transported to the long forgotten battlefield he had spoken of and the most heartrendingly beautiful man I had ever seen had his face pressed against my chest. Only it wasn’t my chest, it was Navarre’s. The man lifted his gaze to mine and his emerald eyes glowed in the darkness, just like Navarre’s. Long dark hair spilled across his handsome face as he asked, “Do you truly wish to become what I am? Careful how you answer, for I will grant you death now if you so desire it—or you can live and share my

fate.”

In that moment I knew why Navarre had accepted the offer. He was still a young man and he was afraid to die. He was embarrassed.

“There is no shame in fearing death,” the vampire whispered.

“I wish to live,” Navarre answered hoarsely.

Just as quickly as this vision had begun, Navarre removed his hand from me and the image was gone.

“You have the same color eyes,” I panted. I realized I was rubbing my chest in the same place his injury had been and put down my hand.

“Sorry,” he said. “But a picture is worth a thousand words. I thought it would be better to show you than to tell you what happened.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I wanted to know, and I’ll admit I have wanted to see him.”

“Careful that you don’t think of him too much,” Navarre said softly. “He can be a dangerous daydream.”

* * * *

Two weeks passed and though we had spent Thanksgiving with my family the day before, I found little to be thankful for at the moment. Things may not have looked bad to anyone else, but I was in turmoil. Navarre, and Robert and I had our first date scheduled for this weekend and only one thing made me more nervous than that. My period was late.

I had been awake for hours, watching Navarre sleep and plotting my course of action. I simply didn’t have the guts to go buy a pregnancy test. Just the thought of waiting for that little strip to turn blue made me want to have a panic attack. Plus, I felt really sick, but that might have been my nerves.

I went to the closet and pulled out the box that had arrived for me the week before. It was a present from Nicholas. I pulled out the T-shirt again and took another look. It was black with the golden outline of a cat’s face. Underneath its whiskers were the words, “Don’t be a pussy.” There was a card which read simply, “I’m waiting.”

“Well, Nicholas,” I said as I slipped on the shirt. “I can’t wait anymore.”

I knew that Alex was out with my sister, but Navarre didn’t know that. So, I left a note by the bed telling him that Alex was with me and we were shopping. Then I finished getting dressed and snuck outside. It wasn’t too difficult to get out without being seen, since most everyone who lived there was still asleep. Even Isidor occasionally slept in the middle of the day. Fortunately, today was one of those days.

My car was parked out back so that I would have something to drive if I needed to run errands. Of course, I hadn’t been allowed out without a bodyguard. I hoped that Navarre believed my note. I didn’t like lying to him, but didn’t see a way around getting to speak to Nicholas. If he knew where I was going, I was sure he wouldn’t like it. My hands were shaky as I cranked the car and pulled out of the parking lot. My heart raced as I tried to recall exactly how to get to The Bucket of Blood.

By some miracle, I didn’t get lost. The moment I pulled up, I knew that Nicholas was awake. I could feel it, and that scared the shit out of me. The one thing I hadn’t worked out yet was how to get to him. The club was still closed for repairs, so I went around front to take a look. The doors had been boarded up pretty good, and I didn’t think I could break through them. I circled the building until I found a window. I looked

around then until I found something to smash it with and didn't hesitate. The longer I waited around, the greater chance I had of getting caught. I had to act as if Navarre hadn't believed the note and hurry before he came to get me.

After using a stick to clear away the broken glass, I climbed through and ran quickly past the restrooms and through the wreckage of the main room. I had just entered the opposite hallway when something growled behind me. I froze.

"Turn around slowly, and I might not rip your throat out," a deep voice growled. I did as he said and once I was facing the werewolf he said, "You were here a few weeks ago."

"Yes. Please. I need to speak with Nicholas. I don't mean him any harm. You can search me if you like. I'm not armed."

He looked at me skeptically and I repeated the offer to let myself be searched. He took a few steps forward and I tried not to shiver. Power radiated out from him in waves. Nicholas had chosen his bodyguard well. Not only could he tear me up, but he would enjoy it.

I held my arms out to my sides as a show of faith, and probably stupidity.

"Go on then," I said. "See for yourself. I don't have anything on me except my car key. I'm not trying to hurt anyone."

"We'll see," he said.

I tried not to look frightened as the werewolf stepped forward and patted me down. He seemed genuinely surprised when he didn't find any weapons.

"No crosses, no silver, not even sharp fingernails," he said.

"I told you, I only want to speak with him."

"Well, you don't look very dangerous," he said. "But why come now, and why break in?"

"It's personal," I said. "But I need his help. If I'm lying I'll let you tear me up with your bare hands."

He laughed. "That's not an offer most people would make."

"I'm not most people. Please, I need to see him."

The werewolf seemed to think it over for a moment. "All right," he said. "Suppose that I believe you and I let you go down. If Nicholas isn't safe and sound an hour from now, I'll come after you."

"Fine."

"And if in an hour I haven't seen your face again, you will regret it."

"So do you want me to come and check out with you then before I go?"

He laughed. "That would be best, I think."

After another minute, he let me go. Once I was out of his sight I ran down the stairs until I came to a stop at the door to Nicholas' chambers. I rested against the wall for a minute and tried to catch my breath. Just the thought of being alone with Nicholas left me short of breath. The last thing I wanted to do was walk in the door already panting.

I started to knock, but something told me he wasn't there. He was in the room next door.

I moved down the hall until I reached the adjoining room and reached for the door. Before I could touch it, it opened.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I opened the door further and stepped into Nicholas' bedroom. He was sitting on the opposite side of the bed with his back turned to me. Dozens of crisscrossed scars marred the perfection of his bare back. However, these were not the result of Navarre's punishment, but his years of imprisonment in the *Chateau d'If*. He was wearing red pajama pants and they matched the bed. The only word that came close to describing his bedroom was lush. It was decorated in varying shades of red and the bed was the most vibrant shade I had ever seen. The canopy above hung down in a sheer red curtain, which seemed to part just so that I could see him.

He slipped on a matching robe as he rose from the bed, but his back remained turned to me.

"What took you so long?" he asked smoothly.

"You know why I'm here, Nicholas. Will you help me or not?"

He turned halfway toward me and what I could see of him looked unharmed.

"Why not just buy a pregnancy test?" he asked. "Do you truly find it easier to hear such a thing from me than read the results in the privacy of your own bathroom?"

"Yes."

"All right then," he said, and when he turned to me I gasped. "I'll reveal your dirty little secret, but I want something in return."

The right side of his face was bright red as if it had been badly burned and patches of skin on his chest were the same color.

"What did he do to you?"

"He set me on fire and watched me burn," he answered without pause. When I gasped again he said, "Repeatedly, with lightning. Now, what about my offer?"

"What do you want?" I asked shakily.

His smile chilled me to the core as he replied, "We'll get to that in a minute."

Nicholas walked over to me and whatever injuries he had sustained had not inhibited his graceful movements. He closed the door and took me by the hand, leading me to stand at the foot of the bed, directly in front of his fireplace. I looked nervously into the flames as he said softly, "You're not pregnant. Your period is late because you are under a lot of stress."

Relief rushed over me and I nearly lost my balance. However, my feelings of joy were short lived when I realized I still had to pay the piper.

"All right," I said, trying to steady my nerves. "Now, what do you want?"

He moved closer and I shivered. However, it was not from fear or even from revulsion at his injuries. Something about Nicholas just made me weak. He stopped just short of contact and looked down at me.

"Is that the only reason you came?" he whispered.

"Yes."

He laughed and my heart thumped painfully.

"Don't lie to me," he said.

“What do you want?” I repeated.

“I want to show you something.”

Nicholas snapped his fingers and the lights were not only dim, but a soft shade of red.

“What is this? The red light special?” I asked, taking a few steps back.

This time his suggestive smile gave me a thrill I hadn’t experienced without batteries.

“Hear me,” he whispered and I felt his voice brush back my hair. “Feel me.” Hands ran up my thighs. “Let me speak to you of wicked things.”

“Nicholas,” I moaned. “No, shut up.”

He laughed again, a deep sinful sound that made my blood pump faster.

“I can read you like a book,” he purred. “And if there is one thing you don’t want, it’s for me to be quiet. You want me to scream.” With these words it felt like someone pulled my hair, but gently. “You want me to make *you* scream.” And as he spoke I nearly did. “But whatever you may want,” he purred, “it is not my silence.”

“This is what I wanted to show you,” he said. “You may as well be honest, because your body doesn’t lie. Even now you grow wet anticipating my touch.” And with the word *touch*, I cried out.

Nicholas moved closer and looked into my eyes.

“Such defiance,” he said appreciatively. “Let go of your hatred and open yourself up to my power.”

“No,” I said, but it came out as a moan.

“Come now,” he said with a smile. “This may be your only chance to know one like me.”

Something told me he meant “know” in the biblical sense of the word.

“I have searched for another, and until now I have never found one. I can touch you with my voice in ways no man ever has.” And even as he told me he could, he did. “Navarre has inherited some powers of voice from our master, but nothing like that which I possess.”

By this time I was fighting just to stand. When he said the word possess, that’s exactly what I wanted, to be possessed by him.

“Give in to me,” he whispered and his voice became as velvet against my body. I may as well have been naked for all the sensations I felt. “Let my voice become like lover’s hands against your skin. Let me inside of you as no one has ever been. I can enter you in ways you cannot imagine and give you pleasure you have never before dreamed of. If I tell you to come ...” he paused for me to catch my breath before saying, “... then you will come.”

And I did. As he spoke I fell to the floor. I curled up, writhing and screaming, completely overcome with the greatest pleasure I had ever felt. It was beyond description. It was almost like a multiple orgasm all at once and it didn’t stop. I could feel Nicholas now, hovering above me, whispering in my ear like a little devil on my shoulder. And the more he spoke, the more I came.

My back arched off the floor and he moved back, so that I still didn’t touch him.

“This is my voice,” he whispered. “Do you dare to experience my touch?”

He traced a path across my collarbone with his index finger and I writhed.

“Yes,” I panted. “Touch me.”

At this point I had no room left for coherent thought. I had never experienced anything like that before. All I could think of was experiencing it again. And again and again ...

I rose to my knees, but still he did not touch me. I was surprised to find that I was still fully clothed. I took off my jacket and tossed it behind me.

“Don’t mistake me,” Nicholas said softly. “I don’t always want you down on your knees, but I have the power to bring you there.”

He flicked his tongue across the pulse in my throat and I begged, “What will it take for you to touch me?”

“A taste,” he whispered against my throat.

“Of my blood?”

“Never fear a little pain when pleasure is on the other side,” he said.

I tilted back my head and Nicholas didn’t have to be invited twice. As soon as his lips touched me I came again. I started to fall and he touched my back in order to lay me down on the floor. The touch of his hands, even through my shirt only intensified the feeling. I threw one leg over his as I ran my hand up the sleeve of his robe. I felt the cool touch of his hand as it roamed underneath my shirt to cup one breast. The feelings coursing through me were too much. I knew that if he didn’t stop soon I was going to faint. It felt like I had been plugged into a light socket, only I had become a conductor of pleasure instead of electricity.

“Yes,” I growled, pulling his hair as I screamed. “Yes.”

Nicholas withdrew from me and sat up so suddenly that I almost cried with the loss. He wiped the blood from his sultry lips as he asked me, “Is it your desire to possess this kind of power?”

“Yes,” I answered breathlessly as I leaned forward to touch his face.

In an instant my blood had helped him to finish regenerating. He was now whole once more and it seemed, even more ravishing than before. I ran my hands over his chest, admiring the perfection of his skin before I slid the robe down his arms.

“You are a twisted and evil being,” I panted. “But I have never wanted anything more in my life.”

Now would have been the time to remember Navarre, or Robert. But as I said, I was beyond coherent thought. Instead I lunged at Nicholas, running my fingers through his hair as I brought his lips to mine.

“You will touch me now,” I commanded softly, showering him with kisses.

I pressed my lips to his throat, nipping gently at his skin and he moaned. Even that soft sound of pleasure made me weak with desire.

“I hate you,” I gasped as I threw him back on the floor.

Nicholas smiled up at me as I straddled his waist and lowered my head to his nipple.

“No you don’t,” he panted. “You hate that I have power over you.” I bit down hard and he yelped. “Don’t be angry, my dear. I will share it with you.”

I pressed my body against him and leaned forward to meet his kiss. Just as his lips found mine once again the werewolf from upstairs came bursting through the door.

“Nicholas, come quick!” he yelled.

“Just when I wanted to take my time,” he said, sighing regretfully. I started to get up, but Nicholas held me tight as he looked around me at the werewolf. “Is anyone

dead?”

“No.”

“Is anyone bleeding?”

“No.”

“Is anything on fire?”

“No.”

“Then get the fuck out.” With those words the werewolf was thrown back into the hall and the doors slammed behind him. “Now,” Nicholas purred, “where were we?”

Even the interruption didn’t manage to break his spell. Whatever power he had over me, I was defenseless against it. Later, I would wonder why I didn’t even try to fight, but not now. At that moment the only thought I was aware of was getting Nicholas a little more naked.

“If you needed my blood to finish healing, why didn’t you just ask?” I said as I sat up long enough to snatch off my shirt.

“Because,” he said, rolling me to my back. “I needed your desire to heal, not your blood.” He pressed against me in a provocative gesture as he informed me, “I need your blood to get hard.”

“Bastard,” I said, rolling him over again.

I held his hands down by his sides as I kissed over his chest, relishing the feel of his flesh. To touch him was such a delicious ecstasy that I could think of nothing else. So, this is what it was like to touch an incubus. I could have rubbed and kissed him till my lips were chapped and I collapsed from dehydration. After a moment he squirmed and that set me off even more.

Then I did something I had wanted to do ever since I first saw him. I ran my tongue over his nipple. But I didn’t stop there. I continued to lick Nicholas until his chest shimmered in the firelight. I swear that he tasted like candy. I couldn’t get enough of him. Even though his touch made me want to scream, I could tell he was holding back and I felt deprived.

“Is this why you wanted me to come here? So that you could toy with me?”

“I wanted you to come here, so that I could trick you into spending the night with me,” he said softly.

For a moment I almost snapped out of it. “But, what about ...”

“Stop worrying about tomorrow and live tonight in my embrace,” he whispered. Having more of my bare skin exposed seemed to intensify the touch of his voice.

“But you don’t want me, not really,” I said, trying to calm down. “You just want to use me.”

“No, my dear,” he said, and for the first time I detected kindness in Nicholas. He sat up with me straddling his waist as he unclasped my bra. “I want *you* to use *me*,” he said, bending down to kiss my breasts. He flicked his tongue across my nipple and I would have fallen over if not for his hands against my back. “Only one of similar abilities could ever withstand the full extent of my power. Test me,” he pleaded softly. “Try my skills and see if they are to your liking.”

I knew there was something that I was supposed to remember. “All right,” I said breathlessly. “But keep talking to me or I might change my mind.”

He lifted his head from my breasts and I watched as if in a trance while the firelight played across his features. No one had ever looked at me the way Nicholas did.

He wanted me, but not just my body. Something in his eyes told me that Nicholas would settle for nothing less than my soul.

“How do you want it?” he asked.

“Now.”

His laughter was a tender touch across my shoulders. “First, I want to look at you,” he said.

The feeling was mutual. Come to think of it, I had never been so glad to have eyes. I had never been so grateful to have all of my senses, for they allowed me to experience Nicholas fully. And I wanted nothing less than all he had to give.

The very thought of him made me want to get undressed. And despite what my heart was trying to tell me, I wanted to be with him. Even if it was only for one night, even if I got set on fire too, I wanted to know what it was like to be with an incubus.

I rose unsteadily to my feet and unzipped my jeans. Nicholas stood up and walked over to the bed while I kicked off my shoes. I’m not sure what he was doing, but by the time he turned back to me I had pulled off my pants. My lace panties were the only article of clothing standing between me and his hungry gaze.

“Take them off,” he whispered, and I obeyed.

Everywhere he looked, I could feel his hands. I sighed as his gaze roamed over every curve and feature of my naked body. And everywhere he looked, I ached for his touch.

“I’m not supposed to stay here,” I gasped, but I didn’t know why. My mind just wasn’t working like it should.

“Says who?” Nicholas asked.

When I opened my eyes I found him looking down at me and I couldn’t answer his question.

“I don’t know,” I stammered.

“Then if no one objects, stay with me,” he whispered.

Chapter Thirty

I placed my hands against his slender hips and knelt before him, pulling his silk pajama pants down with me. I wrapped myself around Nicholas' leg as I kissed his inner thigh. I let my kisses show him what he did to me. And with my mouth, I worshiped every part of his body that I could reach. Although his power was strong, I knew somehow that I could resist if I wanted to. All I had to do was say the word and Nicholas would let me go. But I didn't want to go. I wanted him to make all of my worries go away. I wanted him to take my mind and my body.

When I finally took him in my mouth, he cried out and I nearly came again.

"You taste like candy," I said with a laugh as I pulled back from him. "All of you."

He smiled down at me as he placed one hand on the back of my head, pulling me back toward him. He really didn't have to persuade me, because I couldn't resist the urge to taste more of him. I think I could have stayed there all night, tasting and teasing him with my mouth. But finally, Nicholas stopped me.

He lifted me from the floor and I wrapped my legs around him. His kiss was fierce, returning all the passion I had given him and then some. I tried to slide down his body, but he wouldn't let me. He held me just out of reach so that I could not join our bodies.

He carried me over to the bed and laid me gently across the silk sheets. His hands and mouth roamed over my body as Nicholas returned my favors. His lips felt like fire as they traced a path down my abdomen and right between my legs. His tongue was even better than his voice and he lapped at my flesh with fervor. My pussy ached so that I almost cried with the sensation. I was now painfully aroused. I needed him inside of me. Only the feel of him, pressing into my soft flesh could ease the pain. I arched up toward his face and he slid one finger inside of me. He pressed down with his finger, hitting my G-spot while he pulled my clit into his mouth.

Soon, I couldn't handle anymore and I begged him to take me.

"Please," I cried. "I need you, Nicholas. Please."

Nicholas leaned over me and I was overcome by the look in his eyes. It was not at all what I had expected to see. I reached between our bodies and took his shaft in my hand.

"It won't be like anything you've ever felt," he warned. "You may faint, but I won't hurt you," he promised.

I pulled the incubus down to me with one hand, while I guided him into my body with the other. He slid inside of me completely with one thrust and I was nearly gone. The feeling was almost painful, but not quite. I couldn't decide if that was from his size or just the intensity of the sensations coursing through me.

Nicholas held me to him as he sat up with my legs still wrapped around him. He kissed me again as he started to move my body back and forth against his. He guided me with his hands and I became lost to the moment. When I was next aware of anything, I

was overwhelmed by the emotions I felt coming from Nicholas. He had managed to surprise me in more ways than one.

Nicholas, the bastard who seemed to care so little for others, had the kindest, most gentle hands to ever touch my body. I could feel his heart and soul inside of me and it made me weep. He made love to me as no two or even three men could have. His voice touched me like a second pair of hands while he whispered words of love in my ear.

The loneliness of a lifetime flowed through his hands as he caressed my back. As he rested me back against the pillows, Nicholas kissed my face and whispered, "No one has cried for me in a long time. Why do you do it now?"

"Because," I said, trying to hold back some of my tears. "I can feel you, all of you inside of me. All of your love, all of your hate. I didn't know you were so lonely. I didn't know you had a heart."

His smile was tender as he replied, "I told you so."

"I didn't think you were telling the truth."

"I do that quite often," he said. "Just don't tell anybody."

Nicholas made love to me until it was nearly dawn. I remember looking at the clock before I finally passed out.

* * * *

The next thing I knew I was looking up at a big red canopy. I yawned, but I couldn't move enough to stretch, something was holding me down. I turned my head and saw that it was Nicholas' naked body that held me in place.

"Oh, no," I moaned. "No, no, no. Not again."

The vampire stirred and rolled to his back to stretch.

"That's not what you said last night," he teased.

"How could you?" I asked.

He sat up with a smile and rested back against the pillows. "You mean you don't remember?"

"No, you pervert. I'm not talking about technique. I'm asking how you could take advantage of me. I came here for your help and you seduced me."

"You had a choice," he said. "And you chose to stay with me."

"Yes, I did. But last night I couldn't even remember Navarre. You clouded my thoughts."

He shrugged. "Tell me you didn't enjoy last night and I will issue a formal apology."

I just sat there, glaring at him.

"All right, fine. I enjoyed it. As a matter of fact, I *relished* it. It was the best sex I've ever had and I've never wanted anything so bad in my life. I want you even now. I want to tie you to the headboard and punish you for your wickedness. But I can't."

He laughed. "And why not? I've got some rope in the closet."

"Because you just don't *do* things like this. You don't go sleeping around with every vampire you meet. It just isn't decent! I can't believe I let you talk me into this. What am I going to say to Navarre? He's probably worried sick."

Nicholas rolled toward me and flung back the covers to display his gorgeous body. I had to turn my head.

"Alex spent the night with your sister, and so did you," he said. "You called and told Navarre that you were just homesick. Don't you remember?"

“You son of a bitch,” I snorted as I rolled off the bed. “You hypnotized me and made me call.”

“It was either that or be set on fire again last night,” he said casually. “I really wasn’t in the mood to burn.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I walked to the bathroom. “You are a real piece of work,” I called over my shoulder. “I have no idea how I’m going to survive this mess.” When I walked by the mirror I froze. I knew Nicholas had bitten me last night, but there was no mark.

“How did you ...?”

“I didn’t,” he answered from the door. “You did.”

My knees gave in and he caught me.

“Does that mean that I’m a vampire?” I asked.

“No. You have not turned. Your powers are just that strong, even though you are still human. You know, my master started life as a wizard. The most powerful of us all are born with some magical ability.”

“But you bit me and I have taken your blood.”

“There has to be an exchange in a relatively short time period,” he assured me. “Not two weeks apart. You’re perfectly safe.”

“Perfectly safe,” I scoffed. “My relationship with Navarre is well and truly ruined this time. Robert, he may have been willing to forgive. But this? I can just hang that up right now. I may as well go ahead and douse myself with gasoline and show up on his doorstep.”

Nicholas brushed his teeth while I turned on the water and got in the shower. I was trying to be brave and face the mess I had created head on. But the truth is, I’m not that brave. I was really and truly, head over heels in love with Navarre and if he didn’t kill me he at least wouldn’t want to see me anymore. I would have rather died than face him with this fresh hell.

It wasn’t until Nicholas embraced me that I realized I was crying.

“Shhh,” he said softly as I turned in his arms. “I never meant to hurt you. Please understand that I haven’t dealt with human emotions in a long time. If he means that much to you then I will try and explain things. I won’t let Navarre take out his anger on you.”

“But, how can you stop him?” I asked.

“First of all, he would never hurt you, at least not the way he would hurt me. I’ll tell him the truth.”

“Which is?”

“That you came to me for help and I took advantage of you.”

“Oh, Nicholas,” I sobbed. “I wish I hated you, I really do. But you can’t do that. He’ll torture you again and I couldn’t bear it.”

This news seemed to shock Nicholas so much that he stumbled back from me.

“You mean that you *care* what happens to me?”

“Yes,” I said, and I sat down on the shower floor and cried.

To my surprise, Nicholas joined me.

Once I had gotten dressed and we had both composed ourselves, Nicholas and I decided it was time to face the music. He opened the door and we nearly tripped over the werewolf.

“What is it, Jesse?” he asked irritably.

“Well, you told me to fuck off so I went back upstairs. Only something else has happened, something terrible and I didn’t know what to do. I’ve blocked off the main floor until you could take a look at things.”

“What exactly has happened?” Nicholas asked.

“Well, when you asked me last night if anyone was dead, bleeding, or on fire, no one was at the time. I had heard noises outside and with half of our guards still asleep, I didn’t know what to do. When I went back upstairs someone took me from behind. I woke up with a lump on my head and saw ... well, you’ll just have to see it for yourself.”

“Shit. All right then, lead the way.”

As soon as we reached the entrance to the main room I could see the profile of a nude male body, stretched out across the floor. Nicholas quickly pushed me behind him, trying to block my view, but it was too late. I had already seen. I dropped to my knees in the hall and threw up.

The werewolf, Jesse, came over and held back my hair.

“I know this vampire,” Nicholas said. “He’s one of Navarre’s.”

“I know him too,” I said between heaves. “His name is Hunter.”

An hour later the police were all over the scene and I was sitting in Nicholas’ office with a soft drink. Nicholas kept trying to settle my stomach, but I couldn’t seem to shake the nausea. He’d just informed me that Navarre and Robert were on their way and that Marcus wanted a word with me. Unfortunately, there was no way around telling the police that I had spent the night with Nicholas. Otherwise he would be the prime suspect. But if I was with him all night and Jesse could verify the fact that we didn’t leave the room, then it looked like we were both in the clear.

Marcus entered the room and closed the door behind him. The last thing I saw was Nicholas’ face and I knew he would be listening at the door.

“Do I just disgust you, or do you find mortal men unappealing altogether?” Marcus asked.

“How many times do I have to remind you that my private life is not a part of this investigation?”

“It is when every time you sleep with somebody someone else turns up dead.” Marcus took a minute to get a grip before he continued. “Now, all sexual matters aside, Nicholas told me there was a fight here a few weeks ago. He said it was a bunch of bikers, vampires, who tore the place up pretty good.”

“That’s right.”

“So, you were present when this took place, also?”

“Yes.”

“We believe it’s possible that whoever is responsible for this may be working for or actually be a member of that particular gang. Do you know where I can find any of them to question?”

Oh, shit. Navarre said they had all been burned. I had to think of a way to explain that fast and let them know so they wouldn’t get caught in a lie. I reached out to Nicholas with my mind.

“They overstayed their welcome and when they left, they were caught by the dawn,” he said.

I repeated this explanation to Marcus.

“So, you’re telling me that an entire gang of vampires was turned to ash?” He said some other things then that I couldn’t understand, but it sounded like a bunch of cuss words all run together.

“That’s what happened,” I insisted.

“So, what about last night? It looks like we can’t prove that you came upstairs at any time. So, why were you here in the first place? Why would you run out at dusk and come here? Aren’t you dating Navarre or has the master lost his appeal?”

I hadn’t even realized I was standing, but my hand moved so fast I couldn’t see it. I slapped Marcus hard enough that it rocked him back a few steps.

“How dare you? Who I have sex with is none of your business. I was here with Nicholas all night. He didn’t leave the room and neither did I. That’s all you need to know.”

“Till the dawn?” he asked skeptically. “You didn’t sleep?”

“Till the dawn,” I whispered.

Marcus snatched the door open and Nicholas nearly fell into the room.

“Bastard,” Marcus mumbled as he pushed his way past the vampire.

“Why does everybody keep saying that?” Nicholas asked, looking amused.

“Because you are,” I answered, handing him my empty drink can.

I was on my way down the hall to the bathroom when I ran right into Navarre.

“What are you doing here?” he asked softly. One glance behind me at Nicholas told him everything he needed to know.

“It’s not her fault,” Nicholas said, putting up both hands in a harmless gesture.

“She came here for my help and I seduced her.”

Navarre pushed past me, moving so quickly he was a blur. The next thing I knew Nicholas was bouncing off the wall. As soon as he hit the floor I ran to him and threw myself in front of Nicholas, blocking Navarre from whatever he was about to do. He looked surprised, but I think I had shocked myself the most.

Chapter Thirty-One

“No,” I cried. “Don’t hurt him.”

“Don’t hurt him?” Navarre asked. “Don’t hurt him? *I’m going to kill him!*”

“Navarre, please,” I begged, doing my best to block Nicholas with my small form. “We’re connected. We have been ever since I took his blood and now we are even more. Whatever you do to him, I can feel it. I couldn’t bear for him to be tortured again. Please.”

“What the hell is going on down here?” Marcus asked from the other end of the hall. “Don’t you people ever have a good day?”

“Fuck off,” Nicholas said at the same time Navarre replied, “This is a private matter.”

Jesse stepped forward and put his hand on Marcus’ shoulder to emphasize the whole “fuck off” business, before showing the policeman back upstairs. Nicholas got to his feet slowly, but I still put myself between him and Navarre as we all walked back to the office.

I let Nicholas tell the whole story. I figured if he’d have wanted my input, he’d have asked for it. Besides, it didn’t sound so bad when he said it, even though he told the truth. He had a way of making the truth sound like a really good lie.

“What do you want me to do?” Navarre asked once Nicholas was finished. “Do you expect me to hold you harmless because Sandra doesn’t fully understand her powers?” He turned to me then, “No offense to you. But these abilities that Nicholas seems so *intent* on passing to you are among the most difficult to control. You couldn’t have resisted him, even if you had wanted to.” He turned back to Nicholas as he said, “And he knows that.”

Navarre walked over to the couch and sat down with his head in his hands.

“I swear if I could still get gray hairs you would give them to me,” he mumbled through his hands.

“Navarre, I ...”

“Shhh,” he interrupted. “Just give me a minute.” We all sat in silence until he said, “The closer you become to Nicholas, the more of his blood you take or the more he takes from you, the stronger your own sexual powers become. Now, this could just make you a more powerful witch, or if you persist along this line, it could make you one of the most powerful vampires I’ve ever known.” He ran a hand through his long red hair as he said, “You could not have known how being near Nicholas would affect you. You trusted him. It’s a mistake I have made as well. At some point over the years I had forgotten about his obsession with wanting to find another like himself.”

Navarre rose to his feet as he said, “Come on, we’re going home.”

Nicholas looked at me nervously, but neither of us dared to speak. I knew that Navarre didn’t want me around him. But I also knew that I couldn’t stay away from him, not permanently.

Navarre paused by the back door and I almost ran into him.

“I almost forgot to tell you, I met your great aunt last night.”

It took me a minute to register what he had just said. “Willow?” I asked. “You mean she’s alive?”

“Yes, she’s waiting to meet you at your grandmother’s house. That is if you feel up to it?” He may not have directly insulted me, but his eyes said it all.

“Navarre, I’m sorry. I really didn’t understand how dangerous he was. But I won’t lie to you and say that I didn’t want to stay last night, because I did.”

“Of course you did.” He sighed. “He’s an incubus. Do you know that only another of his kind could have the power to resist him? No? Didn’t bother to tell you that, did he? I think that what Nicholas really wants is to find someone who can resist him.”

“So, what happens now?” I asked softly.

“Now, we try to find a way to live with ourselves,” he said. “It’s something I’ve been finding a way to do for a long time now. Sometimes it’s just not as easy as others.”

“You mean you’re not going to ...”

“To what? Throw you away just because you made a mistake?” His expression softened as he reached out to me. “I am in no position to cast stones,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean that I’m happy about things. From now on, at least for a while, wherever you go I go. That is unless you wish to be done with *me*?”

I could scarcely believe my ears. “No,” I said quickly. “You mean you aren’t mad at me?”

“Oh, I’m mad, just not with you.” When I just stood there looking at him open-mouthed he said, “I’m not the kind of guy who kills the messenger.”

“What about the one who gave the message to the messenger?” I asked hesitantly.

Navarre just raised one eyebrow before continuing out the door. We had just reached the car when I felt Nicholas coming up the stairs. My awareness of him was incredibly acute now and I knew that he just wanted one last look at me. I turned back to him about the time Navarre hit him with a bolt of lightning.

“Don’t look,” Navarre said as he turned me toward the car.

“That doesn’t make it go away,” I said.

“You can’t keep her from me forever,” Nicholas called.

He had barely gotten the words out before he burst into flames from the second hit.

“No,” I cried.

One minute I was standing beside Navarre, the next I was running full out toward Nicholas. He hadn’t made it three feet out the door before he’d been burned for the second time and he was still on fire when I reached him.

“Don’t touch him, you’ll be burned,” Navarre said.

But when I reached for Nicholas the fire went out and he collapsed at my feet. I dropped to my knees and held him to me. I couldn’t bring myself to look at his face. I just held him as gently as I could and tried not to cry.

“You can’t do this,” I said to Navarre. “You don’t know what I know about him.”

“And what is that?” Navarre asked.

“He’s lonely.”

Navarre looked at me skeptically. “That’s no excuse for what he did *again*.”

I reached down and took Nicholas’ hand and his skin crunched. He whimpered

and I tried not to bear down hard.

“Come here,” I said to Navarre. To my surprise he did. When he was standing over the both of us I reached up and took his hand, too. For a minute I thought my idea wasn’t going to work and I just felt stupid. But then I felt it. All of the turmoil I had felt in Nicholas began to flow from him, through me, and into Navarre. Once again the loneliness of a lifetime flooded through me and I cried again in spite of my best effort to remain composed.

Finally, Navarre pulled away and I told him, “This is what I felt. I cannot let you hurt this man.”

“I thought you said I was a bastard,” Nicholas groaned.

“You are,” I said, smiling weakly. “But you’re growing on me.”

“It’s just because you’ve seen me naked.”

Navarre let loose a string of unintelligible cuss words to rival Marcus before he said, “Fine then. Bring him along. I can’t just leave him here like this.” He turned to Nicholas then. “Do you have someone you can leave in charge, a second-in-command?”

“Yes,” Nicholas croaked.

“Then I suggest you do so. The Bucket of Blood will be closed for repairs and until this investigation is finished it will not be reopened, is that clear? Tell all who live here with you to remain beneath the ground. It isn’t safe for our kind to be out these days. Who knows what’s coming next?”

I helped Nicholas to get his cloak and waited for him to leave orders like Navarre had said. He was still smoking underneath the cloak when we got in the car and it made me hurt to look at him.

“Can’t you heal him?” I asked Navarre.

“My blood would heal him too quickly and yours would bring you one step closer to turning.”

“In other words, you want him to suffer?” I said sarcastically.

“In other words, he can wait till we get home,” he corrected.

Navarre cranked the car while I tried to make Nicholas as comfortable as he could be.

“I thought Robert was coming with you.”

“I left him with your grandmother.”

“So, how did you find my aunt?” I asked.

“She came by the club last night with her companion. They pass through the area ever so often to check on her living relatives and she needed a place to wait out the day.”

“You mean she’s a vampire?”

“Are you really that surprised?”

I thought it over for a moment. “No. So, you knew her all along? Why didn’t you say something?”

“I knew of *a* vampire named Willow. I wasn’t sure if it was the same woman your grandmother mentioned. So, when she passed through again last night, I asked her. Turns out my suspicions were right. It also turns out that she wanted very much to see her sister and her two nieces.”

We were nearly there when I asked, “So, what about what just happened? With Hunter, I mean. What are we going to do?”

“I’m not sure,” Navarre answered softly. “But it will have to be dealt with later,

we're almost there. Your grandmother knows nothing of this and I don't plan to tell her that you were anywhere near the place when he was killed. We'll just let her hear it on the news and think that I've managed to keep her granddaughter safe and sound. Because that's what I promised to do."

Well, that made me feel like shit. "I'm sorry for making your job so difficult."

"My job? Do you really think I protect you because it's a job? When will you get it through your head that I'm in love with you? You don't set men on fire just because you're a little pissed off, you know."

"He's right," Nicholas chimed in. "That's something crazy people do when they're in love."

"Shut up," Navarre said. "What I mean is that it's not like me to go around setting someone on fire just because I can."

"With great power comes great ..."

"Shut up, Nicholas!"

But there was no time to argue the point further. We had arrived.

* * * *

"So, that's what happened?" Zanna asked as Navarre and I walked in the door.

At first I overlooked my aunt completely. Even though I knew she was a vampire, I had expected to find someone more my grandmother's age. Instead I found a tall, beautiful blond who could have been my sister's twin.

She rose slowly and walked toward me with tears in her eyes.

"You look just like your mother," she said.

I reached for her and she held onto me as if I were a life raft. Once we had both gotten a hold on our emotions we all sat down and my aunt Willow shared with me the same story my sister and Zanna had just heard.

The vampire who had turned her, the one she had been dating was named Rikard, and they were still together. He was waiting back at Lucy's for fear of what my grandmother might do to him. As a matter of fact, that's why Willow had never tried to make contact in all these years. She was afraid that the incident had soured Zanna's opinion of all vampires. She was pretty close to the truth.

However, as it turned out, my grandmother only knew half the story. Willow had found out that she had cancer, leukemia to be exact. She was dying and didn't want to tell Zanna. But once she told Rikard, he simply couldn't let her die. He convinced her to become a vampire rather than die a slow and painful death.

"I have never regretted it," she finished. "Except that it kept me from my sister for so long. If it wasn't for Navarre, I might never have found the courage to come back."

"You should have told me," Zanna said, and I got the impression that wasn't the first time she'd said it.

"I know," Willow said. "But when I was new, I had difficulty controlling my urges. I also didn't want to accidentally attack you. I would never have forgiven myself."

Sometime during Willow's story, Priscilla had stepped out on the porch for some fresh air. I was so caught up in being able to meet our long lost aunt that I had completely forgotten about Nicholas.

"Do you know there's a man smoking in your car?" Priscilla asked, sticking her

head back in the door.

“What’s wrong with smoking?” Zanna asked casually.

My sister pulled me outside and said, “No, he’s actually *smoking*. As in, on fire.”

“Oh,” I said, looking toward the cloaked figure in the backseat of Navarre’s car.

“That’s Nicholas.”

“You mean the tall, dark, handsome guy from The Bucket of Blood?” Priscilla asked. “What the hell did you do to him?”

“Navarre set me on fire,” he answered, lowering the window just a crack.

“What?”

“With lightning,” he added.

Fortunately, the cloak managed to cover him so that my sister wasn’t traumatized by the sight. The only parts visible were his hands, which he kept down, and his lips, which weren’t badly burned.

“Look, Pris, it’s a long story and I don’t have time to tell you the whole thing right now.”

“Yes,” Nicholas agreed. “Last night alone is bound to take up a few hours of your time.”

“Shut up, Nicholas.”

“You spent the night with him?” Priscilla asked. However, she didn’t appear to be accusing me of anything. On the contrary, she looked impressed.

“Now why would you jump to that conclusion?”

“Because she’s smart,” Nicholas said with a laugh.

“I promise I’ll tell you later,” I said. “But please, not now.”

Priscilla reluctantly agreed to hear the story later and we went back inside.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I was relieved to reach the shelter of Lucy's once more. Once we were there, Navarre took us all down to his private quarters to discuss as he put it, "everything." The first order of business was Hunter's murder. Navarre brought out the grimore once again and shared his theory with Robert and Nicholas.

"This wasn't just a murder or some part of a ritual," Navarre said. "This was a message, to me and to you," he said, pointing at Nicholas. "It was done on your property and they killed one of my vampires. Whoever this is, they are very powerful and they are flaunting it in our faces."

"Then let's kill them," Robert said.

Nicholas snorted. "Well, that would be just brilliant if we knew who the hell they were."

"He's right," Navarre said. "We've got the power to back up the threat. We just have no idea where to direct our energies."

They continued along this line until Navarre was called upstairs an hour or so later. While he was gone, I snuck into the kitchen. Navarre's underground abode was fully equipped with just about everything you could think of and even though he didn't personally need a kitchen, he still had one. He also kept blood in the fridge in case he didn't feel like getting it elsewhere.

I heated up a pint of AB negative and brought it back to Nicholas. Navarre could get mad if he wanted to, but the blood would help him recover. Besides, the whole room was starting to smell like steak. Considering that the smell was coming from the man I'd just spent the night with, I was pretty grossed out.

Navarre started talking as soon as the elevator doors opened again. "I don't know what else to do except continue to help the police if we can and just stay out of sight. As for you young lady," he said as he rounded the corner, "we need to come to some sort of an accord."

He looked at the cup I was helping tip to Nicholas' lips, but didn't comment.

"Come with me," he said and held out his hand.

I took his hand and rose from the couch as I asked, "Where are we going?" He didn't reply, he just led me straight to the bedroom. Once I was behind the doors, he started to close them. "Wait just a minute. I thought you said that *we* needed to come to some sort of an accord?"

He laughed. "*We* do, and then we'll get back to you."

* * * *

So what do you do when you've got three immortal beings professing their undying or is that undead, love for you? Well, in my case, since they all wanted me for their very own, they finally agreed to what Nicholas jokingly calls, "joint custody." And three months later, it's still working.

What does this mean exactly? It means that I am dating them, *all* of them, with the full knowledge and consent of each. Sometimes, we even go out together. Of course,

we haven't done anything else "all together" yet. This is mostly because Navarre doesn't seem too keen on Nicholas showing me any sort of affection in his presence. But that's all right. I'm not sure I'm ready for that sort of thing yet, either.

As far as the "accord," naturally I had to agree to the arrangement as well. It's not so bad really. Especially since I got to spend Christmas with St. Nicholas examining his ... um, candy cane.

My sister, who knew the whole twisted story by now, was so excited about the whole arrangement you'd have thought *she* was dating them. I think she just liked the fact that they all bought her gifts from time to time when she and Alex went with us on a double or was that triple date?

Other than my personal life, not much had changed in three months. There hadn't been any new murders and, according to Marcus, the police still didn't have any leads. Keeping a low profile had been working for the preternatural community as a whole.

Oh, and I had moved in with Navarre. Things should have been strange for me. I mean dating one vampire is enough to keep you busy, but three? Still, I was enjoying each of them for their own personal qualities. I was learning so much history from Navarre. I know that may sound boring to some, but he had lived through so much that he really made it come alive. Robert it seemed hadn't managed to grow up in over a hundred years, which was not entirely a bad thing. Going out with him was like being sixteen again. We had so much fun just hanging out. Nicholas on the other hand ... well, I was certainly learning from him, just not history.

Nicholas was without doubt the darkest of the three, and I'm not just talking about his hair color. What really unnerved me about him was that I saw so much of myself when I looked in his eyes.

I didn't work at the shop anymore, but I did still help them mix potions and put together spell kits. Demand was too high for my services, so I couldn't quit all together, even though Navarre and Nicholas kept insisting that I didn't have to work. Besides, I didn't like the idea of being a *kept woman*, not entirely.

After helping at the shop, I had gone by to collect some more of my things and went straight to Nicholas. It had been three weeks since I'd seen him and he called and said, "It's my turn."

Yes, he was still a bastard, but he was *my* bastard. The Bucket of Blood had been returned to its former glory and was scheduled to reopen next week. Jesse let me in at the front and I went straight down to Nicholas' chambers. I let myself into the room which adjoined his bedroom. He had given me a key months ago.

I threw down my bag beside the door and turned to find him reading by the fire. He was wearing red silk pajamas and a long black robe which matched his raven hair. He seemed to be focusing very intently on whatever it was he was reading and I couldn't wait to interrupt him.

I walked over and crawled up on his lap. Still, his attention was focused on the book.

"Do you remember this?" he asked, holding up the book.

"It does look familiar."

"It's your old spell book," he said. "You left it here a few weeks ago. It must have fallen out of some of the things you'd brought from home."

"Must have," I said as I put my arms around his neck.

“It’s very interesting,” he said.

I sighed heavily. “So I see.”

“This one spell in particular caught my attention.”

He pointed to the page and I reluctantly took a look.

“Oh, my gosh,” I said, taking the book from him. “I had forgotten about this.”

“It looks like a wishing spell,” Nicholas said. “And it looks like somebody couldn’t make up their mind.”

He was right. I had written the spell when I was thirteen. It was a wish for true love that I had modified slightly. I was wishing for someone to always love me.

“Always,” I said, touching the word on the page. “That’s a long time.”

“Yes,” Nicholas agreed.

Funny how we word things when we’re kids. I had also tried to describe this person and started over three times. The first description scribbled on the page said, “Hair as dark as night, with eyes to reflect my soul.” I looked up at Nicholas as I read the words and he smiled. Then I looked back at the page. I had scratched through his description and written, “Hair as golden as the sun and eyes like a clear morning sky. Robert.” I looked up and Nicholas motioned for me to go on. I had crossed through Robert’s description also and written, “Hair like amber flame and eyes like a precious jewel.” The spell closed with the words, “someone to watch over me.”

I gave the book back to Nicholas and put a hand over my heart to attempt to slow it down. “I wished for you,” I said breathlessly. “All of you.”

“Yes,” he said softly.

“I still missed my parents,” I said. “That must have been why I used the word always, because I didn’t want to be left behind again.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “Or perhaps it was destiny.”

Nicholas stood up, forcing me to do the same and took my hand. When I realized he was leading me to the bedroom I asked, “What are you doing?”

“Making your dreams come true,” he answered.

When he opened the door, the first thing I noticed was the candlelight. The second thing I noticed was the men reflected in it. Navarre stood at the foot of the bed, wearing only a pair of green pajama pants. Robert was resting back against Nicholas’ big red pillows, and as best I could tell, he wasn’t wearing anything at all.

“What is this?” I asked Nicholas.

“The red light special,” he informed me with a wicked smile.

I watched as he slid expertly out of his robe and tossed it onto the chair in front of the fire.

“I don’t know what to do,” I told him. I wanted this, but I wasn’t sure how to react.

“Surrender,” he whispered. And like everything else that Nicholas said, that sounded really good to me.

I removed my coat and shoes while Nicholas walked across the room. He turned on some music and as he turned back to me he suggested, “Let’s dance.”

Even as much as the thought of them excited me, I was scared to death and I let Nicholas see it in my eyes. “*I’ll hypnotize you then,*” he whispered in my mind. “*But only a little. Only enough to take away your fear.*” Out loud he said, “Nothing will happen here that you do not wish to happen.”

He took my hands and slowly we began to move to the music. Once again I started to feel the grinding, pulsing rhythm in my bones. I knew then that Nicholas had somehow enchanted the music with his thoughts. I pressed against him and as he lifted my shirt above my head I felt another pair of hands on my hips.

We continued to move, grinding in time to the music as Navarre pressed his lips against my neck. This was the closest they had been to each other in months without sparks flying. Of course, they flew now only not from Navarre's fingertips. They started to touch each other too, not sexually, they just bumped together as they touched me and it was like magic once again. Their powers played off each other somehow and I was caught in the middle.

It felt like a storm was brewing inside of me only there was no thunder and lightning. This quiet storm continued to churn as Robert knelt beside me and unzipped my jeans. I was glad I had worn some of the sexy black panties Navarre had bought me, especially when I saw the look on Robert's face. As he turned to put down my jeans Navarre pressed back against me and I turned to him. Now it was Nicholas who had his hands on my hips. I tossed my hair back in his face while he removed my bra and cupped my breasts in his hands.

"All you've got to do is say yes," Navarre reminded me as he pressed a kiss between my breasts which were still cupped in Nicholas' hands.

"Yes," I said and it sounded more like a sigh than a word.

All this time the incubus continued to whisper to me, both out loud and inside my mind, bringing me further under his spell while the three of us danced. I hadn't even realized it, but as we moved we had made our way closer to the bed. Nicholas stretched back across the scarlet sheets and I needed no further invitation than the smile on his face.

Robert was already there and I rested my head back against his side as the incubus kissed me. It was the first time he had ever done so in front of Navarre and even with his help I was still nervous. That is, until Navarre turned my face toward him and kissed me as well. The kiss was long, deep, and thorough and when he was through, he kissed Nicholas also.

I'll admit I was shocked, but it turned me on something fierce. Still, it surprised me until Navarre turned to me with a wink and said, "I told you that I've done a lot of things."

"So have I," Robert said.

And as I tilted my head back to kiss him I felt Nicholas pulling down my panties. Robert's tongue plunged inside of my mouth as Nicholas' lips claimed me. He moved slowly at first, tasting me at his leisure. Then he began to lick my clit, faster and faster. He moved his tongue in a swirling sort of motion and I moaned into Robert's mouth. I arched against him, pressing him further between my legs, grinding his handsome face into my pussy. When Navarre took one of my nipples into his mouth my cry of pleasure was drowned against Robert's lips.

The sensations coursing through me were too much to take. I had never felt so much at once, so much pleasure from so many directions. It was even better than having Nicholas touch me with his voice while we made love. Because now, his voice could touch me and so could Navarre and Robert.

When I was close to the point of reaching orgasm, Nicholas climbed up over me

so that I was looking into his eyes when he took me. He entered my body slowly and I cried out for more.

“Yes,” I moaned. “Deeper.” With those words Nicholas drove into me harder and I loved it. I moved my hands around to touch his ass. I wanted to feel his muscles flexing as he thrust into my body again.

He quickened his pace as Navarre lowered his head to kiss me once again. His lips were soft and full and I delighted in the feel of them against my skin. I wondered if he and Nicholas were communicating telepathically, because his kisses were perfectly timed with the movements of the incubus. Every time Navarre plunged his tongue into my mouth, Nicholas mimicked the motion with his cock. It was enough to drive me wild.

Robert moved behind me and rested my head in his lap, so that with every thrust I was jolted back against his thigh. I reached behind me and held onto his waist, using his body for leverage as I arched against Nicholas.

“I want you next,” I whispered against Navarre’s lips.

As soon as I uttered my desire, Nicholas withdrew from me and Navarre wasted no time in doing as I had requested. He quickly removed his pants and took Nicholas’ place between my thighs. He placed the tip of his cock against me, teasing me with it. He moved in slow circles around my clit. It was enough to arouse me further without pushing me over the edge. I arched upward, displaying myself shamelessly and requesting without words.

I cried out as he entered me and pulled the incubus down toward my lips.

“Tell me what you want,” I whispered between kisses. “Tell me the wicked things you want to do to me while he takes me. I want to hear them,” I moaned. “I want to feel them against my skin.”

Nicholas began to speak to me in French and I found that it didn’t matter what language he spoke, it had the same effect. Robert took my right hand and began to lick my fingertips, taking each into his mouth as if they were candy, and I wondered if I tasted as good as Nicholas.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than Nicholas knelt beside me and I took his shaft in my mouth. A new and wondrous intoxication flowed through my veins as I pulled his flesh between my lips, and something inside of me, some deep, dark part of me was unleashed.

I pulled back from Nicholas with a gasp and slid from underneath Navarre, letting the look in my eyes make him a promise of things to come. I turned toward Robert and pushed him back on the bed.

“I haven’t forgotten you,” I purred.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Robert's knowing smile made me come undone as I took his shaft in my hands and knelt between his legs. I ran my tongue up and down the length of him and delighted in the way he squirmed. But that wasn't nearly enough for me. I wouldn't stop until he begged. I took him unexpectedly with my mouth, moving as far down his shaft as I could.

"Oh, my, God," Robert moaned. "Oh, my God."

As I continued to torture Robert I felt Nicholas move behind me and run his tongue over the curve of my ass. I arched back so that he could reach my pussy while I turned my attention back to Robert. All the while, Nicholas continued to pause in order to speak to me. It was still in French, but that didn't matter. Hands seemed to glide over my body that were not Navarre's, though he was by my side. It felt as if Nicholas was in about a dozen different places at once. It was all I could do to stay focused on Robert.

I spent the next several minutes licking and teasing his flesh until he cried out for release. I straddled his waist and continued to hold onto his shaft as I guided him inside of me.

"Yes," I moaned as I rocked my hips back and forth. "I want you all."

Robert put one hand on my waist and used the other to stroke my clit. Nicholas pressed himself against my back, caressing my breasts from behind as Navarre stood over us and I took him in my mouth.

"Yes," Navarre gasped. "Take it deep."

Nicholas began to rub his shaft against my butt and I arched against him. It was an invitation I knew he had been waiting for.

"Do you want it?" he whispered, for Nicholas was the only one who had ever entered that way before.

"Yes," I answered him with my thoughts.

As I felt him slip inside of me I screamed, but not from pain. I never thought I would be into anal sex, but I loved the way Nicholas felt in my ass. Nicholas and Robert filled me up as I continued to pull Navarre into my mouth.

"Finish it," I panted, pulling back from Navarre so that Nicholas could kiss my face. "Finish it," I begged.

Navarre dropped to his knees and kissed me as Nicholas sank his teeth into my neck. We didn't just come so much as the bite of the incubus brought us there. Just when I thought I could take no more, Nicholas drank from me more deeply and brought us again.

I awoke several hours later to the feel of Nicholas pressed against my back and Navarre's hair spilling across my face. I lifted up enough to see Robert curled up next to Nicholas before I passed out again.

The next time I woke up with a start, and all of the vampires were still sleeping. One thing about vampires though, they don't move in their sleep. They are literally dead

to the world and they were all over me. After several minutes I managed to untangle myself from Nicholas' arm and wriggled out from beneath Navarre's leg.

"Damn it," I said. I was still tangled in the covers. I twisted and turned and fell off the bed. "Son of a bitch!" Nicholas' sheets were so damned slippery!

"Is everything all right in there?" Jesse asked through the door. He was the main guard around here and I had forgotten that he would be there during the day.

"Fine," I said gruffly, still wrestling with the covers.

"I heard yelling," he said.

"Why bother keeping my voice down?" I said with a laugh. "It's not like it's going to wake them up."

"Them?"

Oops. He didn't know Nicholas had company last night besides me.

"I meant him," I said quickly. "Look, I'm all right, I just fell off the bed."

"Okay then."

After I finally got free of the silk sheets I made my way unsteadily into the bathroom. This was what Nicholas called his "functional bathroom." It was huge, but he had an even bigger one he used for "recreational purposes." I took care of the necessities and was splashing some cool water on my face when I heard a soft knock at the door.

"Can I come in?" Navarre asked.

I opened the door and wrapped my arms around his waist. He felt like safety and he smelled like home.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"I'm fine," I said, nuzzling my face against his chest.

"How come I don't believe you? Did we hurt you?" He pulled back to look at me as he asked, "Did Nicholas hypnotize you into doing something you didn't want to do?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that," I assured him. "If you can believe it after last night, I had a bad dream."

"What was it about?" he asked as I pulled away to turn on the shower.

"That's just it, I don't know. I just woke up afraid."

"Maybe it was nothing," he said hopefully. "So, you're all right about last night?"

"Yes," I said. I couldn't help smiling at the uncertainty on his face.

"You know, I wouldn't share you with anyone but them. Even with the way Nicholas and I fight, we're like brothers in a way. I trust him, and Robert belongs to me."

"I know," I said, pulling him to me again.

"I just want you to understand," he said. "I don't want you to think that I do things like this lightly, or that I don't respect you, or that I think less of you." The more he talked, the faster his speech became. "You see, vampires are free with their affections. Just because we happen to ..."

I cut him off with a kiss. "Shut up, Navarre. You're making my head ache," I teased.

His smile was even more sinful than the one Nicholas usually wore.

"I still can't believe you kissed each other," I said, turning back to check the water. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to see you're not trying to kill one another. I just

didn't expect you to get along so well."

"We always used to get along. The more I thought of it, I saw no reason why we still shouldn't. Through our master, we are connected to one another. Even though I want to strangle him sometimes, it still hurts me to hurt Nicholas." He shrugged. "Besides, he thought you would like it. He said that he'd read your secret fantasies and that deep down you wanted to see us kiss." Navarre walked over and turned me to him as he said, "Please, tell me that's true and he wasn't just putting the moves on me."

I laughed so hard that I had to catch my breath before I could answer him.

"He's not lying. It did it for me," I said, still gasping for air.

"Well, of course it did," Nicholas answered from the door. "Told you so," he said to Navarre.

"I didn't know if you were telling the truth," Navarre replied.

Nicholas winked at me. "People are always so surprised."

"Where's Robert?" I asked.

"Oh, he'll probably sleep for a few more hours," Navarre said.

I had forgotten that only the oldest and most powerful rose first.

"You need to call Alex," Nicholas said as he started brushing his teeth.

"Why?" Navarre asked while he climbed in the shower with me.

"Well, if I knew I would tell you. He just sent me an email saying that he had an urgent message for you and a P.S. that no one was dead."

"You've got email?" I asked.

Nicholas laughed. "Of course. You didn't see the laptop on the desk? Just because I live underground doesn't mean I live in a cave."

* * * *

The message turned out to be a summons from the vampire council. They were having a meeting at the club *Decadence* in Miami and Navarre's presence was requested. As he told me, he wasn't in trouble for anything, but to refuse the council wouldn't do him any favors. Pretty much, if you could crawl you went to the meetings if they asked you to.

"As a matter of fact," he was telling me as he packed his suitcase, "if you can be wheeled in it would be better than to miss the meeting."

"I get the point," I snickered. "So, how long will you be gone?"

"Just one night."

I was sitting at the foot of the bed while he explained everything to me and he leaned forward to give me a kiss.

"I leave tonight, and I'll return mid evening tomorrow. But, I'm leaving you with Robert, and Nicholas should be here any minute."

"You want Nicholas to stay here with me?" I was really surprised.

"I'm not taking any chances with you," he said. "Just because someone hasn't been killed in three months doesn't mean that some nut job isn't still looking for another victim."

I decided not to argue and helped him pick out something to wear.

"I've been meaning to ask you," I said, holding up another of his ruffled shirts.

"How come all of your shirts are made to hang open in front? Don't you like buttons?"

He laughed before asking, "Anything else you want to know about me that you've been just dying to ask?"

I could tell he was joking, but there happened to be several things I wanted to know. “All right,” I said, accepting the challenge. “How come I haven’t seen the first coffin and you don’t have any dirt underneath your bed?”

He burst out laughing.

“I’m serious,” I insisted.

Navarre composed himself and said, “Some believe that sleeping on the dirt of their homeland keeps them safer during the day and helps to preserve their powers. Others believe that simply being in the earth will do. I haven’t found either to be anything except a filthy option on how to spend my day.”

“What about coffins?”

“They just keep out the light better,” he said with a shrug. “You want to know the real reason I don’t sleep in a coffin?”

“Sure.”

“I’m claustrophobic,” he said. I laughed and he insisted, “It’s true. That’s why my shirts don’t fit close around the neck.” When I continued to laugh he said, “It’s why all the ceilings down here are so damn high. I couldn’t be down here if I thought of it as underground. I’d feel trapped, so I made it look like a palace. I even have a secret way out in case the elevator breaks.”

“Then why take the elevator?”

“Because it’s easier on you than walking all that way down.”

“You’re serious. Well, that certainly explains a lot. I’ll be sure to keep you out of tight places,” I teased.

“Hey now, I didn’t say that all of me was afraid.”

“Did you miss me?” Nicholas called over the intercom.

“No,” Navarre answered.

“Well, let me in anyway. The witches up here are trying to rape me.”

Once we were all settled about an hour later, Navarre left for the airport.

As soon as the elevator closed Nicholas turned to me, a suggestive grin spreading over his features.

“Well,” he said. “What should we do now?”

Robert was back in the bedroom changing into his pjs, or so he had said. About that time he came walking back in wearing nothing but a dark blue robe.

“I’ve got a suggestion,” he said.

I looked at both of them and laughed. “You planned this, didn’t you?”

Nicholas took a step forward, shedding his long black coat with a graceful shrug. As the fabric whispered to the floor he said, “Navarre told us to keep you company and that’s what we intend to do.”

Robert walked over to the fire and threw on another log before reclining back against the couch. Since I had been sleeping with all of them, there was no awkwardness as I joined him. I pulled the sash on his robe and opened it wide, displaying his gorgeous body to the firelight.

I leaned forward and pressed a kiss against the ridged curves of his abdomen.

“I can’t keep my hands off of you,” I whispered.

Nicholas slid his arms around me and pulled me from Robert with a growl. I pushed him back onto the sofa as I straddled his waist.

“And I can’t keep my hands off of you either.”

My movements were frantic as I removed my shirt. I was desperate for the feel of Nicholas' flesh against mine. I could feel the warmth of the fire against my back as he unclasped my bra and took one nipple into his mouth. I moaned and threw back my head. Nicholas' hands braced against my back, holding me in place as I leaned back. Robert slipped out of his robe and leaned over to take my other nipple.

I began to fumble with the buttons on Nicholas' silk shirt.

"Take this off," I commanded. "I want to see you. I need to touch you."

He moved quickly to obey my command and I pressed my breasts against his bare chest, reveling in the way his soft hair tickled across my nipples.

I was so wet that I knew my jeans must be soaked through. I slid from Nicholas' lap only long enough to strip completely, tossing aside the last of my clothes. Robert stood and pressed his body against the front of mine. I moved my hands up and down his sides as I rubbed against him like a cat.

Nicholas put his hands on my hips and pulled me back toward him. He had removed his pants and his rock hard cock was waiting for me.

"You do it," I said to Robert. "Take his cock and put it in me."

I'm not sure what came over me, but that was the hottest thing I could think of. He knelt down and held Nicholas' shaft steady while I lowered myself inch by inch until I took him fully.

"Ah!" He was so hard. I could barely move. Nicholas was so big that I couldn't rock back and forth the way I had planned, so I began to move up and down instead. He scooted forward on the couch to accommodate this position while Robert began to rub my clit.

"Oh! I'm going to come," I moaned.

"Come on me," Nicholas whispered against my hair. He pulled me back so that my back was resting against his chest. He moved in and out of me faster and faster as Robert's expert touch brought me closer and closer to release.

Orgasm hit me hard. It felt like something had slammed into all of my muscles at once. I felt my pussy, spasming around him as I cried out incoherently. Nicholas withdrew from me and slid into my ass while Robert moved to take his place.

Robert spread my legs wide, moving into me deeper and faster. Just as I thought one orgasm was about to stop, another began. Cresting and falling like the ocean, they brought me and brought me until our bodies were slick with effort and our passions burned hotter than the fire.

I had never experienced anything like that before in my life. I would like to tell you all about our leisurely shower, but the truth is I was too incoherent to remember much of it. All I remember is that Nicholas washed my hair while I was pressed between the both of them. After that, they helped me to bed and went to rummage through Navarre's movie collection in the next room.

Robert, Nicholas and I piled up on the bed with a portable DVD player and watched movies until I fell asleep.

* * * *

When I woke up the next day it was already noon, but that was earlier than I was used to getting up. I had started to keep vampire hours and I missed daylight. Alex called down to see if I wanted to join him for breakfast, so I got dressed and went upstairs. I figured that by the time they woke up in a few hours, one of the vampires

could let me back in.

Alex and I ate breakfast together a lot of mornings. He was good company and we both enjoyed cooking. There was a kitchen behind the bar upstairs, and that's normally where we met. Isidoor's room was down the hall, so we tried to keep our voices down. The fairy also kept vampire hours since he worked all night.

"I should go check the mail," I said.

"Right now? But it's supposed to start raining," Alex said. He hadn't even bothered to get dressed and was cooking breakfast in his pajamas.

"But my birthday is this weekend," I said, pretending to pout. "I've probably gotten a card from my grandmother. Maybe even one from my aunt Willow."

Since I'd started having my mail forwarded to Lucy's, most of it ended up lost. I was hoping that if my family had sent a card it would be the exception.

Alex sighed as he turned down the eggs. "Fine. Let me get my coat. It's still cold out."

The day was overcast and drizzly. I shivered beneath my sweater as I made my way to the mailbox. I heard Alex closing the door behind me and saying, "Wait for me." But I was too eager for a small taste of freedom.

I had just reached the mailbox when a shot rang out, echoing through the woods surrounding the club. I thought it was a strange place for someone to be hunting, and I was right. Someone had just shot Alex.

"Run," he yelled.

But it was too late. A hand clamped down over my mouth and then everything went black.

* * * *

When I came to, the first thing I was aware of was the smell of fresh dirt. The second was that my hands and feet were bound. My head hurt and I felt dizzy. I was betting that whoever had grabbed me had used some sort of chemical to knock me out, but I couldn't think clear enough to figure out what it was. It sounded like chlorophyll, but I knew that wasn't it.

I rolled to my back and my feet bumped against a wall. I could see a small window above me. It was still light outside, but just barely. With the day being so overcast, it could have been dusk or it could have been one o'clock. I just couldn't tell. Once I got my senses about me a little more, I looked around and figured out that I was in someone's garden shed.

It was big and clean as far as sheds go. Everything was nice and organized. But I didn't care if they had OCD. What I wanted right then was a sharp object to help untie my wrists. I was looking around for an axe when the door opened.

The familiar face which approached me looked concerned and I nearly melted with relief.

"Jules," I said. I was so glad to see Verne's brother that I nearly peed my pants. "Jules, you've got to help me. I don't know what's ..." but my words trailed off as he sat a cauldron full of ritual supplies beside me.

"You and I need to take a walk," he said.

"*You* did this," I gasped. "But why?"

He laughed as he removed his shirt and pulled on a long black cloak. It was scary as hell to see what good shape he was in. I wondered for a moment if he was a Marine

instead of an intern at the local hospital. No way would I be able to fight my way out of this.

“Why do people always ask dumbfuck questions like that?” he replied with a sneer. “Like you would ever understand if I told you. You’ve already made up your mind about me. I can hear it in your voice.”

“All right, I’ll give you that. I think you’re barking mad. But I’d like to at least know why I’m about to be sacrificed.”

“Because your blood is the final ingredient needed to complete the spell,” Jules answered as he pulled me to my feet. He loosened the rope so that I could walk, but just barely. My shoes were too big to slip through the rope and try to run.

“So, this really is a ritual to resurrect a demon?” I asked.

“You know of my ancestor’s spell? How?”

“Why do bad guys always ask dumbfuck questions like that?” I said, returning his smirk.

He backhanded me and it felt like my eye was going to explode.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I rocked on my feet, but Jules kept me from falling over.

“Just so we’re clear on things,” he said. “All I need you to be able to do is bleed. Got it?”

The last thing I saw were his pale brown eyes as he pulled a blindfold down over my face.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked as he started to guide me out of the room.

“Another dumbfuck question,” he said. “If I’d wanted you to know, I wouldn’t have used a blindfold, now would I?”

It wasn’t until I was inside of a vehicle and Jules had cranked it up that he said again, “So, tell me how you know about my ancestor’s spell.”

“Maybe,” I said, trying to sound brave. “But if I tell you, I want to know about your ancestor and why you’re doing all this shit. What will it matter if you’re going to kill me anyway? I think a person deserves to know why they’re being killed.”

“Fine,” he answered. “You go first.”

“I know about your ancestor because someone I know found his grimore years ago. But the spell you’re trying to perform was unfinished. He must have died before he wrote down all the instructions, but I know the gist of it. You need the blood of a human, the blood of a shifter, and the blood of an immortal. You also need their hearts to burn in a final sacrifice before the demon Razael is summoned.”

“Very good,” he purred. “I’m impressed. So, how is it that your friend came across his grimore since not even his family was able to find it?”

“Because my friend is the one who killed him,” I said nastily.

I felt the car lurch as if he had suddenly given it too much gas. In a minute he answered smoothly, “It doesn’t matter. Soon you’ll be dead and I can take revenge on this friend of yours. Probably Navarre the vampire if I’m not mistaken.” My sharp intake of breath was answer enough. “I thought so,” he said. “You see, I wouldn’t have waited this long to take you if I could have gotten my hands on you. As best I can tell, you’re now spending time with *three* vampires, and have several shifter body guards. I have to tell you, I feel pretty clever about being able to take you right under their noses.”

“Good for you.”

“You know, if you’re not such a cunt I might give you a pain killer. Otherwise you can just suffer like that Karen bitch did.”

“Why did you pick her?” I asked.

“Because I hated her. Did you know her?” he asked, but didn’t wait for my answer. “She was a terrible person.”

“So, you carved cunt into her forehead and shoved a spike up her ass? That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“You didn’t know her,” he said coldly. “She had it coming.”

“But, what about your brother?”

Jules was quiet for several minutes before he answered, “Verne was the one who

found all of his things. His name was Ignatius and he was a powerful necromancer. When our great grandmother died a few years ago she left all her things to Verne. In an old chest in the attic there was a stack of papers. No one cared when I took to studying them. No one even realized what they were except me. I also had an incomplete spell. However, I gathered enough from his notes to guess that a witch's blood might just do the trick. Oh, but not just any witch. I got the most powerful I could find. As for Verne, he just made the mistake of believing that family mattered more to me than power."

"And Hunter?"

"I think you already know that was a message. It said that I could do what I wanted with whomever I wanted, and I could do it right under your boyfriend's nose or is that *noses*?" he taunted.

"Did you know those bikers that came through town?"

He laughed. "That was just good luck as far as I was concerned. Everyone thought they were responsible and I let them. Of course, they'll know different once someone finds you, but that can't be avoided."

"But, what about the vampire bites?"

"Those aren't bite marks," he said. "I have a special device I use to drain the blood. It just happens to end up looking like vampire bites."

"What sort of device?" I asked, trying not to get sick at the thought.

"You'll see. Now enough of these goddamned questions. What are you planning to do, write a book?" He laughed again and the car suddenly came to a stop.

He pulled me out of the vehicle and into the cold, misty weather. As soon as he took off my blindfold I started looking around for anything I might remember, anything at all that might let me know where I was. But the weather was getting worse, and I was clueless as to our location.

Jules half led, half drug me into a large clearing. Here, he put me underneath a tree while he began to organize his supplies. I figured it had to at least be time for Navarre to be awake now, but he was in Miami. Still, it was my only hope. I reached out to him with my mind.

"Navarre! Help me!"

"What's wrong?"

"It's Verne's brother, Jules. He's the killer and he's got me!"

"Where are you?"

"I don't know."

I started trying to describe the place and Navarre said, *"You're going to have to give me more than that. I have no idea where that is."*

Lightning flashed as Jules continued to set up his altar and I heard something that sounded like horses. Those horses probably saved my life.

"Jules, are we out behind the old Mortimer plantation?"

"What does it matter? Do you like horses?"

"Not particularly, but I used to come here as a kid. It's just nice to be able to remember something good right now."

His response was answer enough.

"Navarre, are you still there?"

"Yes."

"I think we're out behind the old Mortimer plantation. It's about twenty miles

out of town. Can you get here? Can you help me?"

"I don't think I can make it, but hang in there. I won't let you die. We'll work something out, I swear. Stall him as much as you can. Help is on the way."

His altar was now ready and Jules turned back toward me. For a second I thought he was going to kill me right then, but he reached past me and picked up a stick instead. I nearly fainted.

"Are you going to cut out my heart?" I asked shakily.

"No," he said, and his smile told me he took pleasure in my fear. "All that is required of the final sacrifice is blood. I think that stabbing you through the heart should suffice."

I noticed a large red jewel resting on the altar and assumed it was the one meant to trap the demon. As I looked at the stone, a chill ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold rain. There was magic present in the air now, dark magic and I didn't like it one bit. It made my skin feel like it was trying to crawl off backwards.

I sat there, shaking from cold and fear and watched as Jules began to draw the circle. It was similar to the intricate patterns I'd seen in the grimore. I was slightly relieved to see that this would take a while. His movements were slow and methodical. He was taking his time, making sure that every mark was perfectly carved into the earth before he progressed to the next.

As he moved Jules began to speak softly. From what the wind carried my way it sounded like Latin, which also gave me the creeps. I think I would have been a little less frightened if I could have at least understood what he was saying. Then again, I probably didn't want to know. He picked up a small urn from the altar and began to spread ashes over the circle. It must have been the hearts. I guess he burned them someplace else because of the weather. I wasn't complaining, that was something I had *not* wanted to see.

"Hurry," I whispered. I had meant it to be a message to Navarre, but I had accidentally spoken out loud.

Jules looked up at me and I was afraid he had found me out. Surely he couldn't read my mind. "Don't be so eager to die," he said. "If you believe in God, now might be a good time to pray to him. Take advantage of the breath you have left."

He watched me for a minute before going back to his work. I breathed a sigh of relief when his creepy eyes weren't looking at me anymore. I saw that he'd left his glasses on the altar as well and wondered just how good he could see me through the rain if I took off. But until he cut loose my hands, or at least my feet, I didn't have a chance, because I knew that somewhere underneath his robe Jules still had a gun.

The rain was still light, but I was frozen through by the time he came over and cut my hands loose. I didn't try to snatch away from him. I wanted Jules to let his guard down before I made my move. That is if I *could* move after sitting underneath a tree and freezing for what felt like half an hour.

"If you hold still, I'll give you a shot of Demerol," he said. "Otherwise, you can suffer."

I nodded my agreement and he cut the rope around my feet. I let Jules lead me into the circle where he already had four stakes in the ground. He tied my right wrist to the first stake and I wanted to scream, but I didn't fight. Not yet.

"Please," I said. "Can I have the shot now? It will calm me down. I know I can't

get out of this, but I don't want to spend my last few minutes scared out of my wits."

"Fine," he said and got up to get the shot.

He hadn't closed the circle yet and my only hope was to try and get out before that terrible magic held me in. Jules leaned back over me and I waited until he rolled up my sleeve before I swung my leg up from behind and kicked him in the head. Hurray for yoga! I knew being flexible would pay off one day. He fell forward, and the needle pierced my right arm.

I screamed as I snatched out the needle and used it to stab Jules in the back as he fell beside me. Apparently taking some vampire blood had made me a good bit stronger, because he certainly looked hurt. The rope was too tight to untie my wrist, so I pulled the stake out of the ground and hit him with it across the face. I held my fists together around the stake and pummeled him in the back of the head while I ran my knees into his stomach and groin as many times as possible.

After about a minute of this, Jules fell forward onto the ground and I took off toward the car. If I could just get back up the road about two miles I could make it to the old plantation. I guess I was about halfway through the woods when a white hot pain shot through my back. I collapsed, clawing at the dirt and screaming as the rain came down harder. I was drowning as it poured onto my face and I couldn't seem to move out of the way.

I didn't realize that I'd been shot until I saw Jules standing over me with the gun. He had a cut underneath one eye and it looked like I'd managed to bust his lip.

"*Motherfucker!*" I screamed as I drove the stake into his left foot.

He roared as he snatched me to my feet, removing the stake in the process.

"You *will* bleed in that circle tonight," he snarled. "One way or another!"

He dragged me back through the woods and flung me down as he began to complete the circle. But he wasn't finished when the jewel started to glow. The immensity of its sheer evil awed me. I had never been in the presence of something so awful before.

"*He's coming,*" Navarre screamed in my mind. "*Hold on, Sandra!*"

"Nicholas," I said, sensing the presence of the incubus. "You sent Nicholas."

Jules either didn't care what I was saying, or chose to ignore me. He seemed intent on completing the ritual.

"*I'm here,*" I called to Nicholas in my mind. "*Hurry, Nicholas. I've been shot.*"

When I looked down at his foot, I noticed that Jules was bleeding a lot more than I was. Not only that, but the markings on the ground that touched the blood were starting to glow. He raised his hands in the air and the words he spoke became more intense. I still couldn't understand him, but I didn't need to in order to understand what was happening. The demon was rising.

From the middle of the circle a strange shape began to appear. It was tall and black, with a strange red glow about its body. It had the form of a man, for the most part. But its head reminded me of a dragon. The hideous form stood at least seven feet tall and once it was completely above ground Jules tossed the red stone in front of it.

He continued to speak, and his words seemed to keep the demon in a trance as he picked up a large ritual knife and limped toward me. He leaned over me and I fought him, but the pain in my back was just too much. Jules had won.

I watched the demon begin to scream as it was sucked down into the stone,

however it remained partially free.

“Nicholas!” I screamed. “Nicholas, where are you?”

No sooner had I uttered the words than a large bloody hand emerged from Jules’ chest. I realized with growing horror that Nicholas had punched straight through him. He threw Jules’ heart down into the circle as the wizard fell to the ground. The demon gave a terrifying scream and a blast of energy radiated from it which was strong enough to knock Nicholas and I both from the circle.

When I looked back, only the dead body and a glowing red stone remained.

“You came,” I said weakly, reaching up to touch the face of my rescuer.

“Of course, I came,” Nicholas said, smiling down at me. “Did you really think we’d leave you to die?”

Nicholas tried to lift me and I screamed. Even with the small amount of pain killer that had made it into my system, the wound was unbearable.

“You’re bleeding to death,” Nicholas said. “We’ve got to get you out of here.”

I just shook my head. “The nearest hospital is about a two-hour drive from here. I’ll never make it.”

Nicholas cradled me as gently as he could and whispered, “Don’t ask me to watch you die. I know everyone thinks I don’t have a heart, but I love you, Sandra. It’s been so long since I’ve loved anybody. Please, don’t ask me to sit here and watch while that love slips through my hands.”

I looked a question at him and Nicholas said, “I only know of one solution, but you must consent.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

“You can die in my arms,” he said softly. “Or you can live in my embrace for all eternity.”

I looked Nicholas in the eyes as I answered, “I want to live.”

He tilted my head to the side and sank his teeth into my neck. The pain was sharp, but almost instantly gone. There was no time for hypnosis. He withdrew from me quickly and laid me back against the wet grass. I watched as Nicholas tore his shirt open and ran a hand across his chest. As a trickle of blood became visible just above his heart I remembered Navarre telling me that to offer the blood of one’s heart was a sacred thing. Now I understood why.

“Blood of my blood,” he said as he lifted me and pressed my lips to the wound. I drank from him as deeply as my fading strength would allow. After a moment, Nicholas pulled me back and with his blood still on my lips he kissed me, whispering against my lips, “Flesh of my flesh.”

His power broke over me with those words and I shook with the force of it. Nicholas rested me back against the grass again and rolled me face down. He ripped open the back of my sweater as he said, “I’m sorry, Sandra. But I have to get the bullet out before your wound starts to heal.”

The rain was a cold shock against my bare skin. I felt him press his lips to the wound and I screamed. I knew Nicholas was trying to help me, but I couldn’t stand it. After several minutes, he sat up and spat out the bullet on the ground beside me.

“You sucked it out?” I asked incredulously.

He just smiled as I said, “Yuk.”

“It was the only method available,” he assured me.

He was probably right about that, and I’m sure he could have done it faster if I hadn’t fought him. But it hurt like hell. Nicholas helped me to my feet, and held me close against his side as he moved toward the circle. With Jules dead, all of the power was gone. The evil, skin crawling magic seemed to have died with him.

“We’ve got to clean this up,” Nicholas said. “If someone were to find him here like this, they would know that he had been killed and whoever did that had escaped.”

He led me back to the trees, which offered some protection from the rain.

“I know that this weather is very uncomfortable, but trust me when I say you will not freeze to death,” he said softly. “I’ll hurry.”

I watched as Nicholas dug a grave, using a tree branch for a shovel. This might have taken someone else a week, but not someone with vampire speed and strength. Once he had finished the hole, he used the branch to scratch around the surface, effectively erasing what was left of the circle. He threw in Jules and dumped his supplies on top of him, all except the red jewel. This, Nicholas slipped into his pocket. When he was finished, Nicholas returned to the edge of the clearing where I stood, only about ten feet away.

He looked up at the tree I was standing underneath and gently pushed me aside.

“One last thing,” he said as he walked behind the tree. I watched in amazement as he pushed the large oak over and directly onto the fresh grave. “It will look like the storm did this, and broke up the ground,” he said. “It will be months before someone comes down here to move it and by that time, they won’t be able to identify the grave.”

“You’ve done this before,” I said, and I wasn’t even a little bit surprised.

Nicholas smiled at me again as he took me in his arms, lifting me off my feet.

“Let’s go home,” he said softly.

I rested my head against his shoulder as Nicholas carried me back through the woods.

“Where’s your car?” I asked as we emerged from the clearing.

He laughed softly. “I didn’t drive.” When I just looked up at him open-mouthed, he explained, “I ran.”

He put me down beside Jules’ car as he said, “We should probably take his car back. After all, with him dead there’s no one to report it missing.” He took a moment to appraise the older model sedan and said, “And I doubt he was still making any payments.”

“So, you want to steal his car?” I teased.

“If you think you can stand to ride in it again, I think it would be best if we left no evidence behind.”

“Fine,” I said as he opened my door and helped me inside.

He must have taken the keys from Jules before burying him, because I watched as Nicholas removed them from his pocket now. I was weak as hell and shaking all over. Somehow I’d always thought that a vampire would feel strong. I didn’t feel anything but cold and hurt. Nicholas covered me with his jacket. It didn’t offer a great deal of warmth, but it was at least dry on the inside. I rested my head in his lap and tried not to think too hard about all that had just happened.

We were about halfway back to town when I said, “I don’t feel any different.” I sat up so that I could look at him. “Nicholas, I’m scared. My back still hurts, I’m still freezing, someone just tried to kill me and I don’t feel like a vampire at all.”

“What do you think a vampire is supposed to feel like?” he asked calmly as he put an arm around my shoulders.

“Well, strong, I guess. Powerful. I feel miserable.”

“Do you know how to know for sure that you are a vampire?” he asked.

“How?”

“When you do not die from your injuries.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. You’re cold, but you will not die from it. You are in pain because you’ve been shot, but your wounds will heal. You will bleed and not die. You can drown, yet walk out of a lake. You can be burned and yet walk through fire. This is what it means to be vampire,” he explained. “My love, we are really and truly undead. It doesn’t mean that we don’t suffer. You will still feel pain, but whatever your injury you will not die from it.”

I wrapped my arms around Nicholas’ waist and buried my face against his side.

“Hold me,” I whispered.

He squeezed me tighter as he said softly, “It is normal to be afraid, but you are not alone. You’ve been through a lot tonight. Let’s just get you home and get some rest. I

know it is difficult, but try not to think for right now. About anything.”

“What about Navarre?”

“He’ll be here shortly.”

Once we arrived back at Lucy’s, we entered through the back so as not to disturb the guests. Robert let us in once we reached the bottom floor. By the time I made it across Navarre’s massive living room I was shaking uncontrollably. I just couldn’t seem to get warm. I collapsed into Robert’s arms as Nicholas explained, “It’s the shock. We must get her warm.”

Robert carried me back to Navarre’s quarters, through the dressing room, and rested me beside the large tub. I slipped in and out of consciousness while Nicholas began to fill the water. I could hear the water running, and feel the steam beginning to rise from it. I also felt Robert rest my head against one of the large velvet pillows.

When I was next aware, Nicholas was kneeling over me and he was completely naked. He removed his jacket very carefully from my shoulders and I knew it was to keep from spilling out the jewel he had taken. He removed my clothes quickly and helped me into the water where Robert was waiting.

If I had not had Nicholas for support, I might have collapsed. I rested my head against Robert’s chest as Nicholas pressed himself against my back. I heard a soft kissing noise and opened my eyes to see Nicholas drinking from Robert’s wrist.

When I tried to pull back he said, “You must drink. It is the only way to restore your strength. Otherwise, you will suffer in shock from your injuries.”

“But you guys don’t go through this sort of thing.”

“We are not new vampires,” he replied with a gentle smile. “Robert has already fed tonight, so he was willing to lend you his strength. However, you must take from me.” With these words, Nicholas turned me slowly to face him and reopened the already healed cut above his heart.

I was still pressed between them, drinking from Nicholas when Navarre burst through the door.

“My darling,” he said, focusing on me as he ran to us. “What is going on?” he demanded of Nicholas.

They continued to hold me between them as Nicholas began to explain. As he spoke, Navarre stripped and entered the water. As soon as he was near me I felt better. It was as if Nicholas’ promise was reinforced with the third vampire’s presence. I really wasn’t alone.

Once Nicholas had finished recounting the night’s events Navarre sighed heavily as he took my face in his hands.

“Do you really think you can put up with us for all eternity?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling as I felt my strength returning.

“Then so be it.”

Epilogue

And so it was that Nicholas became my master. He embraced me that night, and I haven't looked back. I don't regret my decision one bit. It was either that or die, and I have always had a strong desire to live.

I was relieved to find that Alex was all right. Jules had hurt him, but he neglected to use silver bullets. Yes, that weakness applies to all shifters, not just werewolves. He was back to dancing and dating my sister within a week.

As far as the police were concerned, the killer had never been caught. He or she just dropped off the face of the earth. I had considered telling Marcus the real story, but Nicholas talked me out of it. As usual, he was probably right.

After having heard my aunt Willow's story, Zanna wasn't so upset when she learned what had happened to me. As a matter of fact, she too preferred this option to my death.

Navarre finally convinced me that he wasn't angry with Nicholas. He said that he couldn't have left me to die either and for once fully approved of a decision the incubus had made. Nicholas left out the part about keeping the jewel and I didn't reveal his secret. Robert was also pleased that I wasn't dead, at least not in the traditional sense of the word.

Priscilla said she knew it all along and that there were worse fates than to spend eternity with three gorgeous men. I agree. Though I'm sure my new life will take a lot of getting used to, I'm looking forward to a long life and the three men I seem destined to share it with.

The End